Good afternoon. My name is Achsah Carrier and I am on staff with the University of Virginia’s Weldon Cooper Center Demographics & Workforce Group. I am here today to give you some of the background and the history of the development of Virginia’s Workplace Readiness Skills program. This is designed to address what you in Nevada have called *employability skills*. I have been working with this program on and off for over 20 years now. I am proud of what we have accomplished in Virginia, and excited to have an opportunity to share what we have done with another state.
I will cover three topics today:

First, a bit of the *early history of workplace readiness*, how the concept became important nationally, the first research we did in Virginia on this topic, and the introduction of the first workplace readiness skills initiative in Virginia’s CTE program.

Second, I will look at *recent national research* demonstrating how important this issue continues to be nationwide.

Third, I will review the work we did over the past several years to **update the list of skills** that we use in the Virginia Workplace Readiness Skills program.
I begin with a quick review of early research on workplace readiness.
Parents and employers have always concerned to make sure that young people have the skills to succeed at work. But in the last few decades this has become increasingly an issue of concern for school. The national groundwork for making workplace readiness an element of public education was laid out in a major report What Work Requires of Schools which was release in 1991 by the US Secretary of Labor’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills. This is popularly known as the SCANS Report.

This report made two crucial points that continue to drive Virginia’s Workplace Readiness Skills program today.

**First,** Employers need schools to focus on a broad range of skills. Success at work requires more than just academic competence. Instead it requires a complex integration of intellectual skills, such as critical thinking and the ability to learn on your own, and personal qualities such as integrity and the ability to get along with others along with traditional academic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics. People cannot be successful at work without having all of these capacities.

**Second,** The SCANS report made the point that these 3 types of skills should be taught in an integrated fashion. We shouldn’t be focusing academic skills in one classroom, personal qualities in another, and intellectual skills in a third. We need to focus on the three at once and in a context that clearly connects them to the workplace.

This is the approach that we have have applied in developing Virginia’s Workplace Readiness Skills program. However, it took us some years, as well as much research and trial and error to get here.
We took the first step toward the development of Virginia’s program in the mid-1980s, with the publication of a Demographics & Workforce Group report called “Changing Job Skills in Virginia.”

For this report, researchers conducted interviews with over 250 employers asking about the skills they required for young workers. No one anticipated, going into this project, that workplace readiness skills would emerge as a key requirement. But for Virginia employers, they were at least as important as traditional academic and technical skills. Employers at this time did not express deep concern about the preparedness of young people coming to them from school. However, researchers reported that the nature of our workplaces was beginning to change rapidly, with the introduction of more and more sophisticated technology. And they anticipated that over the next decade Virginia employers would have increasing needs for four kinds of skills:
These were:
Basic academic skills, including reading, writing, mathematics, and communications;
Interpersonal skills, including being personally presentable, getting along with co-workers and supervisors, and able to represent the company favorable to the public;
Computer skills, from basic computer literacy to sophisticated specialist skills;
Reasoning and generalizing skills, the ability to learn from old experiences and generalize to new ones in order to keep up with the rapid pace of change.
Through our research we found that the trends identified in the 1985 study had continued and accelerated, and more trends were noted. These included:

Growing dissatisfaction with work ethic
Increasing workplace computerization
Rising expectations for a number of skills and capacities, including:
Problem solving and decision making
Customer service
Worker flexibility
Life-long learning
Industry credentials
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- Increasing workplace computerization
- Rising expectations for:
  - Problem solving and decision making
  - Customer service
  - Worker flexibility
  - Lifelong learning
  - Industry credentials

- Education and credentials
In order to meet employers’ rising expectations and be employable in the new workplace, our report concluded that students needed to build a strong set of 13 key skills, including a positive work ethic, the ability to take the initiative, work in teams, and use critical reasoning. Curriculum experts from Virginia's CTE Resource Center enhanced this skill list by developing a series of standards for each one to further guide instruction and evaluation. In 1997, "Workplace Readiness" was added to the list of tasks and competencies required in every career and technical education course.

Virginia’s 13 Workplace Readiness Skills

1. Reading
2. Mathematics
3. Writing
4. Speaking & Listening
5. Computer Literacy
6. Reasoning,
7. The Big Picture
8. Work Ethic
9. Positive Attitude
10. Initiative
11. Self-presentation
12. Satisfactory Attendance
13. Attendance
Virginia was not alone in recognizing the importance of teaching readiness skills. As we entered the new millennium, many national researchers and educators focused on understanding the new skills required by our changing economy.
One of the most important pieces of research was the outcome of a collaboration between the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, The Conference Board, and The Society for Human Resource Management. *Are They Really Ready to Work?* reported the results of a detailed survey of over 400 employers in a range of industries. The survey asked about the skill sets that new entrants—recently hired graduates from high school, two-year college, and four-year college—need to succeed in the workplace.

