



# Are Students Prepared for the Workplace?

New Tools for a New Generation



A JA Education Blueprint Initiative

# Acknowledgments

In December 2013, Junior Achievement USA® convened a *Summit on Work and Career Readiness* in Atlanta, Georgia, featuring recognized experts from nine different areas of specialization focused on the preparation of America's next-generation workforce. This paper presents, in part, key elements of the multi-day discussion.

We wish to extend our sincere appreciation to the Goizueta Foundation and the summit participants who contributed their time, intellectual capital, and enthusiasm and whose contributions will positively impact generations of students for years to come.

*State Department of Education* – **Carol Barkley**, Former Director, California Department of Education, Charter School Division

*Training, Strategy, and Support* – **M.C. Desrosiers**, Former ASCD Chief Strategy Officer

*Small Business Administration* – **Dr. Ruben Garcia**, SBA Director of San Diego and President/CEO of the Hispanic Education Foundation

*Philanthropy* – **Dr. Gisele Huff**, Executive Director of the Hume Foundation and Board Chair of the Christensen Institute

*Innovative Education Designer* – **Dr. Rick Ogston**, President/CEO of Carpe Diem Schools

*Business Representative/Entrepreneur* – **Mickey Revenaugh**, Executive Vice President/Co-Founder of Connections Learning, owned by Pearson, Inc.

*K-12 School District Representative* – **Dr. Themistocles Sparangis**, Chief Technology Officer, Los Angeles Unified School District

*Research/Evaluation* – **John Watson**, Founder of Evergreen Education Research/Group, publisher of the highly recognized annual “Keeping Pace” report outlining education reforms, trends, research, and initiatives

Junior Achievement participants:

**Jack Harris**, *President*, JA of Georgia (Summit Host)

**Jack Kosakowski**, *President and CEO*, JA USA

**Buzzy Thibodeaux**, *Executive Vice President*, JA USA

**Lisa Gillis**, M.A., *Chief Academic Officer*, JA USA (Report Sponsor)

**Joe Thomas**, Ph.D., *Vice President of Evaluation and Research*, JA USA

**Matlea Parker**, M.Ed., *Vice President of Education*, JA USA

**Wendy Oliver**, Ed.D., *Manager of Evaluation and Research*, JA USA



# Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	1
Introduction .....	2
JA USA 2013 Summit on Work and Career Readiness .....	3
The Emerging Population of Workers. ....	4
What Is “Work Readiness”? .....	5
An Alternative to Defining Work Readiness .....	8
New Tools for a New Generation .....	9
A Conclusion: Hope and Anticipation .....	13



# Executive Summary

Educators, businesses, and nonprofit education organizations have a timely opportunity to solve a vexing problem facing American businesses: Graduating students are inadequately prepared to participate in a meaningful way to their employers' success because they lack basic skills such as communication, problem solving, and critical thinking. Many students realize they are struggling to acquire these "life" skills. They intuitively understand they need guidance, direction, and help because they are wired to *want* to be meaningfully engaged when they enter the workforce.

Under the auspices of Junior Achievement USA, education, business, career-development, and research professionals have collaborated to develop a working model that describes how educators from academic and nonprofit backgrounds could design, develop, and deliver a system of training that credentials a student to be workforce ready. The model is flexible, dynamic, and adaptable to different populations and work environments. Above all, the model is practical and lends itself to measurement of progress against specific goals.

Junior Achievement USA is uniquely positioned to lead a discussion about workforce readiness. We understand the needs of students—we talk to them every day! And we understand business owners' needs because they are our partners in delivering financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and work-readiness programs to 4.4 million K-12 students in 100-plus markets in the United States. The timing is right for a discussion about an innovative approach to work readiness, and Junior Achievement USA is ready to play a part in a solution that makes a positive impact on the next generation of students entering the workforce.

# Introduction

Are America's schools preparing our students for work through established curriculum and partnerships with the business community? Is there an identifiable set of core knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will ensure our students are prepared to face the unfamiliar challenges of the workplace? What does it actually mean for a graduating high school student to be "ready for the workplace"?

