

The History of CTE

CTE encompasses a wide range of activities intended to foster work readiness. But it is hardly a new trend. Today's career technical education, in fact, is deeply rooted in the foundation of American society.

A free public education was always deemed a right from the beginning of the United States, with traditional apprenticeships giving way to more formal schooling. The workforce and public education began to work in tandem in the early 1800s to help prepare workers for a bounty of newly created jobs. Specialized "training" schools began to form: setting the stage for CTE.

The first manual training school—merging hands-on learning with academic learning—was established in 1879 in St. Louis, Missouri. Agricultural schools soon followed, as did bills passing legislation supporting career technical education.

In 1917, the first federal law providing funding for vocational education was passed: this even before education was compulsory in every state. Career technical education expanded to include adult education after World War I to retrain citizens re-entering the American workforce. World War II also caused an upsurge in CTE skills as the defense industry needed new, highly trained workers.

CTE suffered a slight decline in the later part of the 20th century. There has, however, been a resurgence in CTE over the last ten years. In 2015, for example, 39 states instituted 125 CTE-related laws and policies, increasing state funding for CTE in many cases. Montana doubled its appropriation for secondary CTE while Nevada tripled its funding.

CTE is constantly evolving to meet the demands of the modern workplace. Yesterday's agriculture, business, Home Ec, construction, and marketing courses are now Artificial Intelligence, App development, Cybersecurity, forensics, and robotics.

But with the requirements of Industry 4.0—the trend of smart manufacturing where cyber-physical systems monitor physical processes and make decentralized decisions—today's students will need to absorb a sophisticated load of skill-sets to secure tomorrow's jobs.

Computer science and advances in engineering have created urgent demands for specialized technology skills: especially in the U.S. where workers are competing in an increasingly global-minded marketplace. Students are graduating with degrees in a number of highly specialized fields, pushing the boundaries and expectations of career technical education.

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Modern CTE courses provide a series of career paths that—ultimately—would lead to well-paying trades involving science, technology, and engineering.

CTE can provide hands-on training that translates directly to viable post-graduation careers. This training can teach students the "soft skills" necessary in the labor market. And by weaving academic skills within a real-world context, CTE motivates and engages today's students, so that they—and our country—can enjoy a more prosperous future.