

Hiring young people can affect a generation

by Dr. Lance Bolton who is in his second year as president of Pikes Peak Community College. Prior to that he was president of Northeastern Junior College in Sterling.

“The tyranny of low expectations” describes how young people in America often are failed by those who do not expect enough from them, and even worse, believe them incapable of meeting high standards.

Pikes Peak Community College serves many students who arrive unprepared for the academic demands of college courses. We capably teach students the academic skills they need to succeed in college and the workplace.

The bigger challenge, however, is teaching the skills needed to set goals, work hard and make wise decisions that will move them towards their goals. Too often I see students making decisions, almost always without forethought, that move them further from their goals.

Our students differ little from students at other colleges and universities; their initial career goals are often vague and not well-grounded through knowledge and experience. As students progress through college they often change their goals. Research shows that more than 50 percent of college students change their major. The primary causal factor is a shallow understanding of the career paths they choose.

Nationwide, college students struggle to match their talents and aspirations with college programs of study. Low-income students have an especially acute dearth of knowledge and experience on which to build career aspirations and college major choices.

Employers can help. Students need, and benefit enormously from, work opportunities. Part-time employment or internships can be life-changing for students who know little about professional work environments. Skills related to character, self-control and work ethic naturally emerge from work opportunities in business.

Often the low-expectation environments our students emerge from lack education in character and life skills that are critical to success throughout life. We know these deficits dramatically impact students, yet most schools and educators shy away from explicitly teaching character and values, as we focus instead on standardized testing, graduation rates, and avoiding potentially controversial lessons in ethics and morals.

Many in our society view character development as an intractable problem that cannot be resolved because college or high school students already are too old and entrenched in their ways. Research suggests, however, that we can teach the traits needed for students to succeed. We can teach resourcefulness, self-control, persistence, resilience and goal setting.

When students, perhaps for the first time in their lives, find someone believing in them, assuring them that they are capable, and pouring optimism into their life, they change.

It isn't a fast process, it isn't an easy process, and it isn't an infallible process. The opportunity to change the life of a student is, however, one of life's greatest privileges. Of course, the changed student's life will impact many more lives including their children and family. You may have the opportunity to impact generations of people to come.

Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman is featured in a newly published book (How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity, and the Hidden Power of Character) that brings together the work of economists, neuroscientists, educators, psychologists, and others to analyze and examine IQ, cognitive capabilities, test scores, and other measures that predict success in life for young people. His conclusion of what is most predictive and impactful for life success is new and startling, yet as old as time: character.

We desperately need the help of our community in the battle to save our youth. Kids are not disposable. They will either become productive citizens or burdens on our society. Our challenge is to not only educate young men and women, but also to instill strong character.

You can help. Big Brother and Big Sister Clubs do amazing work through mentoring programs. Some charter schools are breaking with recent education tradition to focus efforts on character building; they need our support. School boards need our involvement and insistence that teaching life skills is an important part of the curriculum.

Unemployment for minority teens who seek work is greater than 40 percent. We know work can instill the character traits needed for success in our society. Consider a young person for an opportunity to work in your business. The benefit will be much greater than the sum of their salary.

Your business can benefit as well by tapping into new insights about social media, and youth culture. Best of all, you may experience the blessing of helping young people find their true north.

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