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Workforce Education and Two Important Viewpoints

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“Excellence is to do a common thing in an uncommon way.”
Booker T. Washington

Florida Workforce Education

Workforce Education appears to be a goldmine in the state of Florida. As of December 2003, annual job growth statistics reveal that Florida ranked number one in the nation in new jobs and tied for number one in percent change relative to other populous states (Georgia, Texas, New Jersey, and New York) (*Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation, 2003*). The purpose of Florida’s Workforce Education Program is to provide career and technical education as well as other educational services to help students attain those skills that enable them to become or remain economically self-sufficient. Florida’s Workforce Education system continues to evolve with opportunities to obtain two year postsecondary education. However, while earnings have increased, overall completer rates remain low. Gray (2002) noted “while college enrollment has risen dramatically, college success has not.” In a review of Florida workforce education programs the following is noted:

The Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability found that over a four-year period since 1997-98, a majority of students left the workforce education system without finishing their programs, **particularly** those students taking college credit programs (Associate in Science and college credit certificate). For example, over three-quarters of Associate in Science enrollees left the program without completing their

program and only 8.7% completed an Associate in Science degree. The remainder of the students transferred to another program or continued to work in the program on a part-time basis. Adult vocational program enrollees had higher completion rates than college credit enrollees but, more than half of these students either left their programs or earned only occupational completion points, which are levels of student accomplishment that are short of program completions. (OPPAGA Report No. 04-42).

The purpose of this article is to explore the necessity for students to participate in programs that offer less than bachelor degrees while recognizing the importance of higher education, particularly in the African American community.

Less than a Bachelor's Degree

Educational programs that promote less than a bachelor's degree are not always popular. Historically, the viability of these programs has been questioned and the role of vocational education in the African American community has been debated.

The question may be asked, "What does this mean for my family and me?" It is often assumed that most parents would love for their children to graduate from high school, transition directly to a four-year college, and upon graduation, land that top paying job. The reality is that this is not always the case. American youth who do not pursue college degrees are referred to by Howe (1988) as the "*the forgotten half*". These individuals either experience enormous difficulty getting jobs (probably due to inadequate basic work skills), or accept dead-end jobs that offer low status, little training, and pay too low to support a family (Althausen & Kallebert 1981; NAS 1984; Osterman, 1980). The William T. Grant Foundation updated its 1988 report on Work, Family and Citizenship, *The Forgotten Half Revisited: American Youth and Young Families (1988-2008)*, which indicates three key facts: (1) the critical transition from school to the workplace has become more difficult than it was a decade ago; (2) moving into permanent employment is taking longer; (3) young

workers who do not go on to college or career training are experiencing longer periods of unemployment and are relying more than ever on part-time, dead end jobs.

According to statistics (*Florida Education and Training Placement Information Program*) ten years after graduating from a public Florida high school, most students who acquired a high school diploma in 1991 had not earned a higher-level education credential. In addition, of 13,748 students, 68.3% were high school dropouts, and less than one percent obtained a Bachelor's (or higher) degree or Associate of Arts degree. Only 3.5 percent earned a Vocational Certification, and 21.3 percent earned a GED diploma (*Commissioner's Workforce Education Study, 2004*). These astounding percentages indicate the very real existence of Howe's forgotten half in the state of Florida and the need for Career and Technical Education. So, just what does this mean to us as parents and educators? As parents, are we still convinced that a college education is the sole route to self-sufficiency? As educators, do we understand that there are some students who just do not want to go to college directly out of high school, as well a large number who do not want to finish high school? Most importantly, as African Americans, is there is a belief that workforce education does not provide enough education to ensure that your children succeed?

