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ABSTRACT

Twenty-one students and 15 staff members of 8 technical colleges attended a meeting to discuss the question, "What do technical college students want or need from school?" Participants were divided into four groups of students and two groups of instructors and staff members. Each group worked with two facilitators who presented the group with a series of questions; each question increasingly focused the participants' attention toward the main question. Three themes from the student groups set the context for their responses: participants' definitions of success, reasons students attend technical college, and the image of technical school students. The four topical themes from the student groups were as follows: technical college structure and service issues, personal barriers and aids to success in a technical college, school-to-work transition issues, and the effect of the merger of Minnesota's postsecondary education systems, scheduled for July 1995. Major themes from the faculty and staff work group discussion were as follows: differences in students and their needs according to location of school, technical college structure and service issues, personal barriers and aids to success in technical college, concerns of mature students, student expectations of self and school, and school-to-work transition issues. (Results of a participant evaluation of the town meeting are included. Facilitator questions and prompts are appended.) (YLB)

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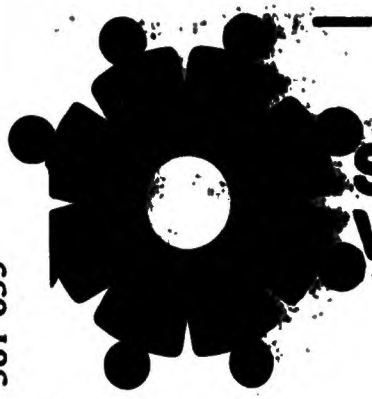

State Council on Vocational Technical Education
STATE OF MINNESOTA

WHAT MINNESOTA POSTSECONDARY LEARNERS REQUIRE OF SCHOOLS

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Report of Work Group Discussions

Town Meeting
Summer 1994

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WHAT MINNESOTA POSTSECONDARY LEARNERS REQUIRE OF SCHOOLS

Report of Work Group Discussions

Town Meeting
Summer 1994

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Acknowledgements

The Council extends its appreciation to the technical college students, teachers, and staff from across the State of Minnesota whose contributions are contained in the following report. The Council also acknowledges its gratitude to the facilitators who led the focus groups and recorded the comments of the participants.

This report will be made available in alternate format, such as large print or cassette tape, upon request.
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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Town Meeting

Each year, the State Council on Vocational Technical Education holds a public hearing, providing an opportunity for the public to express opinions on aspects of vocational and technical education in the State of Minnesota. The State Council is mandated by Title I, Part B, §112c of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Act of 1990 to hold at least one public hearing per year. The 1993 Town Meeting focused on "What Minnesota secondary learners require of their schools" and included high school and postsecondary students, parents, teachers, administrators, counselors, community organization representatives, and business people.

Pursuing the theme of learners' needs, the Council sent notices of the 1994 Town Meeting to all Placement Specialists, Sex Equity Coordinators, and Special Needs Supervisors at the 34 technical college campuses throughout the State of Minnesota seeking participation from students, staff, administration, and the public. Twenty-one students and fifteen staff members of eight technical college campuses attended the full day meeting in St. Paul on June 30, 1994 to discuss the question, "What do you (technical college students) want or need from school?"

The Process

State Council staff, with the assistance of a project advisory committee, developed a series of questions designed to direct the attention of group participants increasingly toward the ultimate question of interest: "What do you (technical college students) want or need from school?" Graduate students from the Department of Technical and Vocational Education, University of Minnesota-Twin Cities Campus, received direction on conducting focus group activities prior to the Town Meeting. The graduate student facilitators were also given a common strategy for recording the comments from the work group discussions.

On June 30, participants were welcomed by Ms. Brenda M. Dillon, Executive Director of the State Council, who explained the purpose and process of the Town Meeting. Following a spirited talk on the changing nature of technical education by Dr. M. James Bensen, a member of the State Council and then president of Dunwoody Institute in Minneapolis, the attendants were divided into four groups of

students and two groups of instructors and staff members for further discussions. Each group worked with two facilitators, who presented the group with a series of questions (see Appendix); each question increasingly focused the participants' attention toward, "What do you (technical college students) want or need from school?" The facilitators were charged with accurately recording their comments.

After several hours of group work, the students, staff, and facilitators met late in the day in a general session to report on the emerging themes from the individual sessions and to discuss the Town Meeting forum and its results.

Description of the Participants

Nineteen of the twenty-one student participants completed questionnaires detailing demographic information from which the following is drawn. The average age of the ten female and nine male students was 32 years. Ten students were currently married and nine students were single or divorced. The students represented 8 of the 34 technical college campuses located throughout the State of Minnesota. The students attending the Town Meeting represented 12 different majors and expected to complete their studies in an average time of two-and-one-half years.

The Town Meeting student participants spent an average of nearly 26 hours per week in school. The seven students who were working averaged 22 hours on the job per week. Ten of the nineteen had some previous postsecondary schooling before their current enrollment. These experiences ranged from previous false starts in technical or community colleges to completion of a master's degree. The students represented a range of backgrounds, ethnicities, origins, and abilities. This may have been a result of the Council designating Placement Specialists, Sex Equity Coordinators, and Special Needs Supervisors as the contact persons for the Town Meeting. Several of these staff members attended the Town Meeting and participated in the staff group activities.

