



County's career training ecosystem is ripe for growth through collaboration



The Journal Gazette Editorial Board [Apr 13, 2024](#)

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Allen County has an opportunity to revolutionize technical education in a way that harmonizes the aspirations of its youth with the demands of the local economy. A collaborative study by the Don Wood Foundation and Ambassador Enterprises, released on April 4, outlines a potential path in its Technical Education Ecosystems Report for Allen County.

The 42-page report suggests that technical education courses should prioritize industry-recognized certifications over college credits. The report also recommends implementing youth apprenticeship programs and providing career coaching to students.

“It’s no longer just a hunch, which is reassuring,” said Patrick Buesching, vice president of strategic initiatives for the Wood Foundation, in an announcement of the study. “We now have concrete evidence showing the gaps and opportunities we must focus on to develop tomorrow’s workforce today.”

The Grow Allen initiative is an example of that opportunity. It has garnered support from all four public school districts in Allen County, demonstrating a unified approach to aligning educational programs with local economic needs. However, substantial reform, especially in education, demands patience, innovation and adaptability, underscoring the long journey ahead.

Employer partnerships offer a practical dimension to career and educational training (CTE) programs, exemplified by the collaboration with Plumbers and Steamfitters and HVAC Service Technicians of Local 166. These partnerships are vital to providing hands-on experiences; however, scaling such initiatives across diverse industries presents challenges.

Any transformative undertaking of this size will have challenges. The study identifies significant issues, such as the capacity limitations at the Fort Wayne Career Academy and underrepresentation among economically disadvantaged students. These challenges reflect deeper systemic issues within Allen County's educational framework, necessitating comprehensive and adaptive solutions.

Furthermore, the study highlights the discrepancy between the perceived and actual value of college credits, pointing to a broader misalignment between education and workforce needs.

In the 2022-23 academic year, high school students in the county earned more than 12,700 college credits through their dual-credit career and technical education courses. However, students interviewed for the study revealed that while their dual credits counted toward electives, they did not count toward their chosen degree pathway.

“While schools, students, and parents view these credits as a significant advantage for post-high school career and educational pursuits,” the report's writers opine, “colleges and employers often do not share this perception.”

This is unfortunate. Though it's not said in the report, one wonders whether this is also about so-called soft skills and the liberal arts. Historically viewed as courses in the humanities, social sciences and sciences, the liberal arts can offer students a holistic educational experience that enhances so-called soft skills such as critical thinking, creativity and adaptability.

The application of these skills can be seen in the Junior Achievement 3DE program (northernindiana.ja.org/programs/3de). This innovative approach merges real-world business challenges into the curriculum, enhancing student engagement and skill

acquisition. Fostering small cohort learning and interdisciplinary teaching cultivates critical “future-ready” skills.

Fort Wayne Community Schools’ Amp Lab at Electric Works is also an innovative approach. In offering half-day programming, students have the opportunity for hands-on collaborations with businesses and organizations in addressing real-world challenges. An example is the Neighborhood 101 Guides (cityoffort wayne.org/visitors/208-neighborhoodsfw.html) collaboratively created by Amp Lab students and the City of Fort Wayne’s Community Development Division.

In the long term, employers shouldn’t seek to mint automatons for one purpose but to provide structures of growth that will provide value throughout life. Don Wood is an example. A former salesman, Wood started his Whitley County-based modular building system company 80/20 while in his 50s, when many people are looking at retirement.

Even the name, a reference to a theory concerning outputs and causes espoused by 19th-century Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto, speaks to Wood’s sense of history and modern practicality.

The report represents a hopeful yet cautious step toward redefining technical education in Allen County. Allen County has a unique opportunity to lead in technical education reform. However, all stakeholders will be required to collaborate to navigate the complexities. Keeping both eyes only on the bottom line is the quick, easy way to long-term failure.

The ultimate achievement is a sustainable system that forms an inclusive, skilled and adaptable workforce. It is crucial to remain vigilant and committed to equity and excellence in education. The work of the Wood Foundation and Ambassador is the foundation on which to build.