

Opinion

School-to-Work Is 'In'

But Colleges Should Keep All Options Open For Efforts To Collaborate

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School-to-Work programming is the "in" concept from Washington in the continuing struggle to successfully prepare young people for the challenges and responsibilities of adult life. The initiative is a by-product of the Workforce 2000 discussions which hold much promise but some possible peril as educators at all levels look toward the 21st Century.

Care must be exercised so that the School-to-Work options not be so narrowly defined as to eliminate the participation of colleges, particularly two-year institutions like Gainesville College. Preliminary activities surrounding the concept seem to make such a possibility. A recent newsletter from the American Association of Community Colleges, highlighting an upcoming teleconference on the initiative, listed "Vocational Education Agencies" among the group of agencies that should view the videotape with no

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mention of other colleges as possible participants. A two-year presidential colleague of mine described to me his participation in a recent meeting in Florida to view promising practices emerging under the concept. He was the only "college" representative in the group and was queried by some as to why he was there.

As indicated by those two examples, the focus seems to be upon the establishment of cooperative relationships between secondary schools, technical institutes and business organizations in facilitating the preparation for

employment and the smooth transition to the workplace either directly from secondary schools or via postsecondary education.

Approximately 80 percent of the graduates of the college within four years have a baccalaureate or graduate degree and are living productive lives, including earning a living throughout Northeast Georgia, one of the fastest growing areas of the county.

Some 80 percent of currently enrolled Gainesville College students work, many of them full time. Such concurrent work experience says meaningful things to the students and to those of us at the college as we assist them toward their educational and career pursuits from a lifelong learning, seamless education perspective. Additionally, higher education should also pay closer attention to the use of cooperative programs, internships, clinical experiences and "summer clerking" options which have been used successfully by professional programs such as engineering, education, allied health and law.

A number of our graduates each year receive the cooperative career associate degree made possible through our joint programs with Lanier Technical Institute. The general education and related academic components of that degree option equip those graduates to be self-directional, problem-solving employees in the high performance workplaces which are demanding increasingly broader skills and technological competencies of their employees in an ever-changing work environment. That foundation also allows those graduates to pursue other educational goals as opportunities present themselves supported increasingly by their employees in such endeavors.

A recent article in the *Atlanta Constitution* proclaimed that "technical jobs are the hot ticket in today's workplace." The article went on to identify computer programmers, radiologic technicians, drafters, lab technologists,



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and paralegals as the fastest-growing opportunities. All of these fields have strong general education and related academic preparation needs which must be provided in a college-type environment.

In a "how-to" document produced by Jobs for the Future, a national non-profit organization that conducts research, provides technical assistance and proposes policy innovation on the inter-related issues of workforce development, economic development and learning reform, the point was made that School-to-Work programs should avoid exclusive targeting of the non-college-bound. Research was cited which noted that "numerous examples of young people previously labeled 'non-college-bound' have become motivated and excited about learning—and about continuing their education beyond 12th grade." They concluded also that

"the cognitive needs of work and further learning are becoming increasingly similar."

In a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, officials at the General Electric Foundation said they had developed a college-bound program because their corporate parent and other manufacturing companies were looking harder than ever for people with a college education. Job responsibilities are changing, they said, and workers must be better educated and more skilled than employees in the past.

As a closing reminder of the eventual value of a college experience, I cite a sentence from an article titled, "The Challenges and Opportunities of Workforce Development" by Hilary Pennington, president of Jobs for the Future. She noted that, "About 10 years ago, college graduates earned 30 percent more than high school students; that gap has now grown to 60 percent. More than ever before, what a person earns depends on what they have learned."

Time may be of the essence in the funding procedures relative to the transition to work program. Indications are that the funding procedures for School-to-Work will follow earlier patterns with allocations to several states for internal distribution. In states such as Georgia which have not embraced the community college concept, the possibility exists that the funds may be channeled primarily through the vocational/technical board and/or Labor Department operations. Such a funding procedure would eliminate institutions such as Gainesville College with its primary transfer mission for students planning to obtain the baccalaureate degree.

Let us keep all the options open and funded adequately as we face the educational challenges of the coming century. Let's raise the level of educational aspirations of our students at all levels and not give up too soon on any of them.