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Vocational education will remain a top national priority for at least the next two decades

The future of vocational education

by W.R. Miller



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The educational community has generally accepted the term "vocational education" as a description for organized educational programs which seek to prepare and/or upgrade youth and adults for employment in occupations that require less than baccalaureate level education.

The Past: A Prologue

Vocational education is certainly not a **frill** or **fad** that has suddenly burst upon the educational scene. Rather it is a dynamic, evolving and unique component of American education that has its philosophical roots deep in the culture and system of which it is a part. The introduction of practical subjects in Franklin's Academy in 1750; the Lyceum and Mechanic's Institutes of the mid 1800's, the Morrill Act of 1862 and the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, are but a few of the foundation stones of the movement.¹ A careful student of American education and the American society can readily document the development of vocational education in response to the needs of individuals as well as society as a whole.

During the past dozen years, vocational education has experienced an unprecedented period of growth. In 1963, approximately four million people were enrolled through federally reimbursed vocational-technical education programs; by 1975 the enrollments exceeded twelve million. The federal government's financial support of vocational education increased from \$50 million to nearly \$500 million during the same 12 years.

It has been estimated by the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) that an additional 30 per cent, or nearly 3,250,000 persons, receive vocational education through private schools and agencies other than those reimbursed through the Federal Vocational Education Acts. According to USOE projections, enrollments in both public and private vocational education preparatory programs will increase from approximately 11,250,000 in 1969 to 18,735,000 in 1975.²

It is obvious to those who have observed the educational scene during the 60's and 70's that there has been a dramatic shift from an "everyone goes to college" syndrome to an emphasis upon a "life centered" educational curriculum that seeks to provide relevance and meaning for a greater portion of our citizens. This shift came about, in part, from a growing disillusionment in our schools by the general public and even educators themselves, as we have too often attempted to fit all students into a narrow mold without adequate regard to their interests, abilities, present needs as well as future needs for their life careers.

The Present Climate

It is equally obvious that the general public has begun to awaken to the potential of vocational education to attract and motivate students with widely varying interests, needs and activities at the secondary, post-secondary and adult levels. As Representative Carl Perkins recently wrote: "... [these individuals at all levels] are demanding a more realistic view of the types of skills which they will need upon graduation, and they are finding those skills often are only available through vocational programs."³

During the past 15 years, vocational educators at all levels have been challenged to meet the growing demand for skilled manpower to fill the needs for personnel classified as "technical" workers in both the production and service fields. Employers have demanded technicians with post-secondary preparation and have sought individuals with increased stability and maturity to fill responsible positions in the health sciences, data processing, equipment maintenance, design and repair fields.⁴ As a result, the number of programs of "occupational education" installed at the post-secondary-level through community colleges, area vocational schools or centers as well as within four year colleges and universities increased dramatically.

As this article is being written, the Congress is in the final stages of consideration of legislation to extend the Federal Vocational Education Act and its amendments. During the past two years Congressional sub-committees have conducted in-depth reviews of the status and need for vocational education, both through oversight hearings and on-site reviews within the states. This review process sparked considerable controversy as it questioned the adequacy of programs at the various levels as well as the administrative structures, especially at the state levels. However, it demonstrated again the conviction that the Congress has in the value of vocational education. Few pieces of legislation secure the unqualified support of both political parties that vocational education legislation has enjoyed. This is further evidence of the confidence that Congress has in the field of vocational education.

A Look Ahead

With full realization that "star gazing" can be risky and that a full list of assumptions upon which future predictions must be predicated would be voluminous, the writer will offer a few observations which seem to be reasonably well supported by current developments and recent trends.

Vocational education is not even close to reaching the high point in its developmental trajectory. Vocational education will remain a top national priority for at least the next two decades. The enrollment increases have been at a rate of 8 to 9 per cent a year even during a period of declining secondary school enrollments. However, a shift in the proportion of enrollments from the secondary to the post-secondary and adult levels can be anticipated.

