



Workforce Development: It’s Time for a Mind/Shift and Word/Shift

While workforce professionals, educators, employers, parents and students are buoyed by the fact that unemployment rates are at an all-time low, there’s a growing and data-driven sentiment that significant changes are needed in the way we talk about and prepare our workforce of 2020 – and beyond.

For the past 30 years, Southwest Ohio Workforce Investment Board (SWORWIB) President & CEO Sherry Kelley Marshall has been championing education reform – from high school diploma testing to alternatives for high school diploma equivalency to career pathing. The establishment of stronger business alliances with workforce professionals, the establishment of the Comprehensive Case Management Employment Program (CCMEP) for those aged 14-24 receiving public support, and more career exploration and job training opportunities are just a few of the wins.

But the work of preparing our workforce for the jobs of today and tomorrow can’t stop there. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment is projected to increase to 167.6 million by 2026.¹ Here are the 10 fastest growing occupations, some of which require in-demand credentials and others that require advanced college education.

	Percent change, projected 2016-26	Employment change, projected 2016-26 (in thousands)	Median annual wages, May 2016
Solar photovoltaic installers	104.9%	11.8	\$39,240
Wind turbine service technicians	96.3%	5.6	\$52,260
Home health aides	47.3%	431.2	\$22,600
Personal care aides	38.6%	777.6	\$21,920
Physician assistants	37.3%	39.6	\$101,480
Nurse practitioners	36.1%	56.1	\$100,910
Statisticians	33.8%	12.6	\$80,500
Physical therapist assistants	31.0%	27.4	\$56,610
Software developers, applications	30.7%	255.4	\$100,080
Mathematicians	29.7%	0.9	\$105,810

With student loan debt of \$1.5 trillion, second only to mortgage debt in the U.S., today’s typical student borrower graduates owing \$37,000.² At 1.7 million borrowers, Ohio ranks as the seventh-largest number of borrowers, with \$53.5 million in debt.³ And while those who graduate will, conceivably, have the means for repayment, the 53.4 percent who don’t will have an even more onerous burden – and broken dreams.



Mind/Shift addresses cultural messages that are powerful. They convey meaning and effort that enable progress and create unintended consequences. They also carry connotations and unintended bias that can perpetuate stereotype and hinder progress. Taking a serious look at the messages that we use to communicate these issues is no small task.

To tackle this, SWORWIB's executive board members, SWORWIB's Emerging Workforce Committee, Youth Provider Roundtable and other partner groups converged to discuss new messaging options and language alternatives. The Mind/Shift and Word/Shift Messaging Task Force discerned two directions after much discussion. Messaging which we termed "*Mind/Shift*" and "*Word/Shift*" for particular words and terms that required updates. The suggestions offered in this paper are designed to help shift the mindset of a variety of constituents, from high school students and their parents who need to consider viable options other than *college-right-out-of-high-school*. The messaging is meant also to aid educators and workforce development professionals when discussing options and presenting solutions.

Using the terminology "*Mind/Shift*" is purposeful. It denotes a change of focus and perception. It can have extraordinary power to make relationships more positive and healthier, improve focus and rate of success and build self-esteem. A mind shift is an "aha" moment on steroids.

The charge of the Task Force was two-fold: inject an informed, "College When Ready" perspective to help guide youth thinking about their options for the future and to reframe key messages for our youth, adults and maybe even society-at-large, by updating the language we use to be more customer-centric and results-focused. The end goal of both missions is clear: engender dignity, change perceptions and lay a strong foundation for changing the way we think about and prepare the workforce of tomorrow.

This paper offers a variety of thoughts about the unintended consequences of pathing all toward a four-year degree and the rationale behind suggesting a mind shift, along with what we're coining a "*Word/Shift*" to illustrate existing and potentially out-of-date words and phrases with alternative language options to help educators and workforce professionals better tackle challenges faced in communicating career and employment options.

Start with People-First Language (PFL)

People-first language (PFL) is a linguistic convention that promotes focus on the individual, and not their status or health issue. "PFL has helped eliminate generalizations, assumptions and stereotypes of those with disabilities since the early 1980's," offers Sherry Kelley Marshall. "PFL is language that helps reprioritize how we process information, which can invite diversity of thought and help minimize marginalization."

By referring to people first, and *then* the challenge faced, the Mind/Shift and Word/Shift Task Force felt we would be better able to focus on the individual. A good healthcare example is saying, "a child with autism" instead of "autistic." A workforce development and social services example that's often used is the phrase "job placement."