A growing body of literature identifies factors that are necessary for a successful transition from either secondary school or college into gainful employment. However, American businesses have indicated they believe only half of high school students are equipped with the most important workplace skills, such as oral and written communication, critical thinking, and problem solving.<sup>1</sup> Hiring professionals who regularly evaluate the qualifications of new entrants (high school and college graduates) into the workforce have an even grimmer view: They believe only 20 percent of young job hires are "very qualified" for their new positions. Eighty percent are "somewhat qualified," "somewhat

*This degradation in workplace readiness comes at a crucial time, with the U.S. economy losing an increasing number of experienced professionals to retirement.*

unqualified," or "very unqualified." These assessments paint a bleak picture of the

preparedness of our graduating students to be successful contributors to the U.S. economy.<sup>2</sup>

This degradation in workplace readiness comes at a crucial time, with the U.S. economy losing an increasing number of experienced professionals to retirement. The skills and experience of these baby boomers are not easily replaced, and there does not seem to be the kind of training and mentoring plans for their successors that eased the transition of previous generations of workers. To compensate, many employers are choosing to hire workers from outside of America who can immediately meet their business needs. This significantly disadvantages U.S. youths as they compete with a prepared and increasingly competitive global workforce.

Leaders in business and education recognize the ramifications of such outsourcing, and progress is being made to align secondary school curricula with the needs of American businesses. Interestingly, three-quarters of employers who responded to a Conference Board survey<sup>3</sup> agreed that "K-12 schools should be responsible for providing basic knowledge and applied skills" for new workers. Educators appear willing to take up that mantle of responsibility. However, is *more* of the same education the right solution, or does there need to be a *better definition* of "work readiness" before a systematic and more effective solution is proposed?

1 2006. *Are They Really Ready to Work?* Conference Board, Inc., Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Corporate Voices for Working Families, and Society for Human Resource Management.

2 2006. *Are They Really Ready to Work?* Conference Board, Inc. et al.

3 2006. *Are They Really Ready to Work?* Conference Board, Inc. et al.

# JA USA 2013 Summit on Work and Career Readiness

In late 2013, Junior Achievement USA (JA USA®) sponsored a summit of leading education experts and thought leaders to explore creating a relevant and actionable definition for work and career readiness (referred to hereafter as “work readiness”). The two-day summit in Atlanta, Georgia, was an extension of investigations and discussions conducted by JA USA through a research grant from the Goizueta Foundation. Early research<sup>4</sup> under this grant had focused on reducing dropout rates of at-risk Hispanic students. But that effort led directly to another key issue: How do we best prepare for the workforce those students who stayed in school until graduation? National JA USA presentations and related publications<sup>5</sup> about this research sparked a groundswell of support and encouragement for JA USA to engage in and lead a national-level discussion about work readiness.

Summit participants initially thought an important first step would be to construct one practical definition of work readiness. After all, it is generally understood what it means to be “college ready.” Test scores and academic performance standards are well established

*How do we best prepare for the workforce those students who stayed in school until graduation?*

for admission into higher education institutions. And the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) has identified standards for success for K-12 students by embracing core academic subjects and 21st century skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, communication, and creativity and

innovation.<sup>6</sup> Summit participants expected to identify factors, much like academic standards, that would be universally recognized as leading to “work readiness” and

which could be used to develop curriculum that would address graduating students’ lack of basic workplace skills.

After much discussion, the summit participants came to the conclusion that it would be counter-productive to produce a new definition of work readiness because of the formidable uncertainty about what the workplace of the future will look like. They did reach consensus, however, that it was possible—and, indeed, preferable—to identify a broad spectrum of enduring knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA) that good workers have always possessed—and will need in any workplace in the future. Examples of these skills include the ability to identify a problem; apply effective problem-solving and decision-making skills; and recognize and then seize opportunities when they arise.

They agreed that these types of foundational skills would better prepare students for their

<sup>4</sup> 2011. *JA Graduation Pathways*. ©Junior Achievement USA.

<sup>5</sup> 2013. *The Role of Common Core Standards in College and Career-Readiness Education*. ©Junior Achievement USA.

<sup>6</sup> Dec. 2009. P21 Framework Definitions. Partnership for 21st Century Skills. Retrieved from [http://www.p21.org/storage/documents/P21\\_Framework\\_Definitions.pdf](http://www.p21.org/storage/documents/P21_Framework_Definitions.pdf).

future than the job-specific skills often taught in narrowly focused work-preparedness programs. Possessing these broader, enduring skills would allow students to be work-, career-, and life-ready, prepared for the constantly changing circumstances they will surely encounter across all areas of their lives.

