

# Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

## *Viewpoint*

### **The United States Needs Career-Connected Learning**

By Gov. Jay Inslee & Abigail Smith

Stanford Social Innovation Review  
Fall 2019

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# VIEWPOINT

INSIGHTS FROM THE FRONT LINES

## The United States Needs Career-Connected Learning

The traditional study-then-work approach is letting too many students down. With a study-and-work approach, we can create more opportunities for more students beyond high school.

BY GOV. JAY INSLEE & ABIGAIL SMITH

**A**t a time when unemployment is close to generational lows, it's easy to forget that dramatic advances in technology are rapidly transforming the labor market. As many as 40 million US jobs could be lost to automation over the next two decades, according to Bain & Company research, and the positions that replace them will have very different requirements.

Preparing our young people for this massive transition is among the biggest challenges the US education system faces. Yet, too few students are being prepared to work in jobs that offer promising, productive futures. While roughly 70 percent of jobs require a degree or credential after high school, the US Department of Education estimates that only about 40 percent of US students entering 10th grade go on to earn either a two-year or four-year postsecondary degree. In other words, the current system risks leaving the majority of our young people behind.

We can solve this problem by creating more pathways for more students beyond high school. Maximizing opportunity for all young people will require something more—something like a system similar to the one we're building in the state of Washington that augments the traditional study-then-work educational system with a broader, more inclusive study-and-work approach to learning. Known as career-connected learning (CCL), this model has succeeded in other countries. In Switzerland, for example, 70 percent of students pursue a career-related study-and-work path, and the Swiss do a

better job of employing their young people. Swiss youth unemployment is 1.7 times Switzerland's total unemployment rate, compared with 2.2 times in the United States.

In this approach, educators and employers work together to combine classroom instruction with relevant real-world experience to give students an array of attractive, academically connected pathways toward fulfilling, high-paying careers. Attaining a four-year college degree immediately after high school will continue to be an appropriate ambition for many young people, but it is also critical to offer multiple affordable career pathways that combine schooling with relevant real-world experience.

Small but promising CCL programs across the United States are already

benefiting students and employers alike. But we have found that building successful programs that satisfy the needs of both employers and students demands something new: a state-sponsored CCL system that connects educators, employers, labor leaders, and nonprofits to create and scale local solutions. Such programs must be high quality, universally accessible, and efficient. They also need to be market-driven and student-centered, meaning they should help students while also supporting the industries that want to employ them and the overall economy. It's a tough balance to strike, but advancing such programs from merely notable to broadly relevant requires satisfying the needs of both employers and students on a large scale.

The system in Washington unites school districts, postsecondary institutions, labor, and major employers such as Boeing, Amazon, and Kaiser Permanente behind a bold ambition: In 10 years, 60 percent of Washington's class of 2030 will choose a robust career-connected learning experience to propel them from high school to career and college-level learning. These students will be in programs aimed at preparing them to build airplanes, cure diseases, or design innovative new software.

The approach starts in elementary and middle school, with programs to raise awareness about careers. It continues in high school by combining classwork with targeted internship opportunities. It culminates in "career launch": a paid on-the-job experience with aligned classroom learning to produce a qualified job candidate with a postsecondary credential and a year of college-level credit. Students can then choose to take a job with their career launch company or use the experience and credentials as



**GOV. JAY INSLEE** is the governor of Washington state and a Democratic candidate for president of the United States. Under his leadership, Washington has invested billions in K-12 and higher education, expanded and fully funded a need-based grant program so that all students can attend college and apprentice programs, and created a statewide system for

career-connected learning.

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a springboard for further education or a different opportunity.

Consider the experience of Nate, a former student at Union High School near Vancouver, Washington. Although teachers for years told him a four-year college degree was the only path to success, it felt like a bad fit to him. He wasn't sure what he wanted to accomplish in college, and he knew it would create a heavy financial burden for his family. But the alternatives did not seem appealing: "Work in my uncle's pawn shop, or get a job in fast food," he said.

Then, an engineering elective called "Imagine It, Design It, Build It" opened a new door for Nate. It led to a high school internship at an advanced manufacturing facility run by SEH America, a unit of the world's leading producer of silicon wafers used in semiconductors. Nate has graduated from high school and now spends around 30 hours

a week working toward becoming a technician at SEH and earns \$13 an hour. He devotes the rest of his time to classes at a nearby community college working toward a two-year certificate in mechatronics, which combines mechanical engineering and electronics. SEH pays for his tuition and books, and it adjusts his schedule to accommodate his classes. Nate views the Career Launch program as a paid stepping-stone. He ultimately plans to pursue a mechanical engineering degree.

Nate's experience is shaped by Washington's long and proud history of registered apprenticeships. These programs combine meaningful paid work experience with aligned classroom learning, leading to a post-secondary, industry-valued credential and a real job. They work because they are held to a high standard of excellence and are jointly developed and run by employers, workers, and educators.

The coming workforce transformation presents an opportunity for a new generation of young people. Our economy continues to generate the kind of jobs that offer clear pathways to career advancement and economic self-sufficiency. These jobs exist across every industry and in every state, with the largest portion of opportunities in health care and information technology occupations. But the US educational system will continue to leave a majority of kids behind if the study-then-work four-year college option is considered the only pathway to success. Career-connected learning doesn't replace college; it's another pathway to college-level learning. Developing CCL programs at scale is our best chance to recommit to the idea that the American dream should be open to anyone willing to work for it. The payoff is clear: a productive, educated citizenry in which everyone is afforded economic opportunity. ■

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