



Exponential Change: Get Ready or Get Left Behind

Op-Ed by Rick Dalton, President and CEO of CFES Brilliant Pathways

Twenty-six years ago, I started an organization called CFES Brilliant Pathways that has helped 100,000 students go to college. Since our founding, the world has changed exponentially, and that requires transforming how students become college and career ready.

Over the last decade, one of the most profound alterations is a twofold increase in the number of students who live in poverty in our schools and communities.

This is troubling because low-income students are often excluded from education and 21st-century jobs. Youth from the bottom economic quartile are 10 times less likely to attain college degrees, at a time when postsecondary study is a prerequisite for new, high-paying jobs.

College costs, as everybody knows, are soaring. Financial aid doesn't necessarily help: Need-based aid has steadily shrunk, while merit aid is increasingly awarded to children of the wealthy, distorting equity and denying opportunity. Even the process of getting into college is becoming more complex. And, thanks to budget cuts, fewer counselors are available in America's high schools, further shutting out low-income students.

These are troubling developments. But they can be overcome when colleges, schools and corporations work together. Already, many youth across America are beating the odds through strategic partnerships, college counseling support from corporate volunteers, and by developing Essential Skills such as perseverance, leadership and agility.

I recently met with a young woman from Florida who, aided by our program, overcame insurmountable obstacles to become college and career ready. Because her father is incarcerated and her mother struggles with mental illness and substance abuse, Lillee raised three younger siblings. "I grew up in a household where excellence meant barely getting by," she says. Lillee will attend Florida Southern College with a \$215,000 award that will cover all expenses and provide a stipend and even a laptop.

Lillee had a peer mentor throughout high school and she also served as a mentor for younger students, helping them build college knowledge. She participated in the student-run Medics Club, where, each month, she met with healthcare professionals who have inspired her to become a pediatric neurologist.

Young people like Lillee are the inspiration for developing and implementing strategies to help all students become college and career ready. It is why later this month CFES and the

GE Foundation will co-sponsor and host a gathering of corporate, education and philanthropic leaders to explore strategies brought on by exponential change and other forces in preparing the workforce of tomorrow.

At this summit, we will look at how America is falling behind in the proportion of our citizens with college degrees and how this threatens our economy and how employers can't find enough trained workers for available 21st-century jobs.

We will discuss a new type of segregation that Enrico Moretti describes in *The New Geography of Jobs*: not racial segregation, but apartheid in our communities, defined by education and income.

Today, where you live matters more than ever. We are seeing troubling trends in Northeastern rural communities, for example, where school enrollments are declining and the old jobs disappearing with no new ones to take their place. Yet cities like Boston and Stamford, Conn., and even Burlington, Vt.—are booming; they have the educated citizens and therefore the job base. Professor Joseph Fuller of the Harvard Business School, considered the foremost expert on America's competitiveness, will lead us through this discussion.

At the summit, we will explore each of these issues, and try to develop solutions to these challenges we can tackle. After more than a quarter-century of partnering with K-12 schools, colleges and universities, much of the work we need to do is clear:

1. Every school and business needs to develop a plan that will help its youth become college and career ready. We need to build communities. In Essex, a town in northeastern New York whose population has dropped from 8,000 to 600 residents, CFES has provided dozens of jobs and an influx of talented college graduates. It is part of our effort to build human capital and re-build a community.
2. We need to help students gain college knowledge so that they understand a growingly complex and confusing college search process that centers around diverse types of colleges, cost, and payment options. It is especially important that young people learn which colleges and programs offer the best return on investment and what today's businesses are seeking.
3. We need to find ways to support our children in building college knowledge through partnerships with businesses, colleges and nonprofits that can provide trained volunteers as mentors and career guides. In addition to mentoring, school-business partnerships can offer internships and job shadowing opportunities.
4. Employers want skills that prepare young people for career and life. CFES refers to these as the Essential Skills. They include leadership, agility, perseverance, networking, teamwork and other competencies that are foundational for academic and workplace success and crucial for preparing young people for an uncertain future.

Our nation's public schools can't address each of these challenges on their own. Their resources are too few and the challenges too great.

Lillee exemplifies how to beat the odds and become college and career ready. She told me recently, "I needed to find a way or I knew that I would be left behind." We need to find a way to help more Lillees or America will be left behind.