

WHY THE EDUCATION ECONOMY IS THE NEXT BIG THING FOR THE AMERICAN WORKFORCE

HOW CAN INTEGRATING OUR EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM, OUR EMPLOYERS, AND OUR JOB CREATORS AFFECT OUR MODERN ECONOMY?

BY BRANDON BUSTEED

Though the economy and education have long been topics of top concern to Americans, we haven't created strong linkages between the two.

The topics are more like two castles with a large moat between them. Yet there is nothing more important we can do as a country than to build the world's most effective "educonomy," which would seamlessly integrate our educational system, our employers, and our job creators. Unless we get education and the economy working together more effectively, America will relinquish its role as leader of the free world.

Political consultant James Carville's famous quip "It's the economy, stupid," changed a presidential election. It's quite possible that "It's the educonomy, stupid," will change and shape not just politics but all leadership for the next decade to come. Here's why.

Over the past year, Gallup has conducted various studies looking at the linkages between education and long-term success in life and work. We've polled representative samples of the general population in America, parents of 5th through 12th graders, and business leaders and interviewed teachers, superintendents, college presidents, principals, college graduates, young Americans aged 18-34, and students in grades 5-12. All told, we collected the voices of close to 1 million Americans on this subject in the past year alone. And what we've learned is alarming:

ENGAGEMENT IS ON THE DECLINE

Student engagement in school drops precipitously from 5th grade through 12th grade. About three quarters of elementary school kids (76%) are engaged in school, while only 44% of high school kids are engaged. The longer students stay in school, the less engaged they become. If we were doing this right, the trend would be going in the exact opposite direction.

About seven in 10 K-12 teachers are not engaged in their work (69%), and as a profession, teachers are dead last among all professions Gallup studied in saying their "opinions count" at work and their "supervisors create an open and trusting environment." We also found that teacher engagement is the most important driver of student engagement. We'll never improve student engagement until we boost teachers' own workplace engagement first.

JOB PREPAREDNESS IS QUESTIONABLE

About four in 10 students in grades 5 through 12 (43%) say they "plan to start their own business," yet only 7% currently have an internship or job in a real organization where they can apply that energy. News flash: Schools and colleges don't have jobs and internships--employers do. If we don't get schools and businesses working together to give students these opportunities, everyone will lose.

Only 14% of Americans say they are confident that college graduates are well prepared for success in the workplace. And business leaders are even more skeptical, with only 11% saying that college graduates are well prepared for success at work. Yet despite this, 96% of chief academic officers of colleges and universities are either somewhat or very confident they are preparing college students for success in the workplace. It's hard to imagine a gap--or moat--bigger than that.

Among young Americans, we found that those who "worked on a long-term project that took several classes to complete" and "used what [they] were learning about to develop solutions to real problems in [their] community or the world" in their last year of school were twice as likely to have higher work quality compared with those lacking these experiences. Yet only 17% said they had these experiences.

IT'S ABOUT GETTING A JOB, NOT A DEGREE

Among college graduates, those who had an "internship or job where they applied what they were learning in the classroom," "worked on projects that took a semester or more to complete," and were "actively involved in extracurricular activities or organizations" during college double their odds of being engaged at work later in life. Yet, only 6% of all college graduates strongly agreed to all three of these statements.

And no matter who you ask, from parents to current college students to the general population, everyone agrees that the number one reason to go to college is "to get a good job." It's not a degree. It's a good job. Failing to recognize this--as we are failing to right now--spells catastrophe. Especially with nearly flat economic growth in the U.S. and a pile of more than \$1 trillion in student loan debt.

“IT’S THE EDUCONOMY, STUPID”

All these sobering findings come amid the reality of our economy today. For the first time since the government began measuring this in the 1970s, the U.S. is now running a deficit between the number of new businesses being “born” and the number “dying” each year. (We always ran a surplus of about 100,000 and now it’s a deficit of about 70,000.)

Nothing will fix our economy more fundamentally than new business creation. And we won’t get the new great American economic engine humming again until we build strong linkages among educators, employers, and entrepreneurs. Right now, we’re more likely to see kids with entrepreneurial talent diagnosed as underperforming troublemakers than we are to recognize them as the next Mark Zuckerberg.

And if you think our schools and colleges will be able to test our way out of this mess, that’s a big mistake too. Perhaps the most important education-related news story of the entire year was Google--the world’s most admired brand--announcing that it found almost no correlation between the grades and test scores of its employees and their success on the job, so the company no longer asks all its applicants to provide these things. This is a canary in the coal mine. As goes Google, so goes the rest of the business world.

How can we fix all of this? Employers of all shapes and sizes can make it a core mission to offer paid and unpaid internships to high school and college students. They can also offer externships for teachers and faculty, many of whom have never been in a work environment outside schools and academia. Education leaders of all kinds must recognize that their job is to foster teacher and faculty engagement, not just student engagement. Engaged teachers and faculty in turn engage students. Educators everywhere must look for ways to align their curriculum with long-term projects that apply the classroom to real problems.

It’s incumbent upon all the leaders in our country--education, business, and government alike--to turn a made-up word into a reality. Let’s build the world’s first educonomy.

--**Brandon Busted** is executive director of education at [Gallup](#).