Look Beyond the Surface to give **Disadvantaged** Graduates a Better Future

Researched and written by Jeff Saperstein and Kevin Wheeler

# Perspective of Educator and Career Coach

The students filed into a classroom for a new semester. They are a group of young people mostly between the ages of 20 to 29, who appear to be one step removed from a gang, the street, or trouble. They are mostly transfer students from community colleges who work during the day and attend classes at San Francisco State University during the night. They are of mixed races and ethnicities, many coming from homes that might not have valued education. Some of them are the first in their families to attend college, while some did not have mentors or role models to nurture or cultivate them for success. Most of these students lack confidence having gone through a K-12 education system that did not prepare them properly for academic life. Many struggled in school. **The six-year graduation rate at all California State Universities is 61% and the four-year graduation rate was 25% in 2018.**[1] Each student who gets over the graduate finish line holds a big victory - both for them, and for us as educators.

Compound this reality with heavy credit card debts and student debts, most pernicious for low income borrowers who are likely to miss payments and default as compared to their wealthier classmates. **Overall, San Francisco Bay Area default rates were 9.6% in 2018, up from 3.8% in 2003.**[2]

According to a 2019 US #RealCollege survey, 45% of respondents were food insecure in the previous 30 days, 56% of respondents were housing insecure in the previous year, and 17% of respondents were homeless in the previous year. **They are hungry, and often live in shelters or worse.**[3]

An educator who teaches the subject areas of Writing, Critical Thinking, and Media Theory and Interviewing in Organizational Settings gets to see, listen, and know who these students are. The educator's role is not only to teach them the skills and resources to become proficient and competent communicators in the workplace, but also to help build their confidence to believe that they can achieve and strive for more. Educators help mid-to late career professionals to find work that matters by aiding them to discover a better fit and adding value in their occupation.

As a Career Transition Coach in private practice, coaches are trained specifically to help direct individuals toward a career change. The students open themselves to me about their career aspirations, attitudes, and life or work experiences.
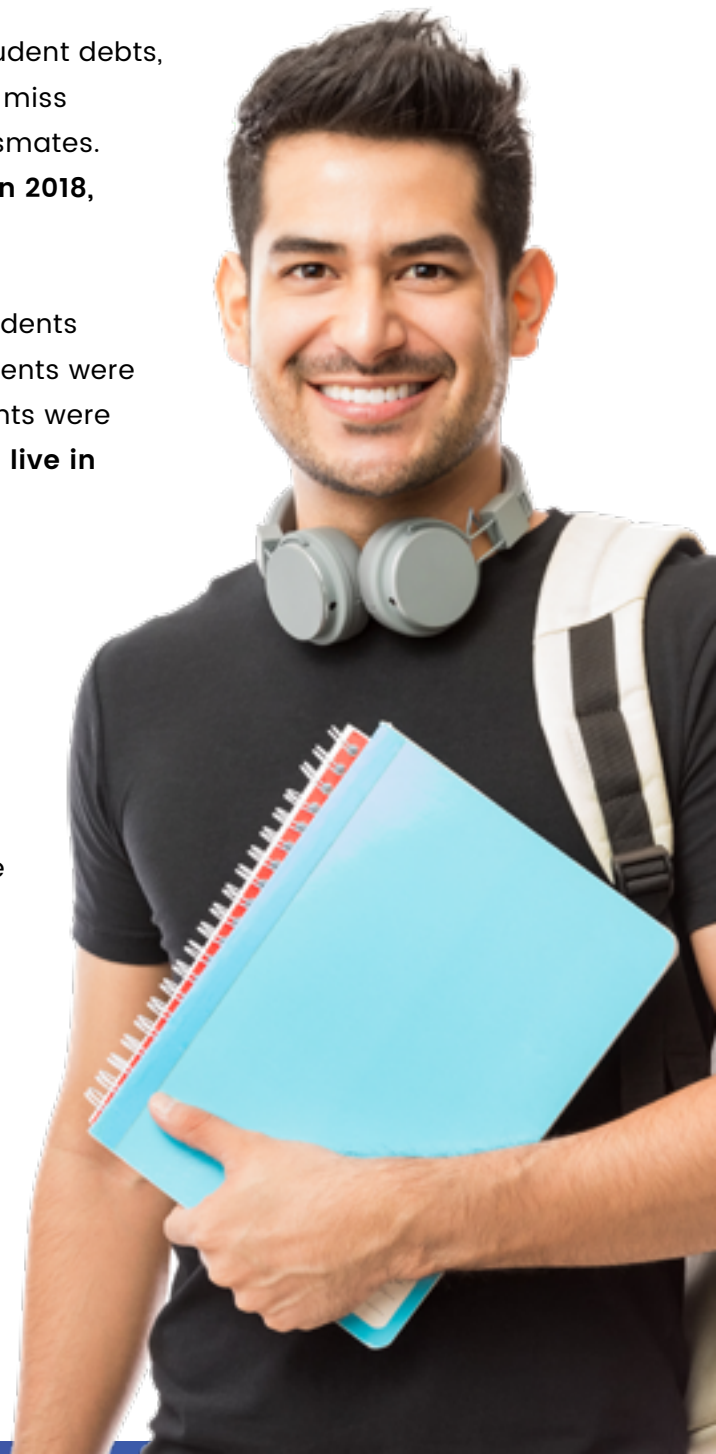
The intent to reach out to the recruiting community is to allow for candidates and others like them to be seen with a different set of eyes as well. Among the group are "diamonds in the rough" - individuals who can make great contributions to organizations, achieve success as employees, and also bring a different and much needed perspective, experience and attitude to the workplace. The imperative of diversity and inclusion is complex, and research suggests to consider not just the demographics but also the diversity of motivation, drive, and experience.