Most of the 15 staff participants did not fill out the personal information questionnaires and very little specific information is available to report on these individuals. Due to some disparity in the responses of the staff and the Council's intent to clearly report the needs and wants expressed by the students, information collected from the two groups of participants is described separately throughout this report.

Initial Findings

Three themes emerged from the student groups that do not address directly the intended outcome of the Town Meeting but are important in providing the

context for many of their replies. These themes concern the participants' definitions of success, the reasons students attend technical college, and the image of technical college students.

Success is . . .

Perhaps due to the mature average age (32) of the student participants at the Town Meeting, statements by many of these students on their measures of success had more to do with family and children than with achievement in school. These respondents were looking beyond school for validation of success and appeared to view their postsecondary education as a means to an end. When asked, "What is success to you?", the most common replies recorded during the focus groups were:

- Being a good parent and providing for my children—e.g., "I measure my success through my children's success."
- Meeting my own personal goals and expectations—e.g., "Finding my niche is important to being happy and successful."
- Making a living at something I enjoy.
- Financial security.

One student's remark, however, appeared to capture the general sentiment among the students: "Success has many definitions. I need the technical college to accept students' own definitions of success." Other statements spoke to the need to adapt in the current economic environment and to prepare for life-long learning.

"Success has many definitions. I need the technical college to accept students' own definitions of success."

One participant described success as becoming a positive role model for one's race and helping to break down racial stereotypes. Another student reflected, "Success used to mean big money and big toys; now it means 'I am happy'. I'm glad that has changed."

Why Students Choose to Attend Technical College

When the students were asked, "What influenced you to attend technical college and why did you select your particular program of study?", the group

facilitators recorded the following replies:

- To meet entry-level requirements for a specific occupation.
- Starting over due to lay-off, accident, or retirement from the military.
- I had reached a (promotion/pay) ceiling due to my previous educational qualifications.
- I need to keep up with changes in technology in my trade/field.
- Technical colleges are more focused. I was attracted by specific programs or combination of programs (e.g., multi-tech).
- Wanted to train for and begin a career more quickly than possible with other postsecondary schools.
- Technical colleges seem more relaxed, with more of a family atmosphere.

The Image Problem of Technical Colleges and Their Students

During a discussion of the concerns technical college students face now and in the future, it became apparent that these students were displeased with the public image of technical colleges and the people who attend them, although they were satisfied with their decisions to attend technical college. They indicated that this negative image has added to their apprehension over the potential effect on technical college students from the imminent merger of the state's postsecondary systems. This image has resulted in some apprehension over their careers after postsecondary education. Students expressed concern over:

- Future funding of technical colleges with respect to space, equipment, class sizes, staff, and support services.
- The future effect on technical colleges from the merger of postsecondary systems.
- Transferability of technical college credits to the University and all other postsecondary options.
- Negative image of technical colleges and the students who attend them.

As one student described the issue:

> "People graduating from technical colleges are seen as a different breed; we have a bad image. The public perception is that people go to technical college only if they can't get in anywhere else—like we're all high school dropouts or GED's. I'm in class now with a PhD student who is taking technical college courses to get a job."

Another student commented, "Only 32 of my 110 credits are transferable to the 'U' or other colleges."

As the postsecondary system approaches the merger of the state university, community and technical college systems, these students are very aware of the merit their credits are given relative to those earned at other postsecondary institutions. "There is a great difference in the way credits are treated, depending on where you earned them. Currently, state university credits count at the technical colleges, but not the other way around."

"I'm in class now with a PhD student who is taking technical college courses to get a job."

These same concerns extend to students' consideration of their careers after they finish technical college programs. One student remarked, "On one hand, the technical college degree insulates you against company downsizing; on the other hand, you always get the lower salary because of the kind of degree you have."

Comments of the Staff and Faculty

The remarks of the staff and faculty participants at the 1994 Town Meeting mirrored many of the comments made by the students. In expressing their definitions of student success, the technical college staff groups listed:

- Building a full skill inventory of occupationally-specific and general soft skills.
- Every person has his or her own definition of success.
- Economic viability—making enough to support a family, afford health insurance, and purchase transportation and a home.

During their considerations of why these students chose to attend a technical college, or a particular technical college, the staff participants catalogued a broader range of reasons than did the students:

- Improvement in work skills needed for the job or occupation they already have or to prepare for re-licensure in their field.
- These students want to train for and begin a career more quickly than other educational venues allow.
- Attraction to financial opportunities and support services for disabled/immigrant/unemployed students.
- Accessibility of the local technical college to the student's home.
- Some students have a history of academic failure. They are less intimidated by the prospect of technical college and are aided by remedial programs.
- Technical colleges are more economical than other postsecondary schools.
- Attraction to a specific combination of programs (e.g., multi-tech).

When considering the image problem of technical colleges and their students, the staff participants clearly recognized the negative effect of this image. Staff acknowledged this by explaining the image as a cultural bias—peculiar to the United States—against technical colleges, their students, and the occupations for which these students train. One staff member related a common maxim to illustrate the prejudice, "Better to be an unemployed PhD than a plumber making $40,000 a year!"

THE MAJOR THEMES

Four themes emerged from the student groups. These are:

(1) Technical college structure and service issues.

(2) Personal barriers and aids to success in a technical college.

(3) School-to-work transition issues.

(4) The effect of the merger.

