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Book Review: *(Re)Defining the Goal: The True Path to Career Readiness in the 21st Century*

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Abstract

In *(Re)Defining the Goal: The True Path to Career Readiness in the 21st Century*, author Kevin Fleming presents his an extensively researched approach for deconstructing the prevalent "one-size-fits-all" education paradigm. The book provides a new perspective with replicable strategies and outlines 6 proven steps to help young people thrive in the evolving workforce. Youth development practitioners will find the topics discussed relevant and practical as they guide their clientele toward personality-aligned careers and not just toward college.

Key words: workforce development, career readiness

The issue of rising costs of attending college are front and center in the minds of parents and students. At the same time that more and more jobs have a need for post-secondary education (Conley, 2012), employers report that young people are entering the workforce unprepared (Jiminez, 2020). Because of their focus on developing youth potential, youth development programs are ideally suited to help students navigate the transition to post-secondary education and the workforce (e.g., Bates et al., 2020; Gee et al., 2020; Horrillo et al., 2021).

In *(Re)Defining the Goal: The True Path to Career Readiness in the 21st Century*, author Kevin Fleming (2016) argues that there is a strong disconnect between current strategies in youth workforce preparation and the realities of the working world (p. XXII). He delivers a robust explanation about why the United States' education system needs to steer away from promoting one path to success—specifically, "college is for everyone"—and focus on aligning adolescents' interests and abilities with their future career goals. Having previously supported over 40 career and technical education programs, and currently the vice president of planning

Book Review: *(Re)Defining the Goal*

and development at Norco College, Fleming promotes an approach that changes the perception of pathways to education and careers in today's society. In this book, as in his earlier video, *Success in the New Economy* (Fleming, 2015), he explains how there should be a greater focus on applied skills and industry-recognized certifications to maintain relevance with ongoing job market demands.

The book consists of 10 chapters. The first five chapters address misconceptions related to college attendance. Fleming suggests that college is not for every young person, and the college-for-all mentality is encouraging college attendance with no clear direction, while students accumulate loan debt that is unaffordable. He contends that this misalignment between degrees and job skills is leading to underemployment and unemployment. He presents an example from California illustrating that 93 of the 100 students did not win the "one-way-to-win" game and makes the case that it is important to encourage more employability skill development rather than pushing "college-for-all" (Fleming, 2016, Ch. 2). Recognizing that young people must be guided to careers, not just to college, these early chapters focus on the issues that currently exist in the United States' education system that directly impact workforce development.

In Chapters 6 and 7, Fleming shifts his focus to a paradigm that would strongly benefit youth development practitioners and their approach to workforce development and college and career readiness strategies. He notes that a typical course of action is for young people to determine their school first, with influences from their parents or friends, pick their major second, and then finally their career. Instead, he proposes that young people should pick their career first because it will determine the major or other training needed to be best positioned for success, and then research and select the college or other post-secondary learning institution that meets the desired outcomes. He also recognizes that young people need more than reading, writing, and arithmetic—referred to as the 3Rs— and advocates for them to learn relevance and reality (pp. 74–75). Fleming emphasizes that the secret to increasing motivation of adolescents is to learn to help them to "see how the content is applicable to their initial career choice" and that "being well-educated is not the same as being employable" (p. 75). These aspects are aligned youth development program goals.

Chapter 8 delves into how to be part of the solution, with Fleming recommending 17 action steps to move the pendulum toward career readiness preparation. Chapter 9 encourages the reader to move away from asking young people what they want to be when they grow up, but

Book Review: *(Re)Defining the Goal*

instead, asking “What do you think you’d like to do first?” (p. 112). Chapter 10 provides insight into Fleming’s six-step program to help young people determine both their educational and eventual career path, illustrated with examples. The book concludes with five appendices. Two appendices, one for parents and one for students, condense the basic steps for career readiness. Labor market information contained in Appendices C and D and resources in Appendix E are helpful but may need to be updated given the book was published in 2016.

Although the book heavily focuses on the secondary educational system and some of Fleming’s action steps are applicable primarily to formal education settings, many can easily be incorporated into new and existing youth development programs. For example, career exploration can be embedded into existing programs or curriculum. This strategy can help youth discover their interests, but also allows them to link their learning to future careers (p. 90). Through the educational opportunities they offer, many youth development programs already address so-called soft skills, such as leadership, teamwork, and communication. Some programs, such as Scouts and 4-H, already use the idea of a micro-credential (i.e., badges and projects), which simplifies competencies into smaller skill sets to accomplish mastery. Youth development programs could use this strategy to incorporate gamification (in the form of digital badges) to personalize the learning experience (pp. 91–92).

Because of the important role youth development practitioners play in preparing leaders of tomorrow and ensuring that young people thrive, this book is a much-needed resource, especially as it can help better understand how to support adolescents as they find the career pathway that best aligns with their interests and connects to the realities of the current job market. Personally, this book has been influential in framing the approach I have taken in my work to develop the Ohio 4-H Pathways to the Future Program (Long, 2022). Educators, youth development practitioners, and counselors alike can benefit from applying Fleming’s approach and strategies to ensure the young people they serve gain a competitive advantage as they move along their career path. An easy read, it uses real-life examples to help change the narrative that the “one-size-fits-all” approach is no longer the best methodology. Youth development programs can fill the gaps as collaborators in career readiness preparation strategies.

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