



Catherine T. "Terry" Hickey
President, the National Council of
State Education Attorneys

NCOSEA Voice

Spelling Out CTE Gender Equality

Let us in education dream of an aristocracy of achievement arising out of a democracy of opportunity.

—Thomas Jefferson

Perhaps the US Department of Education had President Jefferson's exhortation in mind when it recently reminded the education community about the requirement that all students, regardless of sex or gender, have "equal access to the full range of" career and technical education (CTE) programs. The department designated this reminder—in the form of a "Dear Colleague" letter dated June 15, 2016, and jointly issued by the Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education and the Office for Civil Rights—as significant guidance.

The department issued the guidance to clarify the obligations under civil rights laws for recipients and subrecipients of federal financial assistance. The letter identifies some historical barriers to equal access to CTE programs, including implicit bias (social stereotypes), ambient bias (a classroom's symbolic features), and sex stereotyping. Acknowledging that disproportionate gender enrollment alone is not a violation of law, the letter nonetheless urges proactive efforts to increase participation of the underrepresented gender in programs that lead to "high skill, high wage, and high demand jobs."

The letter provides examples of hypothetical violations of the law, and it recommends remedies in areas such as recruitment and promotional activities, access to classes, and counseling. It encourages expansion of outreach activities, additional training for school staff, and revision of admissions policies. It examines and explains the need to be aware of and protect against exclusion based on marital and parental status. And

it addresses the increased potential for sex-based harassment of students whose gender makes up a small minority of those enrolled in particular areas of study.

Perhaps not coincidentally, a bill to reauthorize the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006 was introduced in the US House of Representatives in late June 2016. Entitled the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, the bill includes clarification of what programs need to offer to qualify for funding, proposes adding homeless students and youth with a parent on active duty in the armed forces to the "special populations" definition, and revises performance indicators. The bill emphasizes an expectation of rigorous content aligned with academic standards and the delivery of career skills.

To address gender equity, it proposes as one measure of performance participation that leads to employment in fields that are nontraditional for the gender of the students.

This renewed focus on gender equity in CTE is one facet of the future of schools. Districts and schools will be concentrating on the expected high-growth fields in tomorrow's economies, such as nursing and cybersecurity. This focus on gender equity in CTE anticipates both the expectation and realization of the goal; the result should be superior, prestigious achievement based on open and fair opportunity for all. Thomas Jefferson would approve and applaud the realization of this dream. ■