Technical College Structure and Service Issues

When asked about the concerns they face, the students listed several worries that relate to the structure and services of the schools they attend. These are:

- Funding of technical colleges with respect to space, equipment, class size, staff, and support services.
- Personal qualities of instructors—some are immature, some are substandard, some do not give enough opportunities for hands-on experience.
- Transferability of technical college credits to the "U" and other colleges—even to community colleges and other technical colleges.
- Paternalistic ("high-schoolish") approach by some instructors, staff, and administrators in their treatment of students (discipline, schedules, rules, etc.).
- Day care for students' children while attending school and studying.
- Lack of student and staff diversity.

Technical College Funding

There were several comments that addressed students' worries about the adequacy of their technical colleges in delivering educational services. Observed one student, "I'm concerned about the size of my technical college. We don't have enough space for all our classes." Another explained:

"I'm worried about them cutting faculty and staff. Some of my classes are overcrowded. In one classroom, a single instructor is monitoring four separate, self-paced classes at a time. Although we are learning on our own and approaching the instructor only with questions we can't work out, the instructor is too overworked to be of much help."

Others spoke of the need for an adequate library on campus (many technical colleges have none). Another student remarked, "We need more up-to-date equipment." There was strong agreement among the group members on this observation. One group participant stated, "There seems to be an ongoing problem concerning the disbursement of money from administration to the programs. Too much money seems to stay at the administrative level." Another group questioned whether "votechs have lost their sense of mission during a time when they need to be more on the cutting edge than ever."

"In one classroom, a single instructor is monitoring four separate self-paced classes at a time."

Staff Issues

The comments of the student groups at the Town Meeting indicate that there seems to be a wish or need for either better counseling services or a change in the nature of counseling services on the technical college campuses. Students mentioned particularly the need for:

(1) better sources of information concerning supplemental or developmental courses to help students succeed in programs;

(2) a single "one-stop shopping" center for information on vocational evaluation, career counseling, careers, technical college (course, program, and degree) requirements, and the current job market; and,

(3) more counselors.

As one student explained, "Going to school is a very stressful experience. Many students need reassurance from time to time; some need to deal with more serious issues at the same time they are trying to make a better life for themselves."

Illustrative of the students' concerns about faculty and staff, one student complained:

> "Some of our instructors are terrible. They talk in circles and are disorganized. When the administration surveyed student opinions on the quality of the faculty, they never reported the results back to the students, who poured their hearts out when asked. Bad faculty and staff act like they don't want anything to do with students. If they aren't interested, why the hell are they there?"

Another student recommended ". . . some accountability for instructors who are poor, unmotivated teachers covering the same material over and over again." Others protested immature and complacent instructors.

Transfer of Credits

The transferability of credits across postsecondary systems was also a concern. Several students expressed frustration over their inability to transfer technical college credits to the University of Minnesota, to schools in the State University System, or to community colleges. One student suggested that preparation for credit equivalency might begin by developing ". . . a consistent system throughout the state of quarters or semesters and identical academic calendars for all technical colleges, community colleges, and state universities."

The Treatment of Students

Perhaps due to the mature average age of the participants, several students expressed concerns over the "high-schoolish" and paternalistic treatment of students by school policy, staff, and administrators. Stated one student, "I would like the faculty and administration to treat students as if they are mature adults rather than as if they are all 18 years old." Another student asserted, "Some of the general education requirements may be appropriate for 18-year-old students, but requiring me—at 32—to take an art or physical education class as part of my program is somewhat silly." Others explained that some instructors try to micro-manage the schedules of busy twenty- and thirty-year-old students with families and jobs.

Others found that participation in the school government was verbally encouraged by the staff, but subsequently discouraged by the staff's negative reaction to any student government activities that impacted their programs or class time. Such civic participation was also discouraged by the administration's lack of reaction to initiatives proposed by the student government. As members of one work group stated, "Students want some voice in technical college deliberations."

Day Care

One of the two subjects raised most consistently throughout the day was the subject of child care. Affordable, on-campus day care for the young children of technical college students was listed as a concern and a need by most of the student work groups and by both of the instructor and staff focus groups. With respect to some technical colleges where day care is offered, students complained of both inadequate capacity in comparison to the need (long waiting lists) and rules that require students to remove their children from day care if they are leaving campus for even an hour during the day.

Diversity

Although not as prevalent a part of the discussions as the other concerns mentioned above, students made several comments about diversity issues. Some of the students remarked that, in too many of Minnesota's technical colleges, the students and faculty are nearly all Caucasian. Others explained that a shortage of note-takers and interpreters for the deaf students or a shortage of English classes for immigrant students often act as barriers to successful participation in school. Another student explained that sometimes diversity seemed to mean extra support for some students without equitable support for others. This student illustrated his point by mentioning the existence of a women's center on his campus without an accompanying men's center.

The Needs of Students with Respect to Technical College Structure and Services

When asked what they want and need from school, students raised the following subjects most often:

- Orientation, information, & communication—on the school, its programs, career assessment and exploration, the governance of the technical college, the merger, etc.
- An environment conducive to learning.
- On-site child care, convenient and affordable parking and local housing, and public transportation to and from the technical college.
- More variety in class offerings.
- Equitable transfer of credits to other postsecondary systems.

