

# **Generation Next: Feedback from Students to Improve Career Guidance and Outreach Practices**

Prepared by Heather Winfrey, Director  
Construction Center of Excellence at Renton Technical College

## **Summary Statements:**

This report to the Construction Center of Excellence (CCE) Steering Committee and other interested parties outlines recommendations from students to improve the delivery of outreach and construction career guidance.

## **Background:**

In 2006, the Centers of Excellence serving Construction, Manufacturing and Energy began conversations with the Washington State Tech Prep Association to explore how these two initiatives can improve career guidance messages and outreach. At the same time, the CCE Steering Committee deployed its two-year strategic plan, focusing on improving the image and accessibility of construction trades and careers.

It was decided during a marketing group retreat of CCE steering committee members that student feedback should be collected and analyzed before any new products are developed. There are top quality materials for career guidance already available through reputable state organizations, such as the new Washington State Construction and Building Trades Council DVD. It was determined to be more important to evaluate how those materials could be best used or disseminated, than re-create them.

Moreover, this group felt it was the mixed messages, messengers and venues that are no longer effective in reaching out to young people. It was decided by this group that feedback from students would confirm or dispute this suspicion, and I was directed to collect this feedback by June 2007.

## **Collection of Feedback:**

The feedback presented herein represents a small sampling of students with mixed satisfaction in the career guidance received specifically for construction trades. The participants are students from New Market Skills Center in Tumwater, Washington. This was a limited selection because of time and resource constraints. However, this sampling was compared with broad research conducted in state and nationally, and the results are commensurate.

I used a two-part collection process to gather feedback: first, we conducted an online survey with students enrolled in construction trades and other non-related programs. The online survey asked broad questions about career guidance, decision-making, interests and lifestyle factors.

I used these survey results to format student focus group questions for a meeting with construction trades students. The focus group questions were prepared specifically to gather

input on how construction industry and related career guidance materials and activities met (or did not meet) students' expectations.

## **1. STUDENT FEEDBACK AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

### **Online Survey**

21 respondents responded 100% to 25 questions covering general career planning, guidance, and decision-making in our online survey. In the summary below, their feedback is reported as a bulleted item.

### **Focus Group**

30 students (approximately 10 who took the online survey) participated in the Focus Group. This group was asked to respond to and expand on the combined responses (where significant percentages or sentiments were reported) of the online survey, and to relate their responses to construction trades pathways.

The significant trends from this feedback include:

#### **Certainty of future career path**

- 52% were very certain of the career path they had selected; only 9.52% didn't have a career plan whatsoever. The same percentage reported that it did take a significant amount of time to decide what career pathway was a good fit for them. Interestingly, the greatest challenge to making a decision was uncertainty about how to get into the career of their choice (even after a commitment to a career path was set), followed by the ability to afford college/training.

#### ***Focus Group Feedback to the survey:***

According to the participants in the focus group, many explained that they had been put into a position to make a commitment to a career pathway without fully knowing what levels of training are expected, or the nature of the work. One student also said he thought the data meant that his peers may not be as committed to a career path as they claimed to be.

#### **Influences**

- Parents were cited as the greatest influence on decision making (38.10%), followed by the media (28.57%), and peers (19.05%). Teachers and counselors were reported as significantly less influential in decision making (in fact, no one said a counselor was a great influence).
- When asked what they thought was the greatest influence in their peers' lives, online survey respondents cited "friends" at 57.14%.
- Later in the survey, participants were asked what "global" issues presented through the media they felt their generation would have to "fix" in the future (choices were education; environment; war/terrorism; poverty/starvation; and equality). The online

survey respondents ranked “equality” highest at 33% - and all categories were just below this percentage.

When asked why the above person was considered the greatest influence, those online survey participants who cited parents almost always stated they had a parent somewhere in the field of their choice (construction trades students have parents or relatives in construction). Those who reported media as influential specifically said “TV” or “Radio” in their responses, and that the portrayal of their career path in one (if not both) of these mediums was positive.

***Focus group feedback to the survey:***

The students who were part of both the survey and the focus group were asked to clarify if they discussed career plans with academic or career technical educators. About half of these students said a “math teacher” or “homeroom teacher” and said they had not talked with a career technical educator ever in their school.

When asked why the media was ranked higher than teachers, peers and counselors, focus group participants felt media reports, news, and technology are just more part of their daily lives, and even if they are passively paying attention to what is reported, it’s still “there.”

Media also meant “technology” – ipods, computers, the internet – and most online survey and focus group participants said they owned these tools or used them regularly. Moreover, most felt adults in the workforce were proficient with the internet, websites, and high technology tools.