The summit participants also concluded that in the absence of our education system solving this issue through changes in school-delivered curricula, it remains incumbent upon extracurricular organizations to provide students with such life-skills training. Research suggests that these foundational skills are most effectively taught through experiential and mastery-based learning, the types of learning experiences that Junior Achievement excels in providing. As a result, summit participants expressed strong support for JA USA to initiate and lead an important discussion about the role of nonprofit educational organizations and the business community in preparing students for life after school.

That discussion, summit participants agreed, should result in:

- **defining** a new model that describes life readiness;
- **developing** innovative and relevant courseware that conveys this new model; and
- **delivering** creative new content that excites and captures the imagination of students who are seeking guidance as they enter a constantly changing global society.

## The Emerging Population of Workers

So, what characterizes this population of students who will soon enter the workplace?

Members of the so-called “Generation Z” (or “Gen Z”) were born in the mid-1990s to mid-2000s. They are not the Millennials (“Generation Y”) who have been entering the workforce for the past 14 years and who already have shaped our culture in ways that required social scientists to invent a new vocabulary.

This latest generation has yet to leave such a mark on our culture. But it surely will—for better or worse. The members of Gen Z have experienced in their short lives a revolution in instant communication and information, which has helped to shape these “digital natives” to expect instant access to almost every *other* resource in their spheres of experience: access to jobs, to wealth, to people. But these unrealistic expectations are often in conflict with the way the “real world” works, and their discovery of this frequently leads to disappointment and cynicism.

And, yet, there also are positive psychological characteristics that define Gen Z. They are realistic about the world because they have grown up in troubling times as witnesses to school violence, long Middle Eastern wars, and a crippling recession in which many of them saw their parents unexpectedly lose their jobs with devastating



results. They live in a world of dwindling resources, stagnant income growth, soaring education costs, and reduced opportunities in the traditional industries that have fed and clothed American families for decades. Consequently, they are pragmatic and resilient, willing to openly and honestly confront issues and solve problems.

Can these conflicting characteristics of Gen Z be resolved into a new generation prepared in novel ways for the challenges they will face in a changing workplace? In a word, yes. Growing up with instant access to information, members of Gen Z have learned the value of a knowledge society. They understand the power of using information and knowledge to potentially change the world around them—and to better their own lives at the same time. This perspective makes this generation ready for a new model of work preparedness. Their ability to understand and be realistic about the need for a set of foundational skills can make them successful competitors in a

global economy. They are informed, eager, and willing to try new things. Business leaders recognize the resource this new generation represents, and they, too, are ready to embrace new education models to tap the capabilities of these young Americans.

## What Is “Work Readiness”?

Reviewing the prevailing definitions of work and career readiness underscores the uncertainty that any one set of skills and abilities can predict success for entry-level employees. Direct comparisons between and among these definitions are difficult because of the inconsistent vernacular used by businesses and organizations to describe success factors among young employees. Still, a listing of some organizations and their particular take on work readiness is instructive.



## ACT

ACT is probably best known for its college admissions and placement test, which is administered to graduating high school students every year. What is less well known is that the organization provides more than one hundred other services for education and workforce development. One of those services, called *National Career Readiness Certificate PLUS*, is an assessment of non-cognitive—or “soft”—skills that help employers assess the work readiness of job candidates. This assessment focuses on specific characteristics or traits that are presumably measurable and which are considered important by employers for predicting success in the workplace.

### ACT: Essential Soft Skills

Domain	Characteristics/Traits
Work Discipline	Productivity • Dependability
Teamwork	Tolerance • Communication • Attitude
Customer Service Orientation	Interpersonal Skills • Perseverance
Managerial Potential	Persuasion • Enthusiasm • Problem Solving

## U.S. Department of Labor

The Labor Department, in its *Essential Skills to Getting a Job*, a publication of the Office of Disability Employment Policy, asserts there are certain skills “key to the success of young workers in the 21st Century workplace” and which correlate to soft skills that are attractive to employers hiring new workers.

