

NCPA Steak and Lobster

“The times, they are a changin’” These words, written and sung by Bob Dylan in 1964 ring true today when talking about the perception of Career and Technical Education (CTE) in the American education system. For many years, the national paradigm has been driven by the idea that the college and university path is considered the steak option and the CTE path is considered the hamburger. What is changing today is that while the college and university path is still the steak, CTE is now the lobster.

Both choices are of equal value depending on career goals, even to the point that through many articulation opportunities, students can have the best of both worlds, weaving between college and CTE programs earning industry certifications and college credit simultaneously. In this situation, students are able to enjoy Surf and Turf while taking advantage of both paths on the way to their career dreams!

College, in and of itself, is a means to an end-it is not the end. While many parents will say, I want my child to go to college, the data is clear through our latest United States census reports, that only 10% of American adults under the age of 25 have four year degrees and only 29% of all American adults have a four year degree. While high schools do a good job of driving students to college, college is simply one path to get to where the student is ultimately headed-a career.

As we work to continue to change the paradigm today, we need to move away from focusing on one route to success, and instead focus on the destination. For example, if a student wants to get to Jacksonville (career), Florida, there are many ways to get there. Certainly I-95 (college) works, but I-95 is just one route-and more importantly, it is not the destination. The same is true for College. It works well, but it is just one way to get to the career. CTE is another viable route and a combination of both is yet another.

What really matters, as we move forward, is determining what the Jacksonville is for each student. We need to stop asking freshmen where they want to go to college and instead ask them what they want to be. That question allows us to build a road map that focuses on the destination, and opens up a variety of routes to get there. Even those students who want to be doctors do not need a route that denies them the opportunity to participate in CTE while in high school. Students in high school can and do certify in courses such as Pharmacy Tech and are able to balance that with a quality core curriculum.

When we move away from only one way, we open students up to rich, alternative paths. Students can and should take a variety of CTE courses that will prepare them with knowledge and skills that pay big dividends should they go to college, university, technical institutes, the military, or directly into the work force. Not only that, they can acquire skills that will pay them more than a minimum wage job while in college, should they choose that path. CTE is not the other track for those who are not college bound, it is not something we offer because “we still need plumbers” it is lobster and it is a great way to get to Jacksonville. The times, they are a changin’.