- Understanding and support by technical college staff for the mature, adult student with multiple demands of family, work, and school.
- Gender-neutral programs and services (e.g., in the treatment of students in non-traditional fields, in justifying campus women's centers without corresponding men's centers).
- Acceptance and support of student government and some input into school governance.
- Positive continuous contact between students and faculty.
- Fewer publicly-aired disagreements between faculty and administration.
- Class schedules matching student needs (e.g., offerings during summers, Saturdays, evenings).

Communication

The most prevalent theme throughout the Town Meeting was the issue of communication. One comment mentioned repeatedly in the students' evaluations of the Town Meeting was an appreciation for the opportunity to discuss their experiences. These students were anxious for opportunities to communicate with others and share information concerning their experiences.

The students at the Town Meeting indicated a need for more readily available information on policies, procedures, events, and deadlines. Several spoke of necessary and important information on course and program requirements being scattered throughout the school. Others expressed a need for more readily available information on opportunities for vocational evaluation, career exploration, career counseling, and job market information.

"Students need more information from the school."

Another group of comments concerned students' desire to replace ignorance and fear with knowledge and understanding. These students consistently indicated a need to understand the changes and shifts in technical college governance and policies that affect their lives as students. One student remarked, "Students need more information from the school. Information

from all sources should be disseminated throughout the student body." Another indicated:

> "All increases of rates and fees should be explained to students before they occur; we have a right to know when and why. We should also be told how a tuition increase will result in changes—positive, we hope—in services."

The Learning Environment

Students also wanted an environment conducive to learning. The Town Meeting participants indicated this included longer classes (90 minutes or more), an on-site library, smaller class size, greater hands-on access to computers and the leading technology in students' respective fields, and ongoing, positive contact with the major program instructor. Students also suggested more work-study opportunities on campus, more support for peer tutoring programs, more opportunities for students to interact with each other, and more evidence that program and curriculum decisions are based on industry- or trade-based advisory committees. Students proposed more flexibility in scheduling classes to accommodate those who work and more general education classes to reduce overcrowding in these cross-disciplinary courses.

Personal Barriers and Aids to Success in Technical College

Some of the following barriers have been mentioned previously while others have not. Among the barriers to success in technical college the students listed were:

- Lack of day care for children while attending school (in day and night classes) and while studying.
- Lack of transportation to and from school.
- Rules of social welfare programs that impact required class load or day care.
- Poor command of English.
- Lack of economic viability while attending school.
- Grant requirements that call for too heavy a class load to remain eligible.

Among those personal factors that students listed as aids to success in technical college were:

- Someone to talk to.
- Support from family and others.
- Enough money to avoid financial worries while attending school.
- Sustained positive contact with one's major instructor.

Opinions of the Faculty and Staff

One of the faculty/staff groups at the Town Meeting spontaneously generated a list of what it considered to be personal barriers and aids to student success in technical college. Among the barriers, the group listed:

- Changes in relationships that lead students away from identifying with school.
- Alcohol abuse.
- Lack of financing for school and living expenses.
- Unrealistic expectations of the school experience.

The group's inventory of aspects that lead to successful completion of a technical college program included:

- A strong relationship with the faculty and other students.
- A focus on school.
- A determination to succeed.
- Self-directedness.
- Goal-directed activities that lead to incremental goals.
- A supportive family or personal environment.

School to Work Transition Issues

Another major theme that arose from the discussions in the work groups was a need for better activities that help students achieve a smooth transition from their time as students to their time as workers. Several students spoke of the need for expanded internship programs. Others pointed out that internships are required for completion of some programs, but the school lacks a large enough base of available internship positions with local or area companies to accommodate student demand.

As one student asserted, "I need the school to work more closely with industry and expand the internship program so I can gain more exposure and get more involved in the 'real world' before I finish the program." Another explained, "The technical colleges need to create partnerships with industry; they can share technology, equipment, and expertise." Several students expressed concern over their school keeping current with industry demands while they were completing their programs.

"I need the school to work more closely with industry and expand the internship program . . ."

Another student suggested regional job fairs throughout Greater Minnesota to bring students, potential employers, and the local technical colleges together. Several students expressed concern over getting a job when they complete their programs. One work group recommended internships for all programs. Two groups recommended that technical colleges establish effective outplacement services with current (local and area) labor market information and job application forms on-site.

The Effect of The Merger

No topic raised during the Town Meeting engendered more evidence of anxiety among the students than the imminent merger of Minnesota's postsecondary education systems, scheduled for July 1995. While the staff and faculty groups made only a passing reference to the merger, it was clear from the comments of the students that the prospect of the merger has resulted in ample fear among technical college students.

These concerns parallel many of the themes mentioned previously in this report. Students exhibited apprehension over the relative respect they and their schools will receive under the new system; possible loss of funding; feared increases in tuition; negative changes in the independence, quality, or mission of technical

colleges; and changes in faculty.

One student wanted to know whether additional liberal arts or general studies requirements will add to the length of technical training programs or replace specific program components, such as skill-specific courses or internships. She also asked, "Do patients care if their med techs can speak French?" There were a host of worries outlined by another student:

> "How will classes be structured and teachers be licensed? Will they get rid of technical colleges in favor of community colleges? Will the vo-techs have a different mission or different goals? There is not enough planning or information filtering down to the students. We're scared to death!"