Since many of these students do not have the background or experience that match job specifications of hiring managers in organizations, they may be skipped over during the initial screening processes. They were not given the opportunity to learn Python engineering or career skill sets in their education. These people do not know the full range of career options, so they may not have prepared for an industry the way more affluent students have. Kevin Wheeler points out that Google's performance tracking research shows little difference between a prestigious university and a state university graduate.

The median annual salary for a recent graduate from **San Francisco State University** with five years' worth of post-graduation working experience is **$55,200.** Compare that to a **Stanford** bachelor's degree graduate, whose median five-year post graduation salary is **$76,500.**[4] Those earning less than $55,200 can't support a middle class lifestyle in the expensive San Francisco Bay Area. **The low income threshold in San Francisco for families with less than four is $59,000.**[5]

Part of the solution to overcome the widening employment gap among disadvantaged minorities and diversity candidates is to consider adding qualitative characteristics to the hiring process. This gives them a fighting chance to qualify in the applicant pool with their passion, motivation and self-learning abilities.

For more information on the reality of what life is like for some of these students, please check out Diontae Burden's LinkedIn profile and watch his brief video as he explains who he is, what he has experienced, and what his aspirations are.

Here are several real case examples (their names are changed for anonymity purposes), who illustrate these characteristics.

Joe is a children's swimming instructor. He aspires to create and direct a swimming program so children can gain confidence and have fun, all while becoming fit. He loves to see his students become happier and more self-confident. Joe is rambunctious, loud, and disorderly. You might not think that he could responsibly direct or manage any enterprise. But when you listen to him talk about what he does with kids and how much joy he gets to see them happy, you would definitely want to see him succeed.

Jane is an aspiring museum curator for historical artifacts. She wants to share her passion and knowledge with children and ignite imagination and interest in the world beyond their own neighborhood and family experiences. She grew up in an immigrant home and neighborhood that encouraged the appreciation of art and its resources. When she visited various museums during school field trips, her view of the world was transformed. Jane could imagine the history of each creator based on the artifacts she saw. She positively glows when she speaks about her love for anthropology, art, history and how much she would like to share that love by teaching children. However, Jane has never had a job so she lacks the experience to even be considered for an entry level position at a museum in the San Francisco Bay Area.

John is a fitness coach. He explained that as a first generation Mexican-American immigrant, he would do a lot of menial jobs. Despite that, his goals are clear now when he trains clients for fitness. He is eager to help them achieve what they are most capable of doing to lead a healthy and happy life. He aspires to become a broadcast journalist so he can be a voice for the voiceless. John took the College Writing course and is now completing the Interviewing course. Speaking and writing with meandering and rambling thoughts, he was barely articulate. By sheer will and determination, John transformed his speaking and writing to be concise, coherent, and clear. He was the most improved student, receiving the only A in the Writing course. While still in school, he worked on a mini documentary to tell the story of the San Francisco State Rebound Program, which teaches San Quentin inmates communications skills to be gainfully employed when released from prison. His passion to speak for the voiceless can now begin through this project, which can also get him on his path to achieve his aspirations. He is transitioning from the soul-crushing work he started life with, to the soul-enhancing work that he now has the greatest passion, motivation, and capability to self-learn. But this potential can only be seen if organizations provide an opportunity to open doors.

