

## **The Case for Business/Industry, and Chambers of Commerce in the Region Regarding Education**

Chattanooga 2.0 and “The Unfinished Agenda” have sparked renewed interest in education throughout the tristate 16 county region. These reports have captured the importance of local Pre K-12, higher education, business, government, non-profits, and individuals of becoming involved.

Many states in the U.S., including AL, GA and TN, have undertaken a “top down” approach on many fronts. One such front focuses on returning adults who have some college but no degree in order to strengthen the workforce and grow the economy. The Lumina Foundation has brought this initiative to the national level with the goal of 60% of the nation’s citizens having completed a postsecondary education (certificates, associates degrees, bachelor degrees and beyond) by 2025.

Locally, a “bottom up” (growth from within) approach has been undertaken by the Chattanooga Region Talent Dividend Initiative (CRTDI). Performance objectives regarding the tristate 16-county region regarding postsecondary attainment by adults have been established and will be reset (see Notes-1).

Like many chambers of commerce across the nation, the Chattanooga Area Chamber of Commerce claims a mission to “champion our members business and promote economic growth.” Variations of this mission are advanced by chambers of commerce throughout the region. The care and attention given education is a critical component of these missions, as they demonstrate the value placed on education. With businesses, other organizations, educated parents, guardians, family members, and friends setting the example, more children and youth become inspired to pursue education as they realize others care and show why education is so important (see note -2 Gallop Poll). Businesses have a civic responsibility and a vested interest to demonstrate the value of education not only for an improved workforce, competitiveness, and profitability, but for the community/region at large (see note – 3). The fiscal and societal impact of pursuing and completing postsecondary education are unquestionable.

Business and industry have been treated as recipients of graduates from “top down” approaches, not so much as engaged partners. The engagement of business/industry and higher education requires direct two-way communications. What is needed is an end-to-end relationship. This relationship is essential as employer needs continue to change, and higher education approaches are transformed. Therefore, a systemic and scalable approach with accountability is imperative. Higher education takes the position that in-house accountability is sufficient. However, the types generally practiced by higher education have not helped to improve performance. Some of the types include: 1) superficial personnel evaluation 2) peer review processes (accreditation) 3) peer institution comparisons 4) insular institutional

processes reporting and 5) attention to bureaucratic rules instead of goals, objectives and results. Higher education does not lack accountability rather burdened by unproductive types. Without business/industry holding the supplier accountable only marginal attention is given to quality, cost and timeliness regarding graduates.

A new approach (end-to-end relationship) to assure sustainability and scalability with built-in accountability will yield the desired results of quality, cost and timeliness.

There is, indeed, a way to approaching the condition set forth above. This approach may be applied simultaneously to the work of numerous public and private advocacy groups and foundations relative to other conditions suggested by Chattanooga 2.0 and "The Unfinished Agenda". The approach addresses the millions of adults in AL, GA and TN who have not completed any postsecondary education.

Borrowing from the case in New York to deal with the problem of crime and neighborhood safety the "Theory of Broken Windows" is applicable. If a window in a building is left unrepaired, more windows will be broken as it signals that no one cares. This is the condition that exists regarding the importance of examples by adults (non-completers) and businesses if left undone (unrepaired).

David Gunn, NY subway director, advocated focusing on graffiti since he was convinced that graffiti was symbolic of the collapse of the system in the context of rebuilding the entire organization and morale. Many in NY thought this to be ridiculous, but it worked!

Unity among local businesses, higher education, Pre K-12, government entities, nonprofits, chambers of commerce, and others that champion education at this level is symbolic and will make the difference, particularly if business, as consumers, get seriously engaged. This becomes an unambiguous message without which, intended reforms necessary, will not meet expectations.

The CRTDI is an initiative that can facilitate the change necessary as one component highlighted by Chattanooga 2.0 and "The Unfinished Agenda" report. The CRTDI facilitates the following: 1) establishment to objectives regarding the number of additional adults (non-completers) to complete some form of postsecondary education that enables all to work from the "same page" with accountability emphasizing that "talent changes everything", 2) creates a positive connection about education on a daily basis among each and every person and organization, 3) facilitates the development of education as a value that drives all local businesses, higher education, government entities, nonprofits, chambers of commerce, and other organizations, 4) facilitates the application of "credit for prior learning" whereby higher education awards college level credit toward course requirements, saving time and money in developing a durable workforce (why should someone be required to take a course for which they already have skills and knowledge), 5) improves the competitive position of the region by stimulating productivity, profitability, and competitiveness through interaction among all, 6) gets employer (small, medium and large) off the "sidelines" into the steam of workforce

development by utilizing “credit for prior learning”, 7) facilitates educators to refine and keep their academic programs up to speed and meet business needs as they evolve, 8) taps the latent talent among those who are incentivized and deserve to improve their dream of education but never completed a professional certificate or degree.

[See CRTDI website, [betterbydegrees.org](http://betterbydegrees.org) for description]

## NOTES

1.CRTDI OBJECTIVES: The education attainment of CRTDI is to increase the number Of graduates (in addition to traditional graduates) by 1623 by 2017, 1742 by 2020, 1856 by 2023 and 3940 by 2026. Objectives are to be reset based on attainment levels and continued beyond 2026 at three (3) year intervals. In general, these desired attainments levels are based on an increase in postsecondary achievement of at least a 1% percent increase of the region’s population.

2.CONTINUING EDUCATION or ENTERING WORKFORCE: The importance and value of education are unquestionable regarding the workforce and economy. Early on choices that young people make as they complete high school have a direct bearing on the future workforce. The College Board/National Journal Next American Poll(April 11, 2014) shows that 55 percent of all children from two degree families reported obtaining a college degree, compared with 23 percent of children from non-degree families. Further, 90 percent of those continuing postsecondary education immediately after high school completion indicated that, if they had it to do over, they would have pursued postsecondary education immediately. Family economic circumstances, in a lot of cases, required them to help the family financially. Some Poll respondents said they had no difficulty getting a job and promotion without a degree but employers’ today prefer persons to have a degree.

Family influence is powerful. The pathway to attaining postsecondary completion among those adults who started but did not complete would have a great influence on their children to pursue postsecondary education upon completion of high school. Youth faced with a future of 5-7 career changes and 12-15 jobs in a working lifetime is a daunting reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Many children and young people would benefit, if parents, guardians and/or family members without postsecondary education, especially those with some college would become college completers.

3.BUSINESS ENGAGEMENT: The U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (USCCF) is working toward addressing the skills gap facing the U.S. business community while“ promoting completion with a purpose”. Addressing the challenge in the context of supply chain management, businesses as end-customers look to suppliers (higher education preparation institutions) to meet their needs. Key elements of the relationship between businesses and higher education include improved performance based on quality, cost and delivery times.

The call to action by the USCCF is outlined by its Center for Education and Workforce in the report entitled “Changing the Debate as Quality Assurance in Higher Education, The Case for Employer, Leadership and a Roadmap for Change.

- 4.LEARNING: Learning is a tripartite function that includes a) education (off the job supplied by higher education), b) training (firm-specific knowledge and skills), c) experience (Accumulation of workplace knowledge/skills and other life experiences). Learning attainment levels minimize skill bottlenecks; increase productivity, innovation and competitiveness; and advances smart sustainable growth. Research clearly reveals that ongoing employee learning is the “Life Blood” of firm productivity.