The *Florida Community College and Workforce Education* newsletter edition No. 2004-003, has the following to say about the successes of Workforce Education:

[High school] students who enroll in community college Dual Enrollment programs are enrolling in college and universities at rates significantly higher than students who do not enroll in these accelerate articulation programs. Moreover, Hispanic and African- American students who took Dual Enrollment courses are enrolling in higher education at higher rates than whites or any other ethnic group. Workforce Education research indicates that students who took at least one Dual Enrollment course enrolled in higher education at a rate of 63.9%, compared to an enrollment rate of 55.4% for all high school graduates (including those who enrolled in accelerated programs such as Dual Enrollment, Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate,

or others). For African-Americans in Dual Enrollment, 69.7% enrolled in colleges while only 44.9% of the overall African-American population enrolled in higher education. Clearly, placing accelerated programs, such as Dual Enrollment or others, in high schools, provides students with advanced course work that prepares them for college enrollment. (2004)

Again, while these numbers are encouraging, what about the forgotten half-- those African-American youth who, for whatever reason, either drop out of high school or are simply not ready and not prepared to enter college?

Two View Points from the African American Perspective

That advancement is a number one priority for African Americans is not a question. The question is, as it has always been, *how will they continue to advance?* History notes the viewpoints of two African-American leaders who had visions of a common goal for African Americans, but with very different opinions on how advancement should be accomplished. These leaders' similarities and differences are worth noting, considering that even today generational differences and other factors provide the African-American community with multiple perspectives on the issue of the advancement of African-Americans.

Booker T. Washington was born a slave, and his viewpoints were influenced by his experiences with oppression and the slavery system that defined his youth. W. E. B. DuBois was born free, inexperienced in the hardships of Booker T. Washington, and lacking knowledge of the sacrifice and courage necessary to become a free people. Similarly, today's African-American youth may not totally understand the sacrifices of the past or the necessity of a steadfast commitment and strong will needed for advancement. According to his autobiography *Up From Slavery (1901)*, Washington attributes his deferred education to having to provide income and support for his family. At some point in his life he became determined to obtain the college education he desired, regardless of how long it would take, or how late the start came. Washington advocated hands-on-

skills training as a critical step toward accomplishing economic freedom. Some believe that he set out on a course to *prepare* African-Americans to step into the roles he felt confident they would one day assume. However, his message was interpreted by some African Americans as advocating compromise and the surrendering of civil and political rights in exchange for chances at economic development. His approach to advancement was not always a popular one.

W. E. B. DuBois was a scholar and graduate of Fisk University and became involved in the formation of the N.A.A.C.P. In his book *The Souls of Black Folks (1903)*, he acknowledges Booker T. Washington's proposed methods of African-American advancement and goes on to explain his belief that Washington advocated that the Negro not pursue higher education, but rather, concentrate solely on industrial education. Both men believed education was extremely important in order for African Americans to overcome the social ills of their time, however their approaches differed considerably. Washington believed skills and trade were necessary in order to obtain economic freedom, whereas DuBois believed that the right to vote, civil equality, and higher education of youth were more important than the accumulation of wealth. The authors suggest both men were correct.

In the mist of the struggle for social and civil equality, the Industrial Revolution (marking the replacement of an economy based on manual labor to one dominated by industry and machine manufacture) spurred major technological, socio-economic, and cultural changes in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In modern times, the Information Revolution, marked by the development of an economy based on technology, has resulted in occupations that are not only the fastest growing, (particularly in the state of Florida, see Table 1), but also that require *both* career technical and higher education. African-American youth who do not graduate from high school and gain a college education or study a skill or trade, are unprepared for today's highly-skilled workplace, and the consequences are, and will continue to be, dire for the African-American Community.