One of the more interesting aspects of this research is that it directly compares employers’ ratings of academic and readiness skills.
Researchers asked employers to rate ten readiness skills, including oral communications, ethics, critical thinking and diversity awareness. These skills were all rated “very important” by over 70 percent of employers.

Employers were also asked to rate the importance of nine academic skills. Only three of these were top-rated by a similar percentage of employers — all language skills, Writing English, Speaking English and Reading..

This particular chart shows the results when employers were asked about skill requirements for 4-year college graduates. The survey also asked about 2-year college and high school graduates. Employers were less demanding in their requirements for students at these lower levels. But at all three education levels, readiness skills received high ratings from a larger percentage of employers than did academic skills.

I want to emphasize, however, that these different ratings do not demonstrate that academic skills are less important than readiness skills. Instead they show us something quite different. They show that most academic skills are job specific. For example, only about 10 percent of employers rate arts and humanities skills “very important.” What this means is that these skills are crucial for some businesses, such as graphic design firms, and rated very highly by them. But most businesses don’t do this kind of work and therefore don’t rate these skills as “very important”. The correct conclusion is not that arts and humanities skills are generally irrelevant; it is that these skills are job specific and therefore crucial for some employers and irrelevant to others.

Readiness skills, on the other hand, are rated “very important” by large percentages of employers because they are almost universally required. Every worker needs a good communication skills regardless of the occupation they work in.
In addition to asking employers to rate skills, researchers also asked *Who should be responsible for teaching them?* Three-quarters of respondents said that K-12 schools should be responsible for providing the necessary basic knowledge and applied skills for their new entrants.

Traditionally, schools were held to be primarily responsible for academic skills not readiness skills. While many had high standards for “deportment” and other readiness attributes, these were largely considered to be the responsibility of homes and communities. Students built readiness through extracurricular activities, very often through work itself. And indeed, through the 1980s, the majority of students had the opportunity for real employment. But this is no longer an option for the majority of young people today.
The last 20 years have seen a significant fall in teen employment.
Almost sixty percent of teens nationwide had summer jobs in 1989.

CLICK In 2010, only 31 percent were this fortunate, by far the lowest proportion since the Bureau of Labor Statistics has been keeping records. Interestingly, teen employment rates are the inverse of family income. Teens from low income families are much less likely to have jobs than teens from high income families.

You can see from this chart that from the 1950s through the 1980s, teen employment rose and fell with the economy, dropping during recessions and rising again afterwards. However, the fall that we have experienced over the last 20 years is likely to be permanent.
Teen Employment Will Remain Low

Causes:

• An increase in other activities, especially school

• Structural changes in the labor market

A low employment rate for teens is here to stay for the foreseeable future, for two reasons. First teens are increasingly involved in other activities. It is particularly noticeable that the the percentage of teens enrolled in summer school has risen from 10 percent in 1985 to 46 percent in 2010. This opportunity for increased education is enormously valuable for many teens. But it is not the same as work experience. Second, structural changes are taking place in the labor market.

Employers no longer need or want teens in the way they once did. Many of the jobs they once filled are disappearing – We just don’t have paper boys any more. In addition, teens face more competition from adults for low skilled jobs. And employers face many more regulatory and risk management issues in hiring youth. What responsible employer today would hire teenagers to deliver newspapers on bicycles on dark winter mornings. Look at this boy. He’s not even wearing a helmet!

Given that the opportunities for teens to develop employability through real work are likely to keep falling, we come back to the need to help teens develop these skills in school. They have fewer opportunities to do this outside of school than ever before.
National research, such as the work I just described, gave us in Virginia confidence that we were right to have introduced **13 workplace readiness skills** into the CTE curriculum. However, the continued high importance that employers place on employability, also made us think that we had not taken this step far enough. We wanted to do a much more thorough job of readiness instruction.

Before tackling that step, however, **we began with a thorough review of our list of 13 skills to see if it was really ready for the 21st century.**

To that end, in 2008 the director of Career and Technical Education at the Virginia Department of Education drew together a team to work on skills revision.
The workplace readiness skills team included area specialists from the Office of Career and Technical Education Services, as well as staff from Virginia's CTE Resource Center, the Career and Technical Education Consortium of States (CTECS), and the Demographics & Workforce Group at the University of Virginia, myself included.
The revision process began with a review of national research and of national and state initiatives to include workplace readiness skills in the curriculum.

Drawing on their experience working with Career and Technical Education in states across the nation, The Career and Technical Education Consortium of States took the lead in reviewing these initiatives and evaluating Virginia's list of 13 skills. They aimed to identify skills that needed updating, and to find important new skills that were missing from our list. They recommended, for example, that we consider adding career planning and health and safety both of which were completely missing from our list. They also reported that "computer literacy" was much too broad to be useful in the current workplace and more skills were needed in this area. Finally, they pointed out a number of instances where skills were not tightly defined, or could benefit from being broken out in several more clearly specified skills.