Says Marshall, "This is old language that infers people are objects that are 'placed' or 'put' somewhere." And, she continues, "It's passive versus active. The terminology suggests that, in this example, these 'placed' individuals are not participatory. That language is certainly not indicative of the spirit or caliber of southwest Ohioans. When we talk in terms of participants, we get the added benefit of engendering the feeling of belonging, or strength and being part of a team where everyone has a vested interest in positive outcomes. That can deliver a sense of accomplishment and set the stage for success, tenacity – and positive 'word of mouth', social sharing and referrals."

She continues, "It's time to be proactive, to leverage our experience and communication networks here to help reduce or mitigate unintended, or maybe even subliminal bias."

Thinking more broadly, Marshall offers, "The same thought process can apply. If we as parents and educators are not equipped to talk about career exploration and education options with students from a very early age, we might miss opportunities to guide them to explore their passions and find their employment of choice."



The bottom line is clear: Small language changes count. The suggestions from the Mind/Shift and Word/Shift Messaging Task Force intends to achieve the adoption of more uplifting wording for people. “*Mind/Shift*” is more the “big approach changes” such as the “college commentary changes” and “*Word/Shift*” is more about the philosophy of the impact of language, with us wanting to aim for higher values and better communication, rather than the maintenance of decades-old, governmental messaging.

Instead of...	Try:	Because:
“Everyone should go to college”	“Know what interests you, go when you’re ready and you’ve got a plan to cover the costs”	College is an expensive investment – and you’ll need options to both support your education and choose your employment.
“Pay”	“Earnings”	Earning denote accomplishment.
“Pay”	“Learn & earn”	Piques interest in self-development; infers continual learning, speaks the truth that we all learn as we earn.
“Program”	“Career exploration; career practice; career pursuit, employment experience”	Replacing passive language with an active wording indicates that there are a variety of options for exploration – versus just SAT/ACT testing and/or AP courses as the <i>only</i> direction.
“Trade school”	“Technical skills training, or Skilled trades professionals training”	Illustrates results; matches modern, in-demand jobs; “trades” have been misrepresented in our “everyone goes to college” misguided philosophy.
“Client”	“Customer” “Participant”	Infers choice – instead of inferring legal, medical or mental health treatment.
“Placement”	“Employment”	People aren’t objects that are placed, and you have to earn employment, which denotes success.
“Recipient”	“Participant” “Member”	Helps others feel as if they’re part of their course of action rather than just receiving help.
“Probation”	“Onboarding, orientation, provisional, conditional, evaluation period”	Demonstrates more of a two-way relationship or partnership where both employer and employee are participatory and responsible, and that those receiving public support are learning and growing in their orientations.
“Vendors”	“Partners, Training Partners, teaching partners, funding partners, work experience partners, teammates”	Infers everyone has a voice – and a stake – in the success of each effort.

Instead of...	Try:	Because:
“Case or Case Management”	“Individual Recordkeeping” “Progress Information” “Progress Updates”	Like “probation”, “case” and “case management” have criminal overtones which is experienced negatively for most (maybe all) individuals, except perhaps those in legal, social work or human resource roles.
“Unemployed”	“Participant” “Jobseeker”	Unemployed is a condition – not a person, and many unemployed people feel the term is accusatory or derogatory. Jobseeker explains the person is pursuing employment.

Jobs of the Future

By 2020, many jobs will require post-secondary education, be it an industry-recognized certification, a career technical or college credential, an associate’s or bachelor’s degree. And, the fastest growing fields – STEM, healthcare professions, healthcare support, and community services – will require higher levels of post-secondary education. “For most jobs of the future, a high school education will not be enough to qualify for in-demand employment,” reports Marshall, “which is why it’s pivotal to change the way we prepare our youth and how we talk to them about career pathways.”

“Plus, we’re seeing a growing number of employers looking for cognitive skills, such as communication and critical thinking. And, the [Georgetown 2020](#) report holds that 48 percent – nearly half – of all available jobs will require high levels of active listening skills.”

The report, which also measures education attainment levels by state, shows that almost all states have average attainment levels below those required for the jobs of the future. Ohio’s education attainment level, at 54 percent, is below the national average at 60 percent.⁴ “If we’re going to remain competitive,” explains Marshall, “we need to boost the number of individuals who successfully attain post-secondary education. To do so, we need the language and understanding necessary to illustrate right-sized and right-skilled pathways, be they opportunities for certifications, credentials, associate or bachelor’s degrees or beyond. We also need the U.S. Census Bureau to include credentials when asking Americans to complete their census survey. Our own research bureau jumps from high school to college without recognition of thousands of non-college, meaningful jobs – from skilled, journeyed professionals, to code programmers, fiber-optics installers, police, fire and military service, as examples.”

