HELPING STUDENTS NAVIGATE THE WAY

Offering Practical Advice

Vince Bertram has a brutally honest message for students: Employers don't care about your dreams. Their interests lie with the skills and the value you can add to the workforce.

"In my work as an educator and at Project Lead the Way (PLTW), I have seen thousands of students with unfulfilled promises, and students who have been counseled to simply follow their dreams and that things will work out for them. It's irrational advice. And it's not the truth," he asserts.

His 2017 best-selling book — *Dream Differently: Candid Advice for America's Students* — challenges them to be intentional as they navigate their path forward.

Bertram is president and chief executive officer of Indianapolis-based PLTW, which provides innovative STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) curriculum for K-12 students and teachers across the United States, District of Columbia and U.S. territories. A New Castle native, he was a high school teacher, principal and superintendent (Evansville-Vanderburgh School Corporation from 2007-2011) before joining PLTW.

"So much of this starts early," he contends. "We're not asking students to pick careers at an early age. What we want them to understand, however, is that many of those career opportunities are based on the skills they're developing in elementary, middle and high school. And that these things are important. So, if we can bring real-world examples to them and real-world applications, then they can start to see the relevancy of math and science."

In the United States, student loan debt has soared to nearly $1.6 trillion. While it's created a crisis, Bertram emphasizes that not all debt is bad.

"You can't say $50,000 in debt (for instance) is good or bad. You have to figure out why you've made the investment and what your return is."

Consider a college dropout or a graduate in a profession with few job prospects. That qualifies as bad debt. Someone who invests $50,000 and enters a high-demand, high-wage career, however, accrues good debt.

Vince Bertram encourages youth to "be intentional about your path forward" in his book *Dream Differently: Candid Advice for America's Students*.

The investment can lead to "an enduring, fulfilling career. They (students) need to really do those calculations. I believe that colleges and universities have to be more transparent about the outcomes for specific majors and we also — in my opinion — need to stop selling irrelevant degrees."

Committing to lifelong learning is another part of the solution.

"Human capital can be like any other product," Bertram declares. "If you aren't innovating, if you're not differentiating yourself, you become a human commodity. You become irrelevant. And we want to make sure from a human perspective that we're constantly improving our knowledge and skills so that we not only can keep up, but we can lead that change."

RESOURCE: Vince Bertram, Project Lead the Way, at www.pltw.org

Problem-Solving Pros

Who says being a geek is a bad thing?

A new apprenticeship program at Endeavor Communications offers teens with hands-on telecommunications and computer technology experience — and an opportunity to give back.

"Future Speed Geeks" began in fall 2017. It's a partnership between Cloverdale High School and Endeavor, which provides landline phone, wireless service, high-speed internet, television, security systems, medical alert systems and IT services.

Each month, 13 Future Speed Geeks gather with their mentors (naturally known as "Speed Geeks") to participate in free community help desk sessions at Endeavor's Cloverdale headquarters. They troubleshoot real-world challenges ranging from laptops and iPads to cell phones and email.

Darin LaCoursiere, president and CEO, asserts that the Speed Geeks program "addresses the proliferation of technology in the home and how challenging it is for people. Especially with WiFi: 'Why doesn't this work and why can't I get connected?'

"I'm passionate about what we're doing — helping people in the rural areas and not letting technology pass our rural folks by. It's a way for us to engage our local community. Teach kids about the technology. Train them about what it really takes to deliver internet, WiFi, Bluetooth and all of those different pieces of technology."

Students will receive a certificate of completion. LaCoursiere foresees the

Future Speed Geeks tackle technology issues with the public in a relaxed setting.

apprenticeship expanding their employment prospects.

"Let's get some kids in there and see if we can make a difference!" he exclaims. "Where it goes from there after these kids go through the program, it's really up to them. They have to make those hard life choices. Hopefully, we give them something to remember …"

One day, they may find themselves back at Endeavor.

"If we can keep growing as an organization, for some of these kids that might want to come back to the community (after leaving to pursue college), it would be a great opportunity!" LaCoursiere remarks.

Ultimately, the goal is to expand the Future Speed Geeks program beyond Cloverdale and into other communities.

RESOURCE: Darin LaCoursiere, Endeavor Communications, at www.weendeavor.com

Cracking the Code of STEM Participation

When a young man lost his sister's beloved cat, he sought a solution through the South Bend Code School.

"It shows how you're able to use coding to problem solve," remarks co-founder Alex Liggins. "What he ended up doing was creating a web application where if you have lost a pet or found a pet, you can post about it."

The South Bend Code School was established in 2015.

"A big goal of ours is to introduce kids to coding through fun ways," she imparts. "Whether that's learning how to build their own web sites or to code their own games, they're still getting these transferrable skills that can apply to any career or education path they want to pursue in the future."

Since the organization's inception, "we've had almost 300 students in our formal programs and over 1,000 through community outreach. What's really cool about those numbers is that out of 1,000 students that we've introduced coding to, 47% are female and over 56% are unrepresented minorities."

Programs are geared toward ages seven to 18 (although a partnership with an area school introduces children as young as age five to coding). High schoolers explore game or web development.

"We started a college and career prep course for students who finish our formal program," Liggins explains. "Students are able to come in once a week and we continue to work with them. They build more coding projects so they can strengthen that skills set."

Additional services include guidance in the college application process and placing students in paid internships at local tech companies.

The South Bend-based effort is expanding, with new locations in Fort Wayne (launched in fall 2017) and Elkhart (coming in March).

Liggins was among honorees at the 2017 Women of Color in Technology STEM Conference in Detroit.

"It was so many different influential women who were there," she recalls. "That was incredible and just very inspirational all at the same time."

She expresses optimism about the future of women in STEM professions.

"When you look at programs like ours and even other programs across the country, everyone … seems to be making a conscious effort toward getting more young girls involved in tech and in STEM. Now the trick or the test is going to be watching and remaining a positive force and an influence in these young girls' lives so that they continue along that path, and are pursuing more degrees and different careers that are related to STEM."

"Coding is something that anyone can do," emphasizes Alex Liggins (right), co-founder of the South Bend Code School. She views it as a powerful way for students to unlock new career interests or hobbies.

RESOURCE: Alex Liggins, South Bend Code School, at southbendcodeschool.com