



CHANGING PERCEPTIONS, TRANSFORMING LIVES

By AJ Huff, Nick Linberg & Joel Malin

Perceptions of career and technical education are changing. At Butler Tech, in southwest Ohio, perceptions changed when students, families, and communities began seeing success in ways that were visible, credible, and sustainable. Our visitors arrive expecting to see students in classrooms. They leave having met emerging professionals.

To facilitate this shift, leaders intentionally focused on **four key areas** to ensure public perception matched what the students had already accomplished. Together, these efforts have helped reshape how students, families, business partners, and policymakers understand the role of CTE in preparing learners for careers, college, and lifelong advancement.

1. **Living the mission through shared norms**
2. **Redefining success**
3. **Elevating student voice, and**
4. **Prioritizing access and high expectations across both high school and adult education.**



1. Living the Mission Through Shared Norms

At Butler Tech, this approach is deliberate. A clear mission to “transform lives by making students career-ready and college-prepared” undergirds all decision-making. Rather than just a statement on the wall, the mission shapes how opportunities for students are created and delivered across programs and partnerships, and in everyday practice.

This mission is supported through a shared set of norms that guide instruction and campus culture. These expectations are visible across campuses and emphasize behaviors such as productive struggle, thoughtful collaboration and responsible risk-taking. Students and staff often begin meetings and classes with a reminder of the norms and a reflection on their role. These norms do not serve as rules, but instead foster a common language for participation, communication and success.

Crucially, these norms align with the professional expectations and best practices of current industry environments. In time, the norms shape how students see themselves and how they interact with others. They learn to speak up, take responsibility for their work, collaborate across differences and persist through challenges. The staff models these expect-

tations alongside students, reinforcing that professionalism is not something students learn later but something they practice every day. As a result, students begin to view themselves not just as students completing assignments but as individuals preparing for their next steps.

2. Redefining Success

This shift in how students experience learning also requires a redefinition of success. Traditional measures of school performance often emphasize standardized test scores, graduation rates and report cards. While these indicators can provide useful information, they do not fully capture the purpose or impact of CTE. For high school students and adult learners, success is less about time spent in the classroom and more about whether education supports meaningful next steps.

Recognizing this, Butler Tech leaders deliberately chose to define success in terms of student outcomes beyond program completion. Industry credentials, college credit attainment, workforce placement, wages and continued education became central indicators of effectiveness. These measures provide clear evidence that learning translates into opportunity, allowing students to see how their efforts connect to careers, further education and long-term stability. This reflects an “and then” mentality, where each accomplishment opens the door to the next opportunity.

Redefining success in this way also changes how career and technical education is understood by those outside the classroom. When such outcomes become the primary indicators of effectiveness, the conversation shifts from whether students completed a program to what they are prepared to do next. Families, business partners and community leaders begin to see CTE not as an alternative pathway, but

as a direct route to opportunity.

Michael Eyler, a newly appointed administrator at Butler Tech, observed this shift immediately during his first interactions with students. Rather than describing assignments or grades, students spoke about their goals, the work they were doing, and how it connected to future opportunities. “It didn’t feel like I was talking to a high school student,” he said. “It felt like I was talking to someone already preparing for a career.”

These interactions reinforce a different image of career and technical education. When students articulate clear plans, demonstrate professional skills, and show readiness for both employment and continued education, outdated assumptions fade away. Perception changes not because messaging becomes more persuasive, but because the evidence becomes visible. Accordingly, redefining success is a powerful tool for reshaping how CTE is viewed across a community.

3. Elevating Student Voice

For the evidence to influence perception, it must be both visible and credible to all. One of the most effective ways Butler Tech accomplishes this is by placing students themselves at the center of public engagement. Students lead tours for legislators, business leaders, and visiting educators, explaining their work, demonstrating skills, and answering questions. High school students and adult learners alike represent the organization at the Ohio Statehouse, participate in policy discussions and engage with community members.

Their voices signal that CTE is professional development in progress.