One student participant wondered, "How can current and incoming students prepare for changes in program requirements or tuition if no one at the technical college has any answers?" Others were afraid that technical colleges would lose their family atmosphere—seen as a clear difference between these schools and other postsecondary institutions. "What will the merger do to my school? Will I be taking a math class with 300 other students?" Another student predicted, "With this merger, vo-techs are on the bottom of the pile and will get the least amount of money."

Major Themes from the Faculty and Staff Work Group Discussions

The faculty and staff work groups at the 1994 Town Meeting were conscientious in their consideration of the topic at hand. Their contributions, from a different perspective, may add to the knowledge of postsecondary students' wants and needs.

Differences in Students and Their Needs According to the Location of the School

The following information comes from one of the two faculty and staff groups. During the work group discussion, the group members each described the nature of the students at his or her technical college and discovered, by comparison, that there appeared to be some differences in students and their needs, depending on whether the school was located in an urban, suburban, or rural setting. When these features were shared at the end of the day with the entire group of Town Meeting participants, there was sufficient agreement among students and staff to warrant repeating them here.

Faculty and staff representatives of the *urban* technical colleges described their students as averaging 28 years in age. At these schools there is a high incidence of caseworker or social agency referrals; thus, as many as eighty percent of these

students may be receiving some financial aid. Accessibility to local bus lines is a very important factor in the decision to attend a particular school or campus, as is the presence of subsidized child care.

Due to high concentrations of recent immigrants in the metropolitan areas of the state, both public and non-governmental English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs act as entry points to urban technical colleges with respect to this population. However, these non-English speaking student groups are hampered by either a lack of ESL programs or an inadequate capacity of ESL programs in the technical colleges. While many immigrants arrive with previous professional and technical training from their own countries, all need a command of English to succeed at either training or employment in this country.

Faculty and staff from *suburban* technical colleges described a different student body profile. These students display a bipolar distribution of age; recent high school graduates and older adults needing skill upgrades and retraining are both represented heavily in the student population. Although accessibility to bus lines is a factor for some prospective students, most have transportation and are able to "comparison shop" accessible technical colleges using magnet programs or placement rates as criteria. The younger students often consider the transferability of technical college credits to a four-year institution at a later date in their deliberations.

The faculty and staff members of the work groups from *rural* technical colleges described students who best match the traditional or historical view of such students; that is, those who attend postsecondary education immediately after graduating from high school. The average student age in the rural schools is approximately 22 years. Due to more demanding driving distances to even the closest postsecondary school, they are attracted by the relative accessibility of the local technical college. This is enhanced by heavy recruiting by the technical college at the secondary schools within its service area. These students often select programs of study based on their personal estimate of the current availability of local jobs despite (sometimes contradictory) state and federal labor market projections.

Technical College Structure and Service Issues

The instructors and staff substantiated some of the students' concerns by raising identical issues. The lack of on-site day care for students' children, lack of day care capacity great enough to meet students' needs, or (day care or social welfare program) rules that reduce its utility to students are all major problems that have a daily effect on technical college students' ability to participate and succeed.

The instructor and staff work groups also confirmed that transferability of credits across postsecondary education is a concern among their students. The staff groups remarked on the need for technical colleges to consider more flexibility in

scheduling class meeting times. Some urban schools have more night students enrolled than day students enrolled. Some technical colleges hold 25 percent of all courses at night. Instructors and staff also added the need for more hands-on experience through internships, modern laboratory equipment, and a trained faculty that is professional and current in their fields.

"The schools really need a one-stop information clearinghouse . . ."

The instructor and staff work groups also mentioned several service issues that were not considered by the student groups. They expressed concern over the lack of absolute honesty by technical colleges in marketing programs. They also agreed that many instructors may not be as responsive to the 20 percent of students who are committed to their schooling, but struggling to succeed in their courses, as they are to the top 20 percent who are easy to teach.

The instructors discussed at length the need for students to learn and build skills in time management of family, job, and school while completing a technical college program. As with the student groups, these staff members repeated the need for orientation, information, and communication across the technical college campus to ease students' fears and increase their chances of succeeding. "The schools really need a one-stop information clearinghouse designed to help students figure out how to jump through all the hoops required by the college." Some of the most penetrating comments from the staff work groups occurred during their discussion of the personal attributes of students and their relationship to success in technical college.

Personal Barriers and Aids to Success in Technical College

The instructor and staff work groups noted that many technical college students seem to be suffering from a form of "future shock," brought on by the media and recent changes in the American economic landscape. As one instructor put it:

> "Students are worried about the prospect of constant change in their future, assured by the media. Many do not look forward to a future that may *require* three or four changes in careers, the downsizing of companies that might require them to begin training from scratch, and the likelihood—declared by economists—that they will never achieve the standard of living of the last generation."

Concerns of Mature Students

Faculty and staff respondents reported that the entry into postsecondary education is viewed quite differently, depending on the age of the student. The transition from work or unemployment to school is particularly problematic for the returning—so-called non-traditional—student. One impact of the past ten to fifteen years of changes in the American economy has been to force many people back into school to remain employable. For some individuals, this is a high risk activity. The Town Meeting instructor and staff groups offered fairly detailed descriptions of the experiences and motivations of their mature students.

After being forced into a major change in their lives, some of these individuals are affected by a common and natural fear of change and of the unknown. The unknown includes the prospect of life-long learning to avoid losing ground financially; the possibility that they may fail again after re-tooling their skill inventory; or that their area of training may become obsolete in the near- or mid-term future. What may be most threatening of all is the fact that many of their life experiences or previous areas of expertise simply are not appropriate to their current technical training and are not perceived as relevant by instructors.

