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Why We Love Career and Technical Education - Part One

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Tim Van Soelen

September 14, 2021

As a young child growing up in the church, I do remember thinking that there were two professions God loved the most: the vocational calling to be a missionary or a pastor. (My own call to be a Christian school educator may have placed a distant third in that vocational hierarchy!) My religious upbringing provided many opportunities to hear about missions and missionaries and be challenged to enter the mission field.

But that conversation wasn't about being a missionary in my workplace. It was a spin-the-globe sense of mission: wherever your finger lands, that is where you need to go. While I'm grateful for those invitations and even more thankful for those who proclaim Jesus as Lord to the nations, that mentality has had an unintended, negative consequence: In the process of upholding a couple vocations, we devalued others.

This type of hierarchical, two-tiered spirituality still exists today when we think about career and technical education in our high schools and postsecondary institutions. Do we value and respect all callings equally? Christian plumbers, Christian pastors, Christian politicians. . . . It is essential to affirm *all* callings, including pastoral ones.

We have an interesting paradox in the national and world labor market. Co-existing are millions of jobs unfilled, high unemployment rates, and a notably high youth unemployment rate. This paradox has led governments, policymakers, employers, and schools leaders to pay more attention to vocational education and training (VET), also referred to as career and technical education (CTE). The skills gap in all economies highlights the need to reconceive vocational education.

Underappreciating graduates from vocational programs was misguided to begin with, but the perception that these graduates have lower qualifications or social status than four-year college graduates demonstrates a narrow mindset, a blue-collar stigma in a white-collar society. It has been shown that mass participation in colleges and universities does not necessarily guarantee a high return on investment for an economy or a society ("[College Still Pays Off But Not For Everyone](#)"). Whereas a bachelor's degree may offer the theoretical base needed for some careers, a two-year degree typically provides graduates with both the basic knowledge and practical skills to jump right into a position.

Moreover, today's CTE is not limited to technical training: it includes school-based education and training for post-curriculum students and continuing education and training for adults already active in their working lives. Health Science, Business/Sales and Finance, IT, STEM, Manufacturing, Logistics, Hospitality, Government, Law, Agriculture, Construction and the Arts all find themselves in CTE tracks.

If we are serious about bringing restoration in the fields of health care, business, law, the arts, media, politics, hospitality, etc., we need to think about what it means to do all our work to and for the glory of God. How can our high schools, colleges, and universities provide opportunities for students to explore vocation in its broadest sense? Programs like **Engineering Technology and Agriculture Technology** at Dordt University, or the programs from **Hope Academy** and **Southwest Christian High School** that you will see in the video below, help students gain the knowledge and practical skills needed for their vocational calling while challenging them to think theologically about their vocations.

In my enthusiasm to affirm all vocations, allow me to offer this caveat—let's never forget to honor those called to the mission field or pastoral leadership. Going into global missions or the pastorate might seem less than optimal for some young Christians today. Starting a charity or working for an NGO have become the cool "spiritual" vocations, especially when compared to the slow, plodding work of shepherding a congregation or walking in community with villagers in the Himalayas. It gives me great joy that Christian schools are integrating CTE into their educational offerings.