Based on that review, the entire team then prepared a draft list of 21 skills, with their definitions, for further consideration. These included the 13 original skills with some redefinitions, additions recommended by CTECS, and expanded computer literacy skills. Feeling confident about the overall value of these skills, we then set out to hone this list into a set particularly appropriate for the Career and Technical Education classroom.

The first step in this process was to seek advice from Virginia employers by inviting them to participate in an online comment period. We focused particularly on employers involved with Career and Technical Education through our local and state advisory boards, and also reached out to others through the Virginia Workforce Centers and local Chambers of Commerce and employer associations, including the Automobile Dealers Association, the Hospital and Healthcare Association, the Hospitality and Travel Association, and the School Boards Association.
More than **300 employers participated in our online comment period**. They rated 21 different skills as *essential, useful, or optional* for new workers. They also submitted open ended comments on these 21 skills, recommendations for skills that should be added to the list, and reported on their experience with entry level workers. Their responses and comments confirmed what we had already learned from national research.
Employers gave high ratings most of the skills included on our draft list. A large proportion of employers considered the skills to be “essential” for new workers. The top three, positive work ethic, Speaking and listening and Professional ethics were considered essential by more than 95% of employers.

Employers rarely considered any of the skills on our draft list to be “optional” for new employees. For example, just sixteen percent considered computer hardware basics to be optional, the highest optional rating of any of the skills. Reading and writing, speaking and listening, professional ethics and positive work ethic were not rated “optional” by anyone.

We were gratified to see that the ratings given to our skills closely matched those from the Are They Really Ready To Work report, in which the three highest-ranked skills were Work Ethic, Teamwork, and Oral Communications.
With employers' ratings and comments in hand, it was then time to review the draft list and finalize a new list of skills for Virginia. In doing so, we dropped some less highly-rated skills and added some others that were recommended in employers comments.

In making our decisions about what to add to or drop from the draft list, we began by reviewing employers’ ratings of skills and their additional comments, but we also gave careful consideration to 2 further factors:

How well skills could be integrated into the curriculum for existing CTE courses and;

Whether including them on the list would duplicate instruction already provided in Career and Technical Education.

For example, leadership and financial literacy were included on the draft list — because they appeared in national skills research. But we dropped them from our final list, even though these skills have obvious and important benefits for students.

We dropped them because employers did not rate these skills highly for new workers and because they are already covered in widely-taught CTE courses focused entirely on these topics.

In place of these two skills, we singled out two others, conflict resolution and customer service, for places in the list. These skills had actually been included in the draft list, but as sub-parts of larger skills. We decided to give them positions of their own in the final list because they were stressed so often in employer comments.
Our final list included 21 skills that fall into three broad areas.
Personal qualities and people skills,
Professional knowledge and skills, and
Technology knowledge and skills
First are the personal qualities and people skills. These are the skills of personal demeanor and interpersonal contact that were once widely called “soft skills.” Though this phrase is no longer much used for it seemed to imply that these skills are easier to teach and learn than others, when the truth is that these skills are the most difficult.
The second skills group, Professional Knowledge and Skills are more like technical or academic skills and less a matter of personal capacity and development. Unlike most technical or academic skills, however, these skills are important for success almost every occupation. But, with the exception of the math and language skills, these skills did not previously have a specifically recognized place in the curriculum all of our CTE courses.
The third group encompasses basic technology skills that are valuable across the whole spectrum of occupations. The world of technology is, of course, extremely broad; we teach a wide range of technology courses in CTE, and a large proportion of our students take basic technology courses. But we included these technology skills in our workplace readiness list to ensure that every CTE course incorporates basic technology topics along with specific technical instruction.
To summarize, Virginia has developed a list of workplace readiness skills that are well targeted to the modern workplace.

We developed our list on the basis of more than 25 years of local research and close attention to national research and initiatives.

Our list is also well attuned to the needs of the Career and Technical Education curriculum.

Workplace Readiness Skills were first introduced in Virginia CTE courses in 1997. We had the opportunity over the next ten years to learn a great deal about incorporating these skills in the classroom. We then undertook a wholesale revision of our skills list and our methods of instruction, and introduced a new Workplace Readiness Skills program in 2010. Darren Morris of Virginia’s CTE Resource Center about the implementation of that new program next.
I want to say in conclusion, that Virginia has accomplished this new program with the help of our state and local Advisory Boards, and particularly with the help of our employer and community partners who work directly with students and schools many capacities.

The continued engagement of partners on our Boards, in our Schools, and in our Classrooms is essential to making workplace readiness skills instruction effective and to insuring the skills we teach remain current and continue to match the needs of the contemporary workplace. I am pleased to have been able to speak to a group of partners who are taking a similar interest in the future of education and the economy in Nevada.
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References