### Labor Department: Essential Job Skills

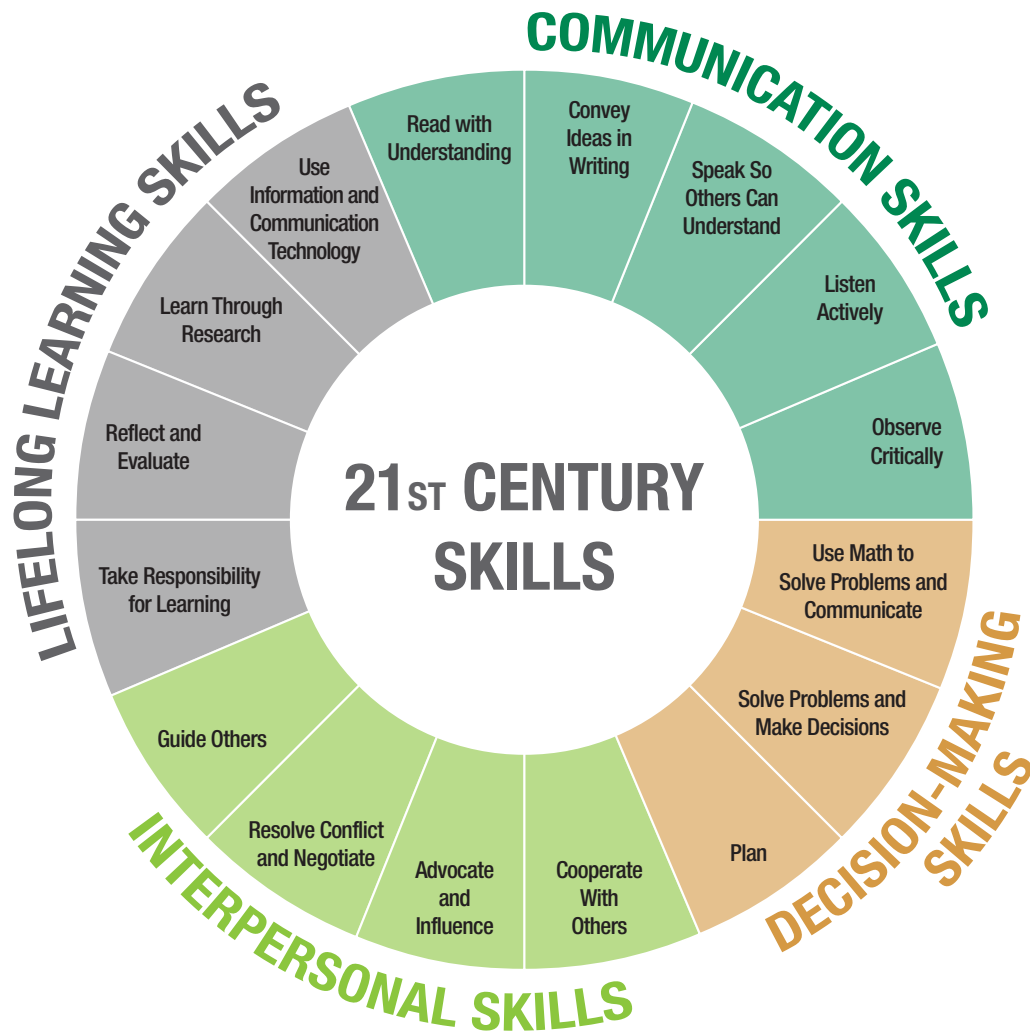
<b>Employers Are Looking For:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Professionalism or Work Ethic</li><li>• Oral and Written Communication</li><li>• Teamwork and Collaboration Skills</li><li>• Critical-Thinking Skills</li><li>• Problem-Solving Skills</li></ul>
<b>Competencies Key to Success:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Professionalism</li><li>• Communication Skills</li><li>• Teamwork</li><li>• Critical-Thinking Skills</li><li>• Problem-Solving Skills</li><li>• Networking</li><li>• Enthusiasm</li></ul>

**National Institute for Literacy**

This federal agency has created a set of literacy standards called *Equipped for the Future (EFF) Content Standards: What Adults Need to Know and Be Able to Do in the 21st Century*. The EFF Standards define adult literacy requirements in the context of roles and responsibilities. The standards are particularly relevant to workers because they have been crafted without regard to the educational levels of adults. The standards assume that all adults—workers, parents, and family and community members—require mastery of these knowledge and skills standards to carry out their responsibilities at home, in the workplace, and in their respective communities.

The EFF Standards are categorized in the following skills wheel.