Student Expectations of Self and School

The staff informants discussed the need for students to have accurate expectations of themselves, their school, and the workforce. This includes an accurate assessment of their true abilities, interests, and aptitudes and counseling to help them see the connections among these attributes. This also involves, according to the instructors, an honest and frank self-inventory of an individual's level of commitment to school, financial resources, child care needs and solutions, and one's willingness to juggle work and school for a period of years. The staff recommended a formal reassessment by the student and principle program instructor at mid-point in a student's program to review choices, goals, and needs.

School-to-Work Transition Issues

The instructors in the Town Meeting work groups indicated that their students must have a greater range of skills than previously to ensure a smooth transition from school to work. These skills include:

(1) occupational experience gained through internships,

(2) competence in job seeking and interviewing, and

(3) a comprehensive package of the "soft skills"—problem-solving, communication, interpersonal competence, and acculturation to the workplace—that are needed by today's employees in order to maintain employment once it is secured.

They indicated that many of their current and former students are eager to secure full-time employment immediately after completing only the most critical courses in their programs. While this is initially satisfactory to the students, these instructors caution that long-term success (and greater advancement) in an occupation depends on an individual taking the time to build a full skill inventory. These instructors cautioned that students need to invest in securing a degree or the licensure that certifies to employers the student's ability to contribute a comprehensive package of knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

CONCLUSION

The intent of this exercise was to determine "What do you (technical college students) need and want from a technical college?" The descriptions in this report are accounts of the information provided by 21 students and 15 faculty and staff. While hard data may contradict some of the beliefs held by these student or staff informants, the authors have made every attempt to accurately report these individuals' perceptions and opinions, as recorded by the group facilitators. Among several independent student work group discussions, major themes emerged reflecting the concerns, wants, and needs of technical college students in Minnesota. These themes included:

(1) Technical college structure and service issues.

(2) Personal barriers and aids to success in a technical college.

(3) School-to-work transition issues.

(4) The effect of the postsecondary merger.

Major themes also emerged from the faculty and staff work group discussions. These themes addressed:

(1) Notable differences in students and their needs with respect to urban, suburban, and rural technical colleges.

(2) Technical college structure and service issues.

(3) Personal barriers and aids to success in a technical college.

(4) School-to-work transition issues.

Analysis of the Major Issues

The issues raised by the students with respect to the delivery of technical college services deserve consideration and reaction by the Council and the administrators of technical schools throughout the state. The process selected by the Council to elicit the opinions of a group of invited students and staff is a very powerful technique in gaining their perspectives on a given topic.

The opinions recorded in this report are most useful as input for any discussion of what technical college students want and need from their schools. This report is based on opinions collected from 21 of the more than 75,000 students currently enrolled in Minnesota technical colleges and 15 of thousands of staff members. Before any generalizable statements could be made concerning the opinions of Minnesota technical college students, quantitative analysis of the reactions of a sufficiently powerful and randomly-selected sample of such students to a survey or questionnaire covering the topics raised in this report would be required.

Child Care

The need for day care for the children of these students is particularly poignant. It is both a personal barrier to the school success of these students and a technical college service issue. While it is tempting to expect these students to find their own child care solutions, just as any working parent(s) must, a large number of these individuals are in a transition phase and often lack the funds necessary to secure private day care. This burden falls disproportionately on female students who, most often, are responsible for the care of their children.

Would on-site child care attract more students? On-site, affordable (supported or sliding-scale) child care may help ensure the continued attendance of at-risk students who might otherwise quit school. One of the positive features of technical colleges described at the 1994 Town Meeting was the family atmosphere absent in other postsecondary settings. A family-friendly program, such as supported on-site child care or a cooperative child care arrangement, is merely an extension of this atmosphere, not to mention good business. It also passes the test of a gender-neutral support service; while it may disproportionately aid female students for reasons mentioned above, male students who are the primary caretakers of their children would be equally eligible for this service.

On the other hand, the addition of child care facilities and staff to the technical college increases the cost of doing business and would, no doubt, decrease the space available for technical, academic, or remedial classes. The problem of inadequate space on many campuses was noted by the student discussion groups. Unless an increase in funds to build and staff child care centers could be arranged, the stakeholders of a technical college must come to some compromise concerning which existing or proposed service would be reduced, eliminated, or postponed to provide the financial means and physical space for such a service.

If a decision is made to implement child care services, however, a technical college would do well to provide child care services with sufficient capacity to meet most of its students needs. The truth of technical college's claim of on-site child care services is of limited value to many students if the capacity of the center is, for example, 20 children with a 12-month waiting list for another 50 or more children.

State Board of Technical College records indicate that 27 of the 34 technical college campuses have child care services available for their students. Twenty-five of these centers are located on the campus of the technical college. All 27 centers have a capacity exceeding 20 children. Seventeen have a capacity exceeding 35 children.

Funding of Technical Colleges

There are two questions which follow from the discussion of the student, faculty, and staff responses. The first is, "What level of funding is needed to guarantee that technical colleges, or specific technical colleges, are able to continue to deliver services at their current levels of quality, depth, and breadth?" The second question is, "What new services are needed in all technical colleges—or, again, in specific technical colleges—and will these services be funded with new money or by re-allocating current monies?"