Table 1
Top 15 Fastest Growing Occupations* in Florida, 2004-2012

Occupation	Employment 2012	Annual Growth %	Educational Attainment
Medical Assistants	40,658	5.28	Voc Cert
Network Syst & Data Comm.	22,248	4.94	Voc Cert
Med. Records Technicians	15,592	4.73	Voc Cert
Home Health Aides	36,427	4.38	Voc Cert
Personal Financial Advisors	16,040	4.34	Bachelor's
Tile & Marble Setters	7,315	4.31	Voc Cert
Kindergarten Teachers	14,592	4.18	Bachelor's
Database Administrators	6,953	4.18	CC Cert/Degree
Fitness Trainers & Aerobics Instr	13,906	4.08	H.S. or Less
Public Relations Specialists	20,240	4.07	CC Cert/Degree
Cement Masons & Concrete Finishers	18,453	4.04	Voc Cert
Respiratory Therapists	8,010	4.03	CC Cert/Degree
Self-Enrichment Ed. Teachers	18,557	4.02	Voc Cert
Computer Software Eng.	20,535	3.91	CC Cert/Degree
Drywall & Ceiling Tile Inst.	9,159	3.89	Voc Cert

*Minimum size: 2004 employment=4,000 jobs

Source: Agency for Workforce Innovation, Labor Market Statistics (2004)

Advantages of Workforce Education for African American Youth

The goal of this article is to focus on American youth in general, and African-American youth more specifically, who fall into one of the following categories:

- High School Drop Out
- High School Graduates with no desire to obtain a college education
- High School Graduates who desire a college education, but who due to family or other obligations or obstacles, defer a college education

These individuals may be considered non-college bound, and the question remains, *how will they advance in a highly skilled workforce that considers a bachelor degree the equivalent of a high school diploma?* It has been suggested that Career and Technical Education be offered as a requirement, *not an elective*, in our high schools. This would ensure that American youth obtain skills that prepare them for a career without a college education, thereby increasing their chances of self-sufficiency. Today, students are already offered college prep courses in high school; however, *requiring* high students to obtain workplace skills would be a giant step in developing America's workforce and narrowing the unemployment/crime paradigm.

Multicultural Overview

As we examine the past to prepare for the future let us not kid ourselves. The perspectives and ideologies that were embraced by both Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois, still hold true even until today. As people of multicultural backgrounds strive to achieve the American dream in education as well as social economic and political equality, the struggle has not changed. The needs and desires for assimilation into the American way of life and to have the American dream have never been stronger in people of color. How will this change come about, and is the society which has emerged in

this century ready to embrace this change? Just as Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois advocated two different perspectives to pursue this dream, the dream has not died. The way in which this dream will come to a reality is the question facing not just people of color, but all mankind. If we are to succeed, then we must all succeed together. The focus must not be on the color of the skin nor the social or economic background of people who are willing and desire to enter the workforce. It should be the right and privilege for all who have the common goal and desire to achieve this success in their lives. Success will not come easy, but if we are willing to accept the changes needed to move forward there are great possibilities. The workforce today is far more diverse than it has been in any other time in our history. With the emergence of technological advancements in every facet of our lives, there is a greater need for the highly skilled and highly trained worker to accept this challenge. The philosophies of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois are needed just as much today as they were yesterday. However, these philosophies should not just be the focus of people of color or those with multicultural backgrounds, but the focus of all people with the desire and willingness to enter the workforce.

Summary/Conclusion

In the state of Florida, Workforce Education is proving to be a viable force that drives Florida's economic engine. Workforce Education provides opportunities to prepare students for today's highly skilled workforce. American youth in general and African-American youth specifically, are encouraged to take advantage of these opportunities and consider key findings from the report of the William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship. This article addresses the viewpoints of Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois in light of today's dilemma of how best to address the needs of African-American youth. These two men believed education was essential in African Americans' overcoming of the social ills of their time; Washington put his faith in skills and trade, and DuBois believed that equality and education were more important than wealth.

In the past, high school required students to participate in courses that ensured the obtainment of skills that prepared them for the workplace. Today, most of these courses are offered in an elective format, placing them second to liberal arts and sciences courses that, while informative and often necessary, do not guarantee that students are prepared for the real world post-graduation. The present generation is experiencing a revolutionary workforce transformation unique for this time in history, and with a widespread integration of skill training and/or college preparatory courses into the high school curriculum (and the destruction of the negative connotation associated with the trade option), employment opportunities and self-sufficiency in future generations of young adults will skyrocket.

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