## Literacy Institute: Essential Skills We All Need



Adapted from a similar graphic at the Skills for the 21st Century website:  
<http://skillsfor21stcentury.wordpress.com/2010/03/23/eff-skills-wheel/>

Clearly, among these organizations there is significant consensus about some of the specific skills that are important for predicting success among entry-level workers. However, what is glaringly obvious is that there is a lack of consensus about the inclusion of *all* the proposed skills within any single, definable domain. That lack of agreement precludes a conclusive dialogue among business leaders and educators about the development of a standard curriculum for preparing students for work.

A number of definitions of “work readiness” also have been suggested in educational publications and by business organizations that categorize associated skills in terms of “cognitive” (reading for information and problem solving, for example) and “noncognitive” (job performance and adaptability, for example). In fact, JA offers an implicit definition of what constitutes work and career readiness in the context of describing the impact of its various programs. JA contends that critical thinking, interpersonal communication, problem solving, collaboration, and teamwork, for example, all constitute skills that are required of any workforce, current or future.

## An Alternative to Defining “Work Readiness”

The summit participants acknowledged the multitude of work-readiness descriptions and intentionally chose *not* to craft yet another definition, concluding that it would be a fool’s errand to predict the specific needs of the future workplace. And, they believed, creating yet another definition of work readiness would constrain the development of an innovative, adaptable curriculum that would address the needs of students no matter what generation they were born into in the 21st century.

Rather, summit participants endorsed the basic elements of JA’s implicit definition by noting its well-known tagline, “Empowering young people to own their economic success.” The word “economic” derives from the Greek *oikonomia*, (*oikos*, “house,” and *nomos*, “custom” or “law”), which together translate into the “rules of the house.” How appropriate a tagline, they concluded, because the work-readiness knowledge and skills that should be taught must be adaptable to meet the ever-changing focus of new generations. The “rules of the house” today are not the same rules of previous generations. And it is impossible to say with any certainty what the rules will be for future generations. Such lack of certainty supports the idea that focusing on the enduring message that youths must take responsibility for their own economic success is exactly the right prescription for future generations.

Is there utility in *not* defining a term? The summit participants think so. They believe that describing work readiness in terms of a *construct of interest* could be much more powerful. They propose that work readiness could best be illustrated by harnessing the experiences of people

who already successfully contribute their skills in the workforce, from the boardrooms to the factory floor. Specifically, they suggest capturing the life stories of successful workers and vividly presenting the attitudes, behaviors, and learning opportunities that contributed significantly to their success.

While such life stories could—and should— be drawn from all types of workers and entrepreneurs young and old, male and female, Junior Achievement already has deep resources from which to draw: It currently has a cadre of more than 200,000 volunteers who deliver JA programs to students. Many of these volunteers have created their own successful businesses, excelled in the corporate landscape, or simply shone in their chosen career. Tapping the depth and breadth of their experiences could jumpstart this new model of work readiness.

Summit participants anticipate that these work-life scenarios will not be confined to the current American workplace, since the enduring traits of good workers transcend time, occupation, and location. Any new attempt at describing work readiness, they insist, must take into consideration that new workers will be part of a global marketplace that transcends geographical boundaries.

## New Tools for a New Generation

*True empowerment is having the ability to manage one's life, no matter what the current world looks like.*

How do we guide future generations to “own” their success? What tools or skills can we provide them? What education or training is appropriate? The consensus of the summit participants is to introduce educators, employers, and emerging workers to a three-fold system of training that should be delivered concurrently:

1. Identify and develop a recognized set of “foundation” skills;
2. Teach students to learn for themselves; and
3. Adopt a hierarchical model of work-readiness preparation that is both practical and measurable.

True empowerment is having the ability to manage one's life, no matter what the current world looks like. And that is the framework that should be used to prepare our emerging generations for global, futuristic “readiness.”

### 1. Identifying the KSA Fundamentals

As described above, summit participants agree that a construct of interest and set of descriptions in the form of life narratives—rather than simple definitions of work readiness—may be the tool that allows the teaching of work readiness to transcend

the specific and the mundane. Through focused, well-told narratives, delivered in formats embraced by Gen Z, students would discover the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that underlie the performance of all successful workers, no matter their age or experience. This approach would build on a framework consistent with real-life experiences of successful workers. And it would represent an exciting departure from tiresome, non-generalizable, static definitions that quickly become outdated. However, any comprehensive definition scheme should also include *fundamental* skills such as mathematics and reading competencies, which are essential elements for any work-preparation model.