When asked why equality had been cited as the most important media issue to fix, two interesting points were made:

1. At the time of the survey, students recalled the “Don Imus” scandal involving derogatory comments had been dominating the news. The participants who participated in both the survey and the focus group said if asked again what they would rank as a critical issue, it could very well be different.
2. The focus group also said that as certain news stories dominate media reporting, there may be a “correlation” (not their word) between what is perceived as an issue they are going to inherit and need to fix vs. the number of times they hear about it. One respondent said “it’s hard to keep up with all the negative stuff in the news and when it’s reported a lot, it grabs my attention more.” Another said that “Iraq” was on his mind this week compared to the “equality” story.

Focus group participants were asked to elaborate on why online survey participants would say their peers were influenced by friends more than any other category. Those who participated in both the survey and the focus group said it wasn’t easy to know exactly what influences other people, but they answered the survey question based on their own sharing or encouraging others to consider New Market’s construction trades program. Others said they didn’t know if their peers had strong relationships with their families, or if their peers’ families were connected to the construction industry.

## Defining Success

- When asked how they will define success in the future, respondents primarily selected “being my own boss/owning a company,” followed by “my job won’t define who I am” and “I will make a good wage.” The percentages were nearly negligible among these selections.

### ***Focus group feedback to the survey:***

When asked to elaborate on these responses, participants overwhelmingly agreed with “being my own boss/owning a company.” A few students stated that they firmly believed they could be in charge of a company or be a contractor within a year. All said owning a business is the equivalent to having a good wage. When asked what “my job won’t define who I am” meant to them, focus groups participants said they wanted balance between their work and free time.

- When asked what the worst thing about working would be, an overwhelming number of respondents said “fear of boredom/routine” (57.14%). All other responses were dramatically lower than this response rate.
- Interestingly enough, later in the survey, participants were asked, “What motivates your peers’ career choices?” and 71.43% said “making money.”

### ***Focus group feedback to the survey:***

When asked to respond to this percentage, focus group participants further elaborated on the defining success question (statistics in above bullet). Over half of the participants said that while wages are important, wages in any career path didn’t matter if the work wasn’t rewarding or challenging. One respondent said, “being happy with your work is part of your paycheck.” Many others agreed with this sentiment. Those who are entering a union apprenticeship understood that they’d be working on different projects, and recommended that the variety and new challenges they would encounter should be a positive selling point to other prospective construction trades students. This group said it should be equally weighted as an advantage to good wages.

When asked to compare motivating factors for their peer group, focus group participants said they couldn’t really answer why online survey respondents may have said that “making money” was identified as most important to their friends. Those who participated in both the survey and the focus group felt it was “perception” issue, and figured their own friends would say the same of them, even if it wasn’t the case.

## Career Mobility

- 71.43% of the respondents said they expect to work for 2-4 companies over their career. 61.90% said they expected to switch jobs at least 3-5 times.

### ***Focus group feedback to the survey:***

As mentioned above, the focus group participants in the construction trades program felt the variety of work through a union apprenticeship should be marketed as a “selling point” to other prospective students.

## Career Guidance Activities, Events or Mentors

- Online survey respondents were asked when a person is considered “too old” to relate to, especially in mentoring or career guidance situations. The majority responded anyone over the age of 30 would not be able to relate to their generation.

***Focus group feedback to the survey:***

There was significant discussion around career mentors and guidance activities among focus group participants. Several related that it wasn't *until they had already decided upon* a construction career path that the age, gender or ethnicity of a “construction trades spokesperson” at an event was irrelevant – many said they would not have talked to an “older” person at a career fair about training or jobs, if that person was representing a pathway they weren't yet “sold” on.

Similar to national research, these students were not afraid of working with people of different age or skill sets, and believed they would look to older workers for mentoring and support once they were on the job. However, much like other generational research findings, this group's responses implied that they “filter” out older voices and feel confident in making decisions on their own before looking for “positive reinforcement” from mentors or industry spokespeople.

Further, they didn't feel career fairs were useful activities – several said they and most of their friends felt college nights, career fairs and other broad activities were “wastes of time” or “ways to get out of school.” Some said a career-specific event was great to reaffirm the career pathway decisions they had already made, and to explore their decisions further. *This may be important to program retention rates.*

One participant suggested that career fairs be designed for career specialists and teachers who provide career guidance through high school advisory classes. Then, students would be more apt to get better information from school officials and wouldn't be out of class “wasting time.” Several participants agreed with this idea, saying they felt most of the career guidance they received pushed only for universities and four-year colleges.

Some said they had been discouraged from applying for apprenticeships, and told that community and technical colleges were only for people who “wanted to transfer to universities after they got their grade point averages up.” One student shared an experience of having to fight to use dual credit, and another said his parents had to push for him to attend New Market. However, many students said their experiences in getting career guidance and attending New Market depended on their “home school.”

## **2. CONCLUSIONS AND QUESTIONS:**

### **How students receive career guidance**

Students are making decisions to enter or not enter a construction career pathway based on information they receive from peers and parents, first and foremost. The “word of mouth”

phenomenon should not be discounted; in fact, students repeatedly said they could be of help in getting accurate and positive information to others. This leads to asking:

- How can we use “word of mouth” to our advantage?
- How can we ensure students have accurate information to share amongst their peers?
- Are there other ways we can tap into parents with construction trades backgrounds to extend their positive influence to other young people, besides their own kids?

Of the students who said teachers were influential in their decision making, only half in the focus group said it was a career technical educator who first connected them to construction trades. Those students also said they had not been in contact with career technical education previously, and most of their friends had not or were not at skills centers or interested in career courses at their home schools.

Most said their current instructor reaffirmed their decisions to pursue an apprenticeship or construction job, but he was not the first teacher who had encouraged them to consider the construction pathway. This is distinct from being a resource in a student’s mind. Participants stressed that the person who helped in decision making at a school was not the same person who provided additional resources or reaffirmation about a decision (that seems to come later, when a student is “locked into” a pathway – see next section).

- If students are not seeking career guidance from a career technical educator, how do we get positive career messages to academic instructors?

The role of the media should not be discounted as a “passive” form of guidance. One focus group participant said he occasionally had “second thoughts” about construction careers because of the many accidents/fatalities reported in the news. The group did say that negative messages “stuck” with them far more than positive messages about construction projects (such as reports about hot home sales, highway projects completed under budget or ahead of schedule, etc).

### **Teachers as advocates**

As mentioned above, students cited teachers as resources before or preferable to a career counselor. Participants stated this was not necessarily an academic teacher, but a CTE instructor who offered support and career planning resources after the student had enrolled in a construction trades course.

Several participants of the focus group felt academic teachers would’ve provided better career information about trades, *if they knew or understood it.* Others felt teachers and counselors perceive universities as the only route to respectable or professional jobs – further conversation with these students revealed they think teachers may believe only “white collar” jobs can be quality jobs, or careers with any earnings potential.

This leads to further exploration:

- How can we provide teachers who are not in the CTE community with construction trades career information – and what would be way to show the value of the information to teachers? Can a “career fair” be held for teachers? What would be the incentive?
- How can construction trades and construction careers in general become contextualized into general academics (construction math being a good start)?

### **Students are savvy to dual credit – but don’t consistently feel encouraged to access it**

Students who go to a skills center represent many high schools in a consortium. Many were savvy to dual credit programs, including tech prep. Several said they had to search out information on dual credit programs with their home schools, and these students clearly understood the fiscal reasons they may not be counseled to access skill centers or programs such as Running Start: the home school could not afford to lose the “FTE” or funds connected to their full time attendance.

These same students expressed dissatisfaction with career guidance from their home schools, saying they could not get adequate information on apprenticeships or two-year schools from career specialists. (**Note:** this was specific to a cohort of students in a specific consortium. It should be acknowledged that any encouragement or discouragement of accessing dual credit may be based on the philosophy, demographics, and local economy of a particular school – as well as the influence of its board and parent-teacher associations).

All students who participated in the focus group related that they were counseled to go apply for a four-year college or university, and all reported that the spectrum of post-secondary education options was not equally shared. The students did acknowledge that each “home school” feeding into New Market “handled” their career guidance differently.

- How do we change the image of construction consistently with schools?
- What are the best uses of our limited resources in construction workforce education (staff representing trades, marketing budgets, etc) to make the greatest impact with schools?

### **Friends and Money**

Collecting feedback means we are analyzing subjective and limited perspectives. For instance, the participants who reported in both the survey and the focus group that family was the greatest influence in their decision making were also the most vocal in saying they felt their friends were not making decisions under the same conditions.

Most were adamant that they had been as or more influential in attracting students to the New Market’s construction trades program. They are positive spokespeople for that particular program and take pride in sharing what they have learned and what they plan to do. If asked, they may report they think they are influential among friends in all aspects of personal life; such feedback would be similar to other Generation Next research indicating that young people believe they have a greater impact on others than they may or actually do.

National research suggests that wages do not matter as much to young people as fulfilling projects and work variety. Many instances with the focus group reaffirmed these findings. Students did recommend outreach should include the great wages in construction, but it should be on par with the advantages of variety in project work.

- How can we utilize students in construction trades programs or apprenticeships as “mentors” or “ambassadors?”