

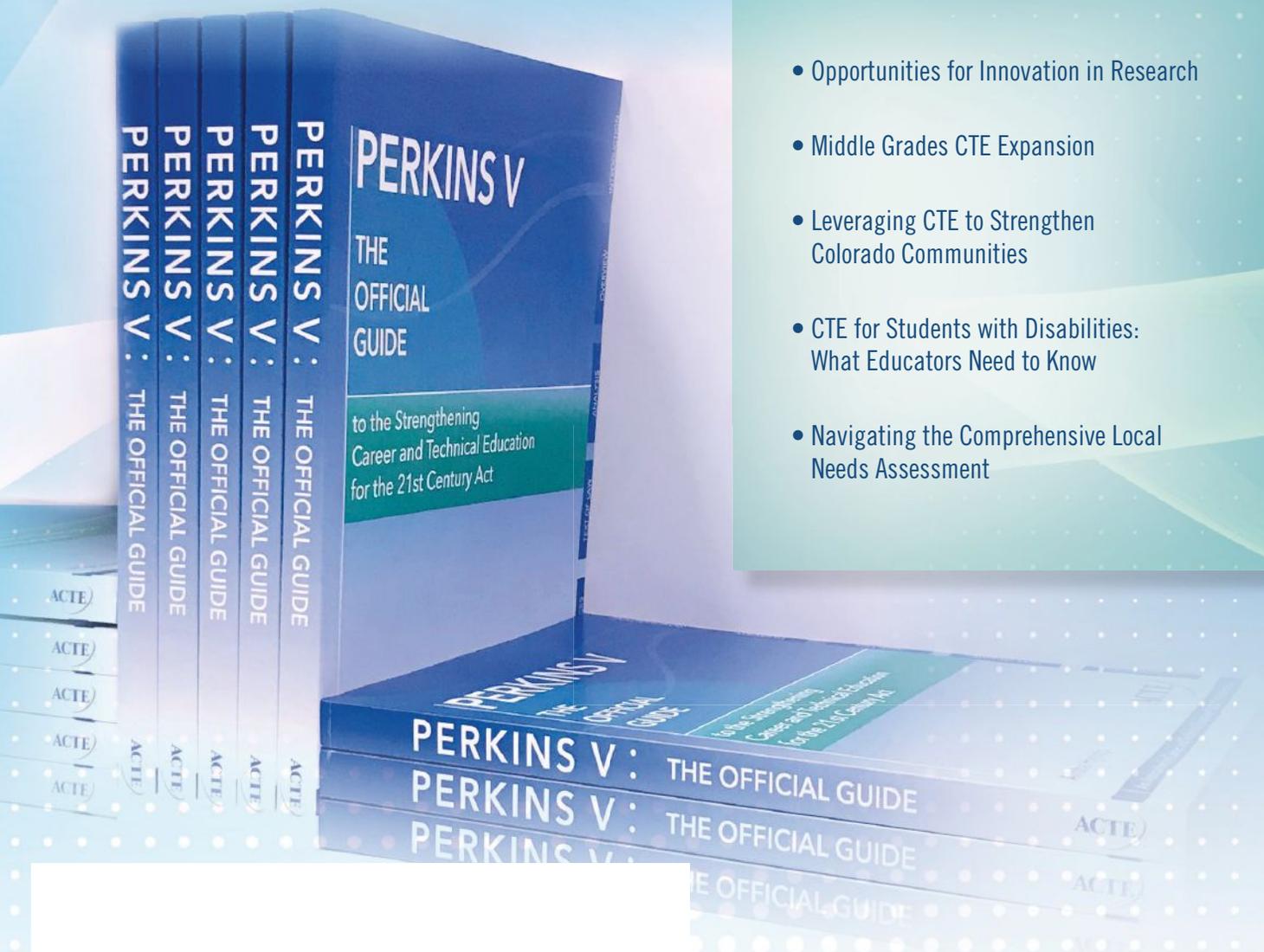
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OPPORTUNITIES FOR INNOVATION IN RESEARCH WITH PERKINS V

By Katherine Hughes

JUST OVER A YEAR AGO, THE AMERICAN INSTITUTES FOR RESEARCH AND ITS PARTNERS — ACTE,

Vanderbilt University and JFF — launched the CTE Research Network. The primary aim of the Network is to encourage and promote causal research on career and technical education (CTE). There is considerable research on CTE, but little of it uses methodologies that can show causal effects. Thus, we have not had a great deal of evidence on whether, and how, participating in CTE can directly affect students' outcomes, such as their likelihood to:

- Graduate from high school
- Enroll in a postsecondary program and earn a credential
- Secure a family-sustaining income

The studies that are part of the CTE Research Network all have causal designs and will provide new evidence on a range of CTE approaches. For example, the Network's co-principal investigator, Shaun Dougherty, and his team members from the University of Connecticut recently released initial findings from their study of students enrolled in Connecticut's technical high schools. Boys who attended CTE high schools in Connecticut had higher graduation rates and higher post-graduation earnings than similar students who did not attend those high schools.