## 2. Teaching Students to Learn for Themselves

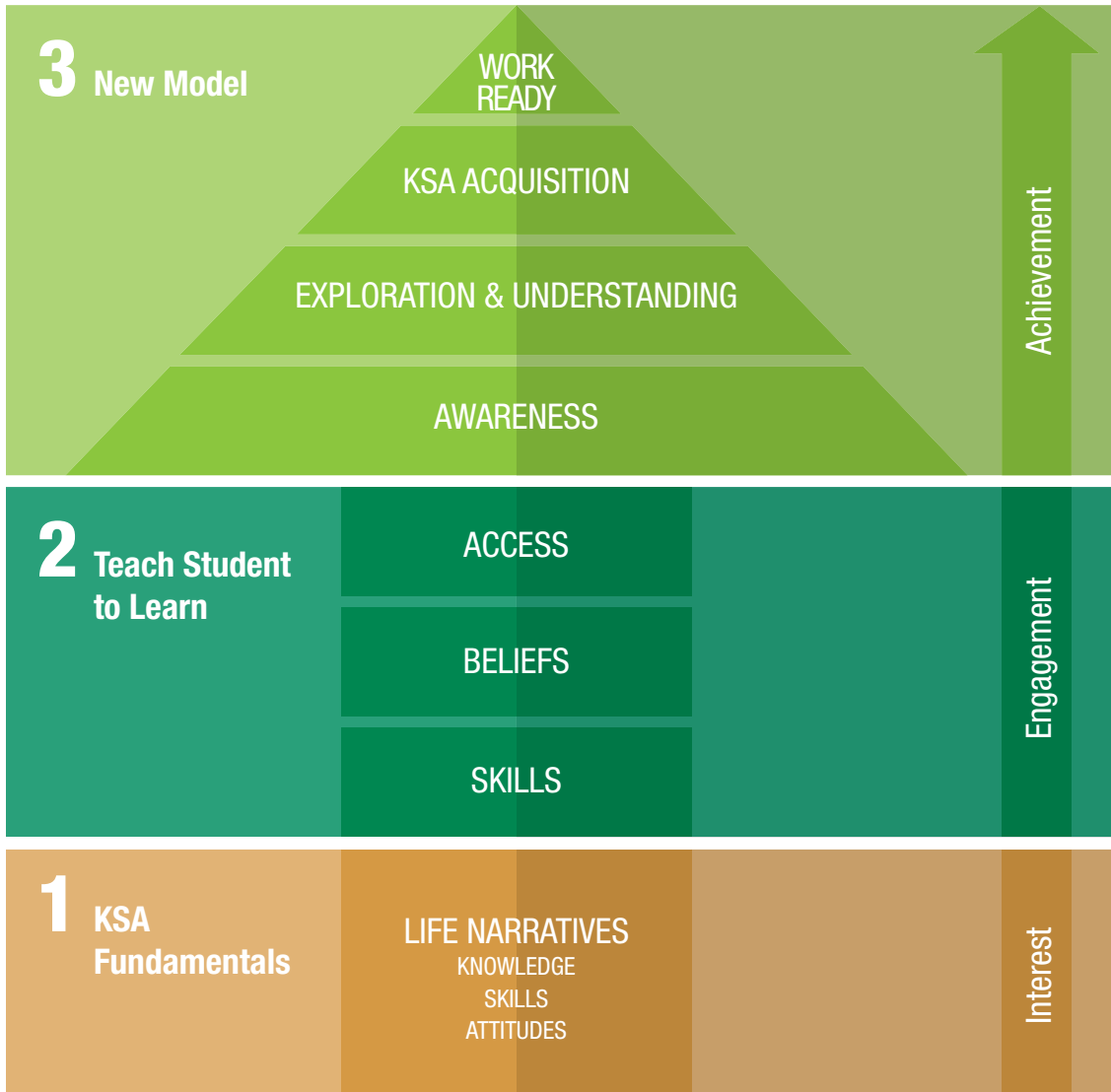
We are moving quickly into a “digital” future, one that will require our students to be connected to information and to each other in networks that we can barely imagine. What we *do* imagine we couch in metaphors and colorful language to aid in describing this exciting, new digital world, such as “world-spanning information fabric.” Whatever the shape or form of future information networks, one thing is certain: Our students will be left behind unless they learn to teach themselves how to use the tools to stay connected and integrated.