Why Care About Getting It Right

Former U.S. Secretary of the Department of Labor Robert Reich under Presidents Ford, Carter, and Clinton, wrote, “The biggest absurdity is that a four-year college degree has become the only gateway into the American middle class. But not every young person is suited to four years of college. They may be bright and ambitious, but they won’t get much out of it. They’d rather be doing something else, like making money or painting murals. They feel compelled to go to college because they’ve been told over and over that a college degree is necessary. Yet if they start college and then drop out, they feel like total failures. Even if they get the degree, they’re stuck with a huge bill — and may be paying down their student debt for years. And all too often the jobs they land after graduating don’t pay enough to make the degree worthwhile.”

Reich continued, “Last year, according to the [Federal Reserve Bank of New York](#), 46 percent of recent college graduates were in jobs that don’t even require a college degree. The biggest frauds are for-profit colleges raking in money even as their students drop out in droves, and whose diplomas are

barely worth the ink-jets they're printed on. America clings to the conceit that four years of college are necessary for everyone and looks down its nose at people who don't have college degrees. This has to stop. Young people need an alternative. That alternative should be a world-class system of vocational-technical education. A four-year college degree isn't necessary for many of tomorrow's good jobs. For example, the emerging economy will need platoons of technicians able to install, service, and repair all the high-tech machinery filling up hospitals, offices, and factories. And people who can upgrade the software embedded in almost every gadget you buy. Today it's even hard to find a skilled plumber or electrician. Yet the vocational and technical education now available to young Americans is typically underfunded and inadequate. And too often denigrated as being for 'losers.' These programs should be creating winners ..."⁵

Reich's sentiments are a lot to unpack. *Forbes* reporter Sarah Lundrum, whose "Under 30" column byline reads, "I write about how millennials can be happier at work" shares, in *Impact of Student Loan Debt on Millennial Happiness*, "... the average American household with student debt owes about \$49,000. Graduates in their twenties spend more than \$350 per month, on average, on student loan payments and interest. Since the average 'entry-level' job was worth about \$50,000 a year in 2016 for new graduates, 'truly average' college grads in America can expect to see their earnings garnished by between eight and 10 percent for roughly 10 to 12 years after they graduate." She continues, "That's a lot of averages and assumptions, but it's still instructive. It tells us that the problem is not necessarily about debt itself, but rather, the proportion of our earnings it represents, the size it takes on in our imaginations and, therefore, the toll it takes on our mental health."⁶

Broken Dreams

If we could provide greater guidance from an early age, say middle school, would it have a more positive effect on career exploration? "Yes," says Marshall resoundingly. "We'd affect everything from dropout rates, debt, under and unemployment – and that's why the work of this Mind/Shift and Word/Shift Messaging Task Force is so important. We know that the jobs of tomorrow – and today, I'd wager – require some kind of post-high school education. But is that post-high school moniker only applicable to a four-year degree? The answer is no, and the right question is how do we talk about this without overwhelming parents, educators, social service agencies and workforce professionals?"

She continues, "The message of the Task Force is simply this: Think about the language you use to communicate and guide. Paradigm shifts take time, but if we're all focused on success of our students, our employers and our workforce, we'll collectively have a greater impact. Think about the power instilled with the words: consider college when you're ready, you've worked at something to help you have an idea of what you're interested in, and you can get a scholarship or pay for school with or without help or use employer tuition assistance."

Marshall concludes, "Ensuring that everyone thinking about college is aware of the costs of a four-year degree – from tuition to living expenses to debt and interest costs – is equally important."

Spreading the Word

Everyone can play a role in spreading the word. SWORWIB is working with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and Cincinnati Public TV Station (CET) on their third grant supporting "American Graduates: Getting to Work." Video vignettes illustrate career exploration options and parental support for young people's exploration of their interests help encourage exploration, as does content available at www.ohiomeansjobs.com.

Here are some choices that you can make to help share the messages that matter the most to you:

- Encourage young people to pursue their interests and passions while also taking care of their financial business.
- Encourage adults and parents to support their children’s passions and interest and allow them to take a few jobs that help their children hone their interests. Remember, learning what you *don’t* want to do informs what you *would want to do*. And, there is significant benefit from understanding all job choices to appreciate the value of the efforts of those who perform roles that may not be of interest to all.
- Emphasize that there’s no magic to going to college right after high school – lots of young people take a year to experience a variety of opportunities so they know better the value of further education FOR THEM INDIVIDUALLY.
- Lastly, catch yourself when you are casual with terms that are “old style, dependence-building.” Replace your words and comments with those included in this exploratory paper to offer new-style, respectful *and* independence-building input.

To learn more about workforce, check out the podcasts and white papers at www.sworwib.org.

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