A recent blog post by Corinne Alfeld of the U.S. Department of Education and Austin Estes of Advance CTE, "Partnering with

Researchers Can Help State Leaders Build the Case for CTE," highlighted the Connecticut study and others that are contributing important causal evidence. Alfeld and Estes (2019) pointed out that these studies result from partnerships between researchers and states: "Research can be a powerful tool to help state CTE directors understand what's working, what isn't working, and what needs to change."

This is certainly true, but I would add that

it is important for local CTE administrators and instructors to be research-minded as well. Those in the field can have an important role in identifying areas and questions for research, particularly as they begin to implement new provisions in the Perkins V legislation.

This is not to call on CTE practitioners to conceptualize and implement causal studies, which can be daunting even for the most experienced researchers. Rather, practitioners' detailed knowledge of CTE programs and practices can help researchers to understand the experiences that students are having, and to devise ways to measure their impact.

We will surely see some changes in CTE programs and practices as a result of Perkins V. The legislation encourages innovation and the identification of novel practices. Localities will conceive and pilot new programs and co-curricular experiences, some of which may lend themselves to evaluation.

Work-based Learning

While researchers have investigated work-based learning in a theoretical and descriptive way, we do not have hard evidence in terms of the type or intensity that is most beneficial to students. Perkins V acknowledges that work-based learning may take place in physical workplaces or in simulated environments. Given that it can be challenging to identify work-based learning placements for all students enrolled in a program of study, opportunities exist to randomly assign some students

to work sites and others to virtual or simulated experiences, and to assess differences in outcomes. Those implementing these placements know best what the learning goals and the tasks and responsibilities are, and can thus help researchers hypothesize what the desired student outcomes should be — gains in employability skills? Increased sense of self-efficacy? Subsequent greater likelihood of finding above-minimum-wage employment?

Employability Skills

Developing students' employability skills was newly added to the core purpose of the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V), and how CTE programs do this is an area ripe for research. Defining these skills and developing ways to measure them would best be done not by researchers alone but in collaboration with CTE practitioners.

Practitioners regularly work with employers and listen to their needs; instructors develop curriculum and related activities to prepare students not only for their first jobs but for their careers to come. They thus have first-hand insights into employability skills that can inform researchers' efforts to formally study them.

Student Recruitment

Student recruitment is a strong theme in Perkins V. Funds must be dedicated to recruiting special populations, and eligible agencies are encouraged to increase the participation of students in nontraditional fields. As practitioners devise new recruitment strategies and materials, they could work with researchers to pilot these in a random selection of schools, or to test different versions for their effectiveness.

Many other provisions of Perkins V provide exciting opportunities for research — middle school career counseling, dual enrollment and building the CTE teacher pipeline, among others.

As one strategy to fulfill its mission, the CTE Research Network will help to inspire and prepare a new generation of CTE researchers through a series of in-person summer research training institutes. The Network will also develop and freely share online modules to support practitioners' use and understanding of data and research. Details on the summer institute and the online modules will be posted on the CTE Research Network website in the months to come.

We all aim for students to complete their secondary and postsecondary CTE programs equipped with desirable employability and occupational skills, and having gained the right knowledge and self-knowledge to decide on their next steps. We need substantial additional research to fully understand whether, where and how this is occurring. ■

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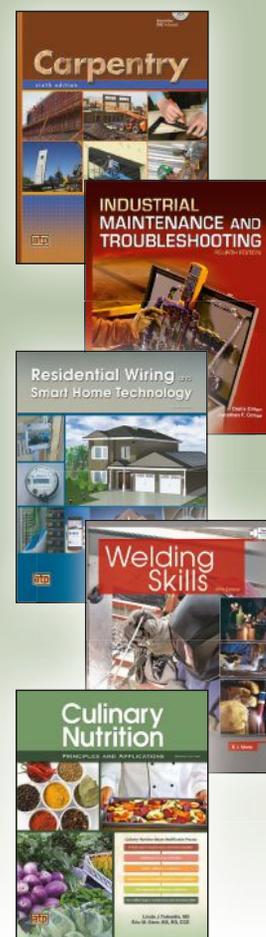
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Alfeld, C., & Estes, A. (2019). Partnering with researchers can help state leaders build the case for CTE. *Inside IES Research*. Retrieved from <https://ies.ed.gov/blogs/research/post/partnering-with-researchers-can-help-state-leaders-build-the-case-for-cte>.

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