



## **Accelerate Nebraska – Position Paper**

### **May 19, 2015**

An eighth grade education and willingness to work hard were what was needed from America's labor force throughout the first half of the twentieth century. College was needed for only a few professions. By the end of World War II the demands of the economy had changed. A high school diploma was a necessary achievement and more Americans were going to college. During the half century following World War II high school diplomas became commonplace and the number of college diplomas also increased. The demands of the labor market had again changed. More and different education was required. The achievement goal was set higher. Generally, the economy rewarded degrees and diplomas as indicators of competency in a particular skill or academic area.

The move to the twenty first century and the recession of 2008 has marked yet another transition in the market for labor. Today, the high school diploma is an absolute necessity. We still respect the achievement. The high school diploma is the foundation, the indicator of readiness for the next step. The economy is demanding more than ever some level of training or education beyond high school; hence, the certificate or credential in early childhood, in welding, or plumbing means something to an employer, the two year associates degree certainly has value and so does the bachelor's degree and beyond. It is no longer good enough just to have earned the degree or the diploma. To the labor market today, it isn't just about how much you spent on your education, or how many credits you've earned, or how many hours of classroom time you have put in; rather, employers are asking, "what can you do?" "What talents do you have and bring to the work place?" This begs reflection on the true meaning and value of the credentials that students spend so much time and money striving to earn and the efficiency of our talent pipeline.

The goal of Accelerate Nebraska is focused on the talent pipeline. We want to see better educational outcomes throughout the pipeline in preparation for education beyond high school and careers, and we want to see a pipeline that is properly aligned with Nebraska's workforce needs. Every student should have the opportunity to find what they are interested in and develop the skills to "do the job." Improved talent means productive careers, successful communities, and an economically more viable state.

Nebraska has developed a talent pipeline that connects high school graduates to post-secondary education opportunities or directly to the job market. Using 2013-14 data, in Nebraska there were 23004 public and private school students who moved through the pipeline and graduated from high school. Nebraska has an enviable public high school graduation rate of 90%.<sup>i</sup> Approximately 71% of those graduates continued through the pipeline and chose to go on to some type of post secondary education.<sup>ii</sup> Examined further, of the 71% who entered some kind of post secondary education at a public institution in Nebraska, 29% of those students did not continue beyond the freshman year.<sup>iii</sup> The remainders of the high school graduates left high school and were available to the workforce or possibly the military. On its face, the numbers may

*Connecting Talent + Careers + Communities*

look good but there are indications that the talent development pipeline may not be effectively aligned and there may be barriers, which need to be addressed.

Nebraska is graduating most of its high school students, which is a good thing. But, higher education institutions, both two year and four year, question the quality of the high school diplomas being conferred in preparing students for education beyond high school. Nebraska's K-12 schools have work to do and they know it. The apparent lack of college readiness for some students may mean that they end their postsecondary experience prematurely and therefore do not maximize their capabilities and marketability. In the case of those students who chose not to go on to some type of education beyond high school, they need to have the necessary skills and direction when leaving high school to successfully function in today's labor market.

The higher education institutions in Nebraska may also be contributing to the difficulty some students are having moving into postsecondary education. K-12 and higher education together need to clearly define the "readiness" target that K-12 is being asked to hit. Higher education institutions in Nebraska need to thoroughly examine the means by which they decide if a high school student is ready for the next level in their education. Is K-12 asking the right questions of higher education about their student's preparedness and, if asked, are they getting the answers they need? Higher education institutions in Nebraska, particularly the community colleges, have admirably taken on the role of providing remediation classes for incoming students who may lack the necessary preparation to succeed. However, is remediation being offered at the right time and in the right manner to be effective?

Another important part of the state talent pipeline involves preparing students for the work world. There are the students who don't go on to get any formal education after high school. What are we doing to ensure that those students are ready to go to work? Are we listening carefully enough to what Nebraska businesses are telling us about their talent needs, with respect to both K-12 and college programs? Is the business community clearly articulating their skill needs? Is our K-12 and post secondary curricula really preparing students for careers; are they reengaging the disengaged student? Are we listening to the students? Are students having opportunities to meaningfully be exposed to the world of work and the expectations that come with it?

The economy has changed and so must our education system K-20. Nebraska's talent pipeline is good; however, good can often times get in the way of being better. Accelerate Nebraska believes that waiting for the pipeline to naturally evolve and adjust is irresponsible. Not taking advantage of the leadership, the education and business assets in the state, and the attitude in Nebraska, which typically prevails, "if there is a problem, lets put our heads together and fix it!" would be missed opportunity. Accelerate Nebraska is tasked with identifying the problems with the pipeline, seeking out demonstrated best practices or policy fixes, and bringing the leadership together to facilitate the needed change.

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### Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Coordinating Commission for Post Secondary Education. (March 2015). *2015 Higher Education Progress Report*. Retrieved from

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[http://www.ccpestate.ne.us/PublicDoc/Ccpe/Reports/progressReport/15\\_PR-Full\\_Report.pdf](http://www.ccpestate.ne.us/PublicDoc/Ccpe/Reports/progressReport/15_PR-Full_Report.pdf), 24.

ii Coordinating Commission for Post Secondary Education. (March, 2015). *2015 Higher Education Progress Report*. Retrieved from [http://www.ccpe.ne.us/PublicDoc/Ccpe/Reports/progressReport/15\\_PR-Full\\_Report.pdf](http://www.ccpe.ne.us/PublicDoc/Ccpe/Reports/progressReport/15_PR-Full_Report.pdf), 62.

iii Coordinating Commission for Post Secondary Education. (March, 2014). *2014 Higher Education Progress Report*. Retrieved from [http://www.ccpe.state.ne.us/PublicDoc/Ccpe/Reports/progressReport/14\\_PR-Full\\_Report.pdf](http://www.ccpe.state.ne.us/PublicDoc/Ccpe/Reports/progressReport/14_PR-Full_Report.pdf), 123.