This report has documented a fairly extensive list of services or capital improvements that the student participants felt they needed to succeed in technical college. Most of the needs suggested in this report can be satisfied by the administration, staff, and faculty communicating effectively, arriving at a consensus, and implementing their decisions. Increasing communication and the flow of information throughout a school is a matter of changing or adjusting processes. Fewer publicly-aired disagreements between staff and administration can be accomplished by establishing better lines of communication. Promoting an environment conducive to learning is feasible with or without increases in the cost of delivering services.

Some of the suggested improvements, however, will require either the re-allocation of existing funds or an increase in funds necessary for increasing capacity. Libraries, more classrooms, newer equipment, additional instructors, additional course offerings, larger and more numerous ESL programs—all can be attained only through spending more money than the school is spending now or decreasing services in other areas.

In most cases, the technical college and its staff are making a genuine effort to accomplish as much as they can with the resources given them by the federal and state governments and the local community. Increasing the capacity of any educational institution will cost more money. This burden will inevitably fall on the students in the form of increased tuition and fees as it is spread across the multiple sources of revenue.

Staff Issues

Both staff groups and the students agreed on the need for a "one-stop shopping" center for information pertaining to vocational evaluation, career counseling, careers, technical college (course, program, and degree) requirements, and the current job market.

The students also indicated a need for more counselors for a variety of reasons, many of them requiring counselors with training in multiple areas of expertise. The addition of vocational development specialists and an increased capacity for vocational evaluation and counseling may be reasonable. However, an increase in counselors trained to deal with more personal issues of students under stress may be well beyond the mandate of and services appropriate to a technical college. The delivery of such services by technical college staff without specific prior training is professionally inappropriate and potentially actionable.

Students also complained of instructors trying to micro-manage their schedules. It is inevitably up to the students and instructors to determine where the appropriate boundaries should be between a proper concern over a student's time-management skills and sheer intrusiveness. The instructors at the Town Meeting indicated their belief that students need, and instructors should teach, time management and a full range of soft skills, which may not appear to the student to be directly applicable to the student's area of skill training. This instruction includes, as previously mentioned, demanding a level of responsibility for attendance and punctuality higher than many students have experienced in the past.

Some Thoughts on Student Expectations

Most of the barriers the students listed were services that would be provided by others. Taking these and other comments together, our students have told us, in effect:

> "I want day care for my children, transportation to and from school, and social welfare and student aid rules that reduce my stress while I'm attending school. At the same time, I don't like my instructors treating me as if I'm still in high school; I want to be treated as an independent adult."

Most of the barriers listed by the instructors were internal to the student. They were saying, in effect, "These are the pitfalls: alcohol, new relationships, unrealistic expectations, and a lack of financing." The aids the instructors listed were personal attributes that the student either brings to school or develops while there.

The federal and state governments and the community can optimize the conditions under which its adult citizens can work at further education, but seeking and succeeding at education beyond high school is difficult. Regardless of how the conditions are changed to make continuing education as painless as possible, it is never completely painless. The state and community provide instructors, buildings, access to textbooks, equipment, expertise, and, at times, child care. The student is expected to make an investment in money, determination, effort, and time management. Together, the state, community, and students create a more educated citizenry and highly skilled workforce.

The test of value for any vocational technical education or training must be in the acquisition of skills, demonstrable and appropriate to chosen occupations. Comparable performance resulting from either academic or occupational skill training should be equally valued across educational systems. If this can be demonstrated by technical college students, the transfer of their credits to other postsecondary schools or four-year institutions is a fair and reasonable request.

Participant Evaluation of the Town Meeting

In an effort to improve the process of the Town Meeting forum, the Council requested that the participants evaluate the Town Meeting. Seventeen students and thirteen instructor/staff members filled out an evaluation consisting of three open-ended questions. The results of this are outlined briefly below. The number of times each comment occurred (in parentheses) exceeds the number of evaluators due to multiple answers or suggestions from the respondents.

(1) What did you like <u>most</u> about the Town Meeting?

Student Replies:

- The exchange of ideas and opinions on technical colleges with other technical college students. (5)
- The interesting discussion. (4)
- The opportunity to discuss some issues about which I'm concerned. The opportunity for problems and ideas—discussed daily on technical college campuses—to reach the ears of people who can make changes. (4)
- Address by Dr. M. James Bensen. (3)
- Small group discussion. (2)
- The relaxed atmosphere/openness of the group process. (2)
- Good facilitators. (2)
- Good questions. (2)
- Lunch. (1)
- It was a great experience—I hope we have made a difference. (1)

Staff Replies:

- The opportunity to exchange information and ideas with others in the technical college system. (7)
- Informal discussion, but with a structure and an endpoint. Small group discussions. (4)
- Great facilitators/facilitators created a safe environment for honest discussion. (3)
- Great participants. (2)
- Dr. M. James Bensen's speech. (2)
- The opportunities for deaf students to participate and express their opinions and needs. (1)

(2) What did you like least about the Town Meeting?