Learning for oneself is a common theme in educational circles today—synonymous with the concepts of lifelong learning and autonomous learning, and it is universally understood to encompass the self-motivated, voluntary, and ongoing pursuit of knowledge. Thus, a system that teaches students to “own their own success” must include teaching them to participate intentionally and aggressively in the knowledge economy. If we are to subscribe to the idea that the best way to predict one’s future is to invent it, our emerging students must learn how to learn for themselves. They also must be resilient, flexible, and able to reinvent themselves to respond to a rapidly changing work environment.

## 3. Adopting a New Model of Work Readiness

A useful model of work readiness should be practical and measurable. It should be *practical* in that it must be adaptable to different academic situations and social environments while providing a general architecture for concrete steps and activities that should be taken. It should be *measurable* so that accountability can be assigned for specific actions and progress can be quantified against stated goals. A three-fold system of training is presented on the following page that addresses each of the proposed elements of recommended preparation.

## JA Three-Fold System of Work-Readiness Training



---

The model depicts graphically the following ideas and philosophy:

- KSA fundamental information would provide the base for student preparation for the workforce. This information would be presented in the form of **life narratives** that explore the enduring knowledge, skills, and attitudes of successful workers.
- To learn for themselves, students would require: (a) **access** to mentors and workers who provide real-life information and guidance about job content and requirements; (b) a shift in their **belief** systems to understand and accept their personal role and responsibility to own their preparation; and (c) a curriculum that translates the life narratives into specific **skills**.
- Students would transition through three distinct levels of events once they commit to a path of preparation. Beginning with an acknowledgment that there is a gap in their current skill set (**awareness**), students would begin a set of activities that focus on the need to close their skills gap (**exploration & understanding**). That would lead to active learning and transfer of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (**KSA acquisition**).

This system would lend itself naturally to three measurement touch points: **interest**, **engagement**, and **achievement**. Metrics could easily be developed that quantify students' levels of investment in each of the three elements of the training system while measuring their progress against specific objectives tied to knowledge acquisition and skills achievement.

The system could be developed into a robust road map or set of diagnostics and interventions that guide students through a comprehensive workforce-readiness program. The system would not attempt to identify what motivations students may or may not have but rather would presume that a student entering the process is already motivated and goal-oriented. However, the system would be sufficiently well-articulated to provide a backdrop against which to study the three factors that are understood to constitute motivation: values, beliefs, and desires.

Taken together, these three components—identifying the fundamentals; teaching students to learn for themselves; and adopting a new model of instilling work-readiness skills—constitute a comprehensive system of training that would be both practical and manageable, while simultaneously lending itself to accountability and measurement.



## A Conclusion: Hope and Anticipation

American employers are deeply concerned about the deficit of foundational workplace skills in the emerging workforce. At the same time, many of our youths are finding it difficult to transition from school into the workplace because they are unprepared for the challenges they face in an unfamiliar environment. As a result, they are unable to contribute at their potential. This trend will continue as long as nonprofit education organizations and the business community fail to explore more creative ways to partner with education to focus on effective work-readiness strategies.

*Junior Achievement USA provides hope. It can leverage its organizational infrastructure to connect students to meaningful, life-changing learning opportunities*

Junior Achievement USA, however, provides hope. It is in a unique position as the world's largest nonprofit organization dedicated to providing young people with the knowledge and skills they need to own their economic success, plan for their future, and make smart academic and economic choices. It can leverage its organizational infrastructure to connect students to meaningful, life-changing learning opportunities that better prepare them to be competitive in the 21st century global marketplace and beyond.

Consider: Junior Achievement USA's programs are delivered by more than 200,000 corporate and community volunteers who provide relevant, hands-on experiences that foster work readiness, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy skills. Its programs use experiential, mastery-based learning



strategies that inspire students to dream big and attain their potential. Today, JA USA reaches 4.4 million K-12 students in 115 markets across the United States and an additional 5.8 million students in 120 other countries worldwide, for a total of 10.2 million students around the globe.

This is an exciting time for Junior Achievement USA, as it reinvents itself through its JA Education Blueprint. The blueprint proposes to introduce innovative, transformational programs that will re-engage American students, expand our relationships with our corporate partners, and equip our students with the life skills that will prepare them to own their own economic success.

By leading the national discussion about work readiness through the convening of the *2013 Summit on Work and Career Readiness*, JA USA is poised to lead the development of a new, relevant model of instruction that truly prepares young workers for the challenges of their time in history.