Alice owns and operates a food truck and she wants to open a restaurant. However, tragedy in her life lowered her chances. Her husband abandoned her, and she was forced to raise her three-year-old child while working at the food truck and also going to school. She is an emotionally disabled student who has special needs to fulfill her assignments. Alice had to overcome her panic attacks, and sometimes having individual sessions would be the best way to keep her focused when completing an assignment. She believes that no one takes her seriously because she is a woman, an immigrant, and shy. Teachers can only do so much. Alice needs a female entrepreneur mentor to help her. Most students who are like Alice are invisible or disregarded by the conventional business community.

These individuals are being passed over and not even being considered by recruiters for open roles because they do not "fit" or have the required experience or specifications. There is a built-in bias for pedigree and cultural fit that eliminates these people from consideration before they get an opportunity to meet a hiring manager.

Each of these students have passion and motivation kindled by his or her own aspiration to work toward improving lives and livelihood. Hiring managers may not have job specifications or openings that match exactly what these individuals say they want, but you can recognize their aspirations and see how their contributions to a team would be valuable. The skills and experience they can gain while in a professional organization can be mutually beneficial to the employer and student. **They have the hunger and desire to make their work meaningful. They have overcome obstacles to become college graduates with a strong sense of purpose.**

It is important to distinguish between disruptors, who come with an agenda to challenge your organization to fit their view of justice, and enhancers who want to work with a team and learn organizational culture to improve collaboration toward a common goal. Passion, motivation, and ability to self-learn are distinguishing characteristics which can be applied in the search to find these people.

This next section provides guidance on how you can apply methods to find these "diamonds in the rough" and cultivate them to be productive workers for different clients.

From Recruiting Leadership Perspective

These stories portray just a few of the thousands of ambitious, smart, and unfortunately underemployed young people who are seeking opportunities.

The nation is at full employment and there is still a big need for talent who can contribute to the country's prosperity and growth. A recent survey by Statista shows that there is less than one person available for every job listed as available in the US.[6]

Labor Is in High Demand in the U.S.
Number of unemployed persons per job opening, seasonally adjusted

Yet society continues to exclude people who lack specific skills or who do not have relevant job experience due, in part, because they do not have the time or resources to train them. Perhaps a more significant reason for this is our bias toward the status quo. Hiring managers are most comfortable hiring people who fit a specific profile and position.

Bias, unintentional and even unconscious as it may be, runs rampant in recruiting. Hiring managers and senior leaders have stereotypes about what makes a good candidate. They have beliefs about cultural background, education levels, schools people attended, grades achieved, and activities participated in. They may favor people from one organization over another. Recruiters, too, tend to weed out candidates that do not fit their own biases.

There is little quantitative evidence to support most of these stereotypes. Google has done extensive analysis of its past recruitment criteria, including grade point averages, schools attended, and years of experience, and compared that criteria to success on the job, job tenure, and productivity.

They have found little to no correlation between these two sets of data, and have changed their criteria to be more inclusive. There is also data showing that women and minorities are underrepresented in almost all workplaces, most especially in the tech world.

Google recently released a report on its minority employees. Only 2.8% of its technical employees are black and 5.3% are Hispanic. Yet Asians make up 51.8% of the company's tech workers. 74.3 percent of Google's tech workers internationally are male with a 74.1% in leadership. Across all jobs, the number is 66.8%.[7] And this is mirrored throughout the tech world. Google and other firms have discovered that their most productive employees are those that have a mission, passion, and a willingness to learn. These are the employees who will go the extra mile, contribute to teams, and strive to be on top of every problem.

The students portrayed above possess all these attributes and yet are excluded because they lack traditional qualifications.