Student Replies:

- "Nothing" as an answer or no answer. "Can't think of anything; it was very enjoyable." (12)
- Too short; not enough time for discussion groups. (3)
- Better food/more variety of food. (2)
- Too much lecture. (1)
- Better ventilation. (1)
- Misunderstood the question. (1)

Staff Replies:

- No answer or "Nothing" as an answer. "It was well done." (5)
- Tendency of some participants to misunderstand the point of the discussion or to stray from the point. (2)
- The separation of students and staff. (2)

- Some questions were repeated too often. (1)
- The scheduling of the Town Meeting is problematic—during the summer, the student are gone from campus; during the school year, they're schedules prohibit participation. (1)
- Long day. (1)
- That I could not attend in the morning. I thoroughly enjoyed the afternoon. (1)
- Too little participation of the technical colleges and students. (1)

(3) Any suggestions for future Town Meetings?

Student Replies:

- No answer or "Nothing" as an answer. (6)
- Keep holding them. I'd like to come back again. (4)
- Keep up the good work! I thought it was very well handled. These are great. (3)
- More participation by college instructors. (1)
- Change location to outside Metro area. (1)
- Directions to site of meeting could be improved. (1)
- Add more breaks. (1)
- Misunderstood the question. (1)
- Do not use the word "vocational" at all; we are technical colleges. (1)

Staff Replies:

- No answer or "Nothing" as an answer. (3)
- Change the timing of the Town Meeting to the Spring Quarter or school year for more participation. (2)

- We need more of this type of meeting. Have it every year. (2)
- Misunderstood the question. (1)
- Discussion of international issues affecting technical education—e.g., How do technical colleges and their students fit in globally? What opportunities are there to work with other countries? How do we best serve international and immigrant students? (1)
- Share the results of all Town Meetings with past and present participants. (1)
- Change location to outside Metro area. (1)
- Present the questions to the participants before the meeting (via e-mail). (1)
- Include all educational institutions in these forums—K-12, private schools, technical colleges, and community colleges. (1)

The Council is pleased with both the format and results of the 1994 Town Meeting. When coupled with the Report of the 1993 Town Meeting (available upon request), the Council has collected valuable information on the needs and wants of both secondary and postsecondary students in vocational and technical education. Such information can provide a starting point for further discussion concerning the improvement of both educational venues, as well as the basis for further research. Through this format, the Council will continue to collect the views of multiple constituencies with respect to the improvement of vocational and technical education in the State of Minnesota.

APPENDIX

Questions and Prompts for Facilitators - Town Meeting 1994

Preliminary Question:

What influenced you to attend technical college and why did you select your particular program of study?

Question A

What are some of the concerns you (technical college students) face today and in the future?

Prompts for (A)

- What are you worried about?
- What problems do you have as a technical college student?
- What do you worry about now?
- What do you worry about for the future?

Question B

What do you think/feel that you need to be successful?

Prompts for (B)

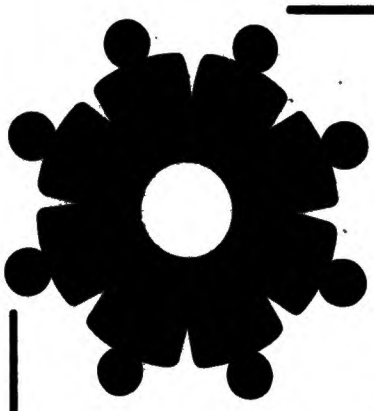
- What is success to you?
- How do you define success?
- How has your definition of success changed over time?

Question C

What do you want and need from school?

Prompts for (C)

- What would help you get through school?
- What do you expect from school?
- What does the school do for you?
- Think Big! What one thing could the school do to help you succeed?



The logo of the State Council on Vocational Technical Education is an abstract representation of the citizen-councilors assembled at a round table. Designed by a commercial art student at Alexandria Technical College, the design was selected in 1982 from 69 entries submitted by vocational students in Minnesota's high schools, secondary cooperative centers, and technical colleges. The Council made its selection on the basis of a recommendation by a panel of representatives from the graphic arts, public relations, and media industries in Minnesota.

Purpose of the Council

The State Council on Vocational Technical Education is designed to further public-private collaboration for the advancement of quality vocational programs responsive to labor market needs. Established in 1969 and designated as a state agency in 1985, the Council comprises 13 members appointed by the Governor. Seven members represent the private sector interests of agriculture, business, industry, and labor. Six of the members represent vocational technical education institutions, career guidance and counseling organizations, special education, and targeted populations.

The Council advises the Governor, the State Board of Technical Colleges, the State Board of Education, the Governor's Job Training Council, the business community, the general public, and the U.S. Secretaries of Education and Labor. The Council advises on development of the annual state vocational plan; provides consultation on the establishment of program evaluation criteria and state technical committees; analyzes the spending distribution and the availability of vocational programs, services, and activities; reports on the extent to which equity to quality programs is provided targeted populations; recommends procedures to enhance public participation in vocational technical education; recommends improvements that emphasize business and labor concerns; evaluates the delivery systems assisted under the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act and the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA); and advises on policies that the state should pursue to strengthen vocational technical education, as well as initiatives that the private sector could undertake to enhance program modernization.

To enhance effectiveness in gathering information, the Council holds at least one town meeting each year at which the public is encouraged to express its concern about vocational technical education in Minnesota. To enhance its effectiveness in providing information, the Council publishes a quarterly newsletter, an annual directory, and a biennial report. These publications as well as project and activity reports are available to the public.

Information on the date, time, and location of meetings and other activities is available by calling the Council Offices at 612/296-4202.

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Office of Educational
Research and Improvement (OERI)

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
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