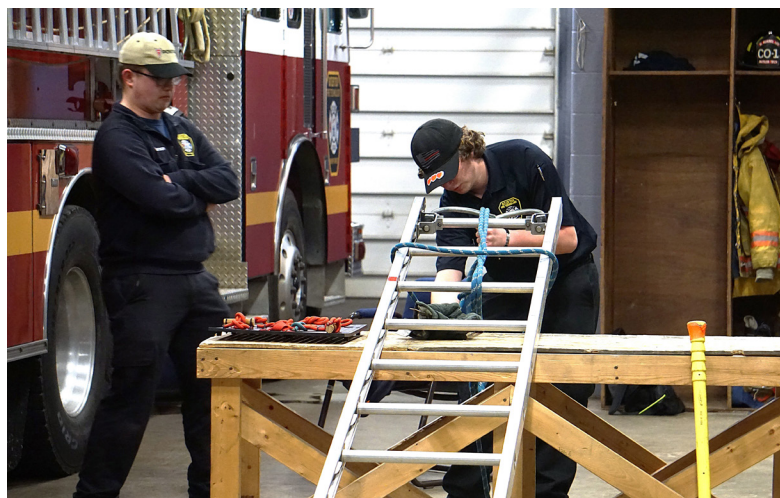
Student voice is cultivated intentionally. Butler Tech maintains a large student ambassador program composed of secondary students who represent the organization at events, panels, recruitment activities and community engagements. These ambassadors play an important role in welcoming prospective students and families, sharing their experiences, and helping others envision their own pathways. Rather than simply promoting programs, they speak candidly about challenges, growth and opportunities, making the experience tangible and trustworthy for those considering enrollment.

Beyond the ambassador program, opportunities to present and reflect on learning are embedded across all secondary programs. Students participate in multiple public showcases each year, presenting projects and sharing what they have learned with their families, the staff and local business partners. These events reinforce accountability, communication skills and professionalism while making student growth visible to the broader community.

Even small practices reinforce this emphasis on professional readiness. Activities such as an annual handshake challenge, where students practice introductions, eye contact, and a firm handshake, reflect a district commitment to employability skills that business partners consistently cite as distinguishing Butler Tech graduates. Students are expected not only to master technical competencies but also to represent themselves with confidence.

Whenever possible, Butler Tech also employs students as paid interns within the organization. This practice reinforces the expectation that students contribute meaningful work while gaining professional experience across areas like marketing, information technology and operations.

Collectively, these experiences create a culture in which students are not passive



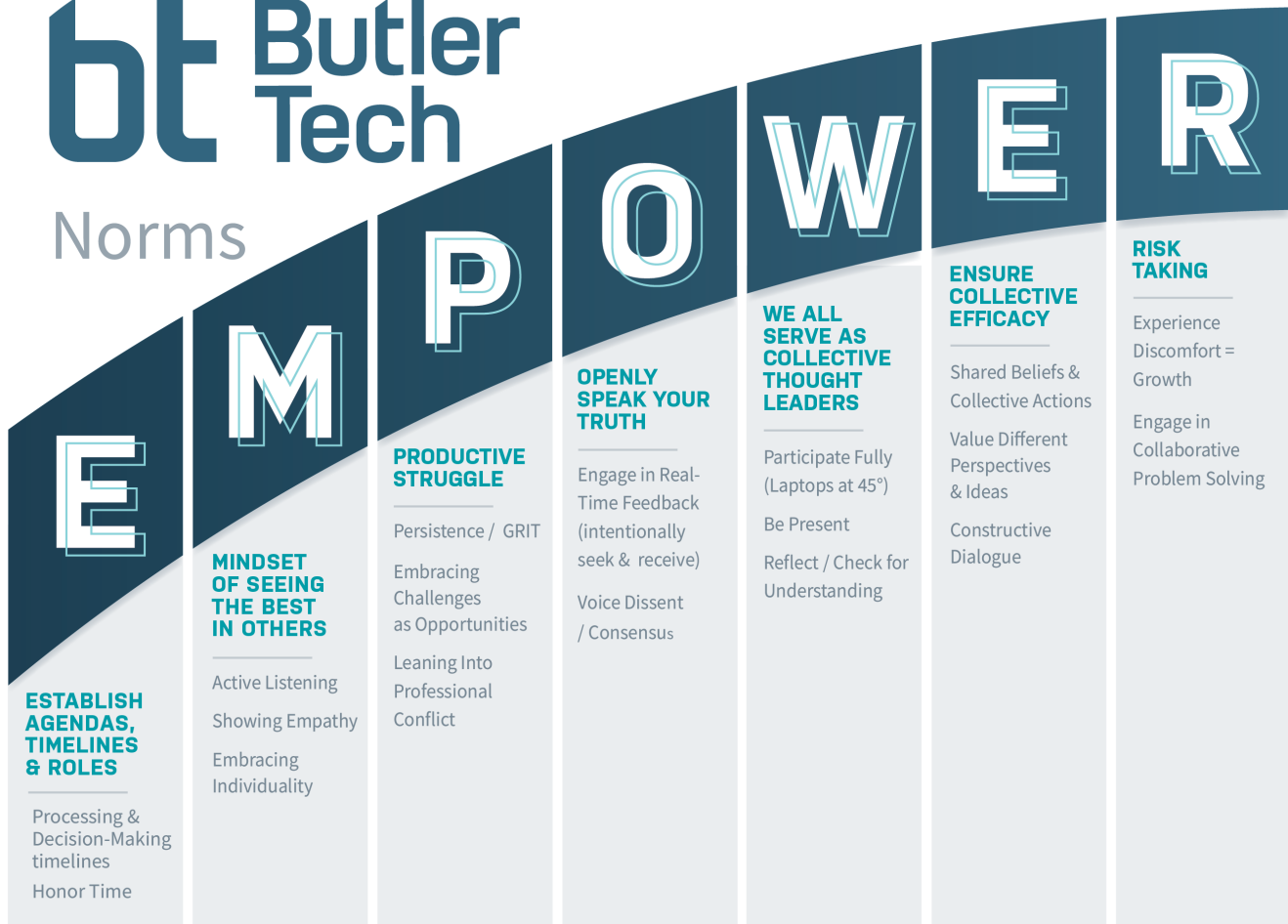
recipients of education but active representatives of its impact. And the narrative surrounding career and technical education shifts. The message becomes less about programs and more about people, less about possibilities and more about demonstrated outcomes.

4. Prioritizing Access and High Expectations

Trust, however, depends on whether the outcomes reflect opportunities available to all students rather than only a select few. To ensure broad access, admission to Butler Tech programs begins with a lottery system instead of selective criteria. Students who are credit eligible may apply, meaning grades, attendance and disciplinary history do not determine who has the opportunity to be selected.

Consequently, demand consistently exceeds available seats, and programs regularly reach capacity. Students arrive with diverse academic histories, experiences and support needs, yet expectations remain consistent across programs. Butler Tech meets students where they are through advising, academic support and individualized services when needed. At the same time, students are expected to meet professional standards by earning industry credentials and/or college credit,

Norms



completing authentic work and work-based learning activities, and participating fully in the learning environment.

Tony Huff, director of student services, emphasized that support and accountability go hand in hand. He explained: “When students are given access to real work and real expectations, they rise to the challenge.” This philosophy reflects a belief that expectations should expand rather than restrict opportunity. Support is designed to equip students to meet those standards.

For observers, this balance reinforces a powerful message. Career and technical education is not reserved for a narrow group of high achievers, nor does it dilute rigor to accommodate broader participation. Instead, it demonstrates that when systems are intentionally designed, a wide range

of students can succeed. This approach reshapes perception by demonstrating that access and excellence can coexist.

Conclusion

When these elements come together consistently, the impact extends beyond the classroom. Graduates emerge confident, capable and prepared for what comes next, and perception shifts naturally. Families see possibility. Business partners see talent. Communities see a pathway that strengthens both individual lives and the regional workforce.

Public perception does not change through messaging alone but through sustained alignment between purpose and practice. When decision-making is mission-driven, when access is paired with

high expectations, and when students are trusted to demonstrate what they can do, the narrative begins to change.

Reshaping perception requires building environments where success is visible, credible and sustainable. While each organization must adapt these strategies to suit their own context, the underlying principle is the same. When learners experience real opportunity and meaningful outcomes, trust follows. And students’ lives are transformed. ■

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