Most have backgrounds that are atypical – many overcoming significant ethical, social or economic challenges in order to better themselves. They have not had relevant job experience and are just finishing a degree in liberal arts which, particularly in Silicon Valley, makes them even less desirable compared to other candidates.[8]

The future is uncertain and no one can know what skills recruiters will be seeking the most for down the road. People who have a broad array of skills and knowledge – the ability to think critically and apply scientific, historical, ethical and social perspectives to their decisions - are more likely to adapt to whatever needs arise and learn new skills quickly. This is the realm of a well-designed liberal arts education.

The new generation of workers need a broader base of skills and knowledge than any previous generation. While science and math are important, they are just pieces of a greater whole that includes the ability to communicate effectively, work in teams, influence others, and think critically.

The New Economy - From Hardware to Software

What has been happening is a transformation of the workplace. It is shifting from a world where the glory was in hardware - making, building, and inventing machines and tools - to one of design, software and service.

Most firms in the United States and Europe do not make anything directly. They are innovators and design centers, neither of which need or use large numbers of engineers, scientists, or technologists. Apple Inc. prints on the back of every iPhone "Designed by Apple in California. Assembled in China."

Apple Inc. and other firms depend on a rather electric group of talent – people who make up a large portion of what Richard Florida named the Creative Class. These are writers, designers, artists, anthropologists, software programmers, and the like. Silicon Valley is full of these folks. INextNow is a global network with a few hundred people who are mostly what would be called bohemians. One invented Hypertext, also known as the term, e-learning. Some do research, some write books or make movies, some have a technical background, but it's not how they earn a living.

Many of these people do not have a college education and self taught themselves or they apprenticed with a master or studied something very different from what they actually do.

The New Worker

Robots will take over most of the manufacturing and engineering work.[9] Automation has supplemented engineers, reducing the need for them and driving efficiency. Automation is now entering the hospital, surgery, and has contributed to the advent of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) that allow education to be distributed from one professor to thousands. Even architects can work essentially alone these days. Frank Lloyd Wright had scores of draftsmen drawing plans, and clerks and technicians reproducing blueprints as well as apprentices.[10] Today with the advent of CAD technology, the number of draftsmen is declining and those remaining are more computer technicians than drafters. Similar reductions have occurred in almost every field from manufacturing and civil engineering to the semiconductor industry.[11][12]

Chart 3: Long Robots. Short Humans

Global Industrial Robots (RHS) — 2015-2018 estimates — US Maunfacturing Jobs (LHS)

Source: BofA Merril Lynch Global Investment Strategy. IFR Statistical Department

BUSINESS INSIDER

Summary

Attitudes toward recruiting people with varied and non-traditional backgrounds need to change. Recruiters and hiring managers need to shift their thinking to benefit people with diverse experiences so that they can enhance the perspectives of organizations. Having a specific skill or expertise may be important, but having people who can think differently while working hard, overcoming adversity and challenging assumptions can bring more value into the workplace. New ideas and innovation almost always come from those who are outside a particular field.

The successful skills of the 21st century will be those of critical thinking, collaboration, and communication combined with a fiery passion and thirst to learn.

Organizations would be wise to create positions for these nontraditional graduates. Recruiters and hiring managers would be even wiser to hire them. These graduates have the potential to bring to the table everything an organization would want, while quickly learning and implementing the skills that will learn during their employment.

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Kevin Wheeler is a futurist, public speaker, entrepreneur, and consultant to many Fortune 500 companies, as well as an author. He is a noted speaker and writer on the future of human resources, recruitment, and learning.

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Jeff has worked as a corporate executive, marketing consultant, university instructor, speaker, and is the author of nine books and five business case studies related to how technology opens opportunity in the future of careers and organizations.

About Hiretual Council

Hiretual Council's vision is for talent acquisition to be intelligence driven for the next generation. Hiretual Council members will educate and foster a recruiting community that is passionate about knowledge and intelligence driven talent acquisition, technologies, and products in a world that is increasingly augmented and automated.If you like what you read and want to be part of the journey by becoming an author and a member of the Hiretual Council, be a person who is:

- Proud to be a recruiter, sourcer, leader, analyst or operations in talent acquisition
- Ready to give back to the community by sharing knowledge and lessons learned
- Insatiably curious or have deep understanding about topics in talent acquisition
- Passionate about writing well-researched white papers, uncovering insights from work and data, sharing actionable items for positive change

Our mutual goals:

- Council members can