Vocational education will continue its emphasis on a broader range of occupations as well as an emphasis on competencies within occupations that are transferable and less subject to obsolescence. This will necessitate closer involvement with employers who will, by necessity, provide an increasing amount of training that is highly specific to their manpower needs.

Vocational education will increase its supportive efforts to programs of occupational information, exploration and guidance leading to occupational decision making by youth and adults. The complexities involved in bridging the gap between school and work will escalate and increased service in these areas will be required.

Vocational education has been looked upon as a force that can assist in the resolution of some of this nation's social problems. These will continue to be a challenge to the vocational education community as it seeks to provide opportunities for disadvantaged, handicapped and minorities, since it is recognized that occupational life has a major impact upon all other aspects of one's life style and self concept. As many traditionally male dominated occupations become open to women, the training needs of this segment of our work force will increase. Of course, the male role as a homemaker is changing, and the field of home economics will be challenged to respond to new demands by both males and females.

Vocational education will need to increase its credibility in the market place. The products of vocational education must get jobs and be able to perform at a high level. This not only means effective guidance and instructional programs, but it demands placement and follow-up services for every trainee. Advisory councils at the local, state and national levels will be increasingly involved as the public's "watchdogs" and partners in the establishment of developmental patterns which assure relevance and credibility.

Increased numbers of professional personnel to assume both the instructional and non-instructional roles will be needed. Emphasis must continue to be placed upon instructional personnel who have the occupational and instructional skills necessary to assist youth and adults to develop marketable competencies that lead to occupational advancement, satisfaction and personal fulfillment.

Non-instructional personnel must be selected from the pool of qualified professionals who have competencies gained through experience and especially designed educational programs that will permit them to support instructional programs at the local and state levels. Professionals who are to provide leadership through non-instructional roles such as curriculum development, administration, supervision, research, counseling, planning and evaluation, etc. must be prepared in a systematic and purposeful way rather than to merely "siphon off" the **best** teachers for non-instructional roles.⁵ Major institutions of graduate study in vocational education will continue to meet this challenge through efforts which have been stimulated by the Education Professions Development Act, Part F, Section 552 during the first half of this decade.

Professional personnel development programs in vocational education will continue to emphasize the comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated approach which yields a more discerning professional who views his own specialty within the totality of vocational education rather than as an isolated entity.

The preceding predictions regarding the future of vocational education must be viewed against a backdrop of human development which is bound up in the meaning of life, as well as the worth and dignity of those of us who are privileged to live it. The importance of cognitive and psychomotor competencies is readily acknowledged by those of us who step into the last quarter of the twentieth

century. However, there are those affective qualities that are more frequently "caught" than taught which make the **what** and the **how** of occupational life worth living at all. In the words of Robert Theobald, a British socio-economist and futurist:

Our survival seems to demand that man become the missing link between ape and humanity. Such a transformation will require imagination and courage—two qualities which are presently in short supply. The basic challenge of today is not a lack of information, but a lack of willingness to act upon what we know and thus create a more humane world.⁶

For individuals to realize their full potentials as human beings there must be an appropriate balance of liberal and vocational education. Those who focus on education for "earning a living" must not ignore the role of education in assisting each individual to maximize his or her human capabilities for living a full and rewarding life.

The career education movement in education has great potential for building an institutional context within which individuals can view themselves as total persons with a life career that encompasses all of their "life career components" whether they be economic, aesthetic, political, recreational, moral or religious. Vocational education can play an important role in the life career of an individual, but this role can be maximized only when vocational educators view their responsibilities within the total concept of human development.

As Theodore Roszak said:

... the future grows out of the here and now ... there are questions that must, therefore, be worked deeply into awareness ... What are you, and what do you want to become? ... What are your true needs? ... Are you in charge of your life, and if not, who is? ... Gradually, the whole person must be brought forth to answer.⁷

A purposeful incorporation of the concept of developing the total individual through the vocational education program of the future could maximize its impact on the individual as well as our society as a whole.

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