



PREPARING STUDENTS VIRTUALLY FOR TOMORROW'S JOBS

The elements of a successful, modern career readiness program

There is no question that K-12 education is undergoing a seismic change. The widespread adoption of virtual learning amid the pandemic is more than a temporal blip. It has exposed millions of learners and educators to the ways that technology can enhance learning.

"Education has looked the same since the early 1900s. It takes something like this to drive human innovation," says Mike Dardaris, senior director of career readiness education at K12. "During this time, people are recognizing how important it is to have an equitable, quality education."

Amid the crisis, 82% of teachers said in a study by [72 Point and SAM Labs](#) that using technology in learning helps students get ready for their future careers.

That's crucial because the workforce is also seeing rapid shifts. Digital skills will be essential in 92% of future jobs, according to [MDR](#).

The time is ripe for educators to consider whether they are making the most of today's tools to equip students for tomorrow's careers.

Online and blended career readiness education (CRE) and career and technical education (CTE) programs are key ways for schools to expose students to different career options and provide them with practical training they can apply to future degrees and jobs. Those programs, however, must be robust and reflect the evolving nature of work to ensure success in the new economic environment.

This piece draws on the expertise of veteran educators and thought leaders in career readiness education to highlight best practices for CRE/CTE programs and demonstrates how schools can excel at providing modern learning experiences in a virtual environment.

EXPOSURE TO HIGH-GROWTH INDUSTRIES

The workforce is evolving rapidly, and many of today's jobs are new-collar jobs. In some cases, the careers that will be relevant in the future do not even exist today. Artificial intelligence and machine learning are making it possible for computers to complete many tasks that people had to perform until now. They also are creating new jobs emphasizing skills that are difficult for a computer to learn, such as creativity and collaboration.

CRE/CTE programs have an opportunity to equip students with certificates or badges that acknowledge the skills learned and enable them to find jobs in high-growth areas of the economy such as IT, manufacturing, health care and business.

Most students only have exposure to a limited set of career options – those that are modeled for them in their communities. But that prevents a student who lives in a rural setting, for example, to consider a career in technology, or for a student in an urban environment to study farming. Online or blended CRE/CTE programs can bridge that gap and widen students' exposure, particularly to those jobs that will be important in the future but may not be common in today's workforce.

“These programs keep students from being locked into their ZIP code in terms of career exploration,” says Heather Buskirk, director for CRE at K12.

Virtual CRE/CTE offerings not only prepare students for future jobs through their focus, but in their format as well. Many jobs are expected to remain virtual after the pandemic, and online learning mimics that environment.

“Through virtual CRE education, we're giving students a chance to model what the future of work may be like,” Buskirk notes.



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— **HEATHER BUSKIRK,**
director for CRE at K12



TEACHING STUDENTS ABOUT THEIR PERSONAL BRAND

The internet has redefined how job candidates are assessed. One's personal brand, including how they present themselves online, has become an important element.

Many students who use social media tools to connect with friends may not realize that what they post has implications on their future careers. That's why K12 Learning Solutions helps students develop their personal brand as part of its CRE programs, explains Pat Michel, vice president of career readiness programs for K12.

"We make kids understand that they need to be very cognizant of how they look on the internet," he says. "Your internet footprint, your brand, is extremely important."

Discussing personal branding also empowers students to think about their own potential and how they can apply it in the workplace, adds Mike Dardaris, K12's senior director of career readiness education.

"Typically, students only know what society has told them about their personal value," he says. "When you allow a student to be unhinged from society's norms and boxes, they're allowed to dream." ■

PERSONALIZED, BLENDED LEARNING

A virtual learning environment equips educators with unique ways to meet the needs of all learners, and CRE/CTE programs should use that to their advantage.

For example, the most extroverted students may get the most attention in a live classroom. Digital learning levels the playing field by offering other ways for students and teachers to engage. It also enables students to learn at their own pace and in the style that best suits them.

"It's never been a good idea to have a one-size-fits-all style for education," Dardaris notes. "When you can offer multiple modes of education, and multiple opportunities for students to learn the same thing in a different way, you're firing on all cylinders."

Strong CRE/CTE programs also incorporate in-person instruction where it makes sense. For example, a student interested in a health career may spend time gaining hands-on experience in a hospital. They also may include augmented reality simulations that allow students to practice their future craft in a controlled environment.

What's key is for CRE/CTE programs to be designed with flexibility and various tools that educators can incorporate as they see fit to ensure students have a rich experience.

"If we blend those practices, the students win," Dardaris says.

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING

Skills are becoming increasingly important in the workforce, as are the modes of assessing them. As the [World Economic Forum](#) puts it, skills are the new currency of the labor market.

"In the HR world, there's a shift away from, 'Just give me your resume,' to, 'Show me what skills you have,'" says Pat Michel, vice president of career readiness programs for K12. "It changes the whole outlook of how education is done."

CRE/CTE programs can help students prepare for this reality by adapting new ways of teaching. Rather than giving tasks, teachers should assign projects. This style mimics the modern workplace, a collaborative environment where problem-solving and creativity are crucial skill sets.

“We tell students what the answer should be, and they figure out how to get there,” Michel says.

Such project-based learning allows students to experience the discomfort of not having all the answers and develop the research and discovery tools they will need to thrive in a working environment.

Educators face a blunt choice because of the pandemic. Workplace trends that technology already had kick-started have accelerated because of the unprecedented growth of virtual work and learning. To help students excel in the future of work, they must rethink many underlying aspects of traditional education.

CRE/CTE programs are more important than ever for learners to explore career options and acquire essential skill sets.

“We still haven’t figured out the new landscape, but it’s here and it’s happening,” Buskirk says. “For students to not just survive but thrive in it, we need to teach them how to connect and collaborate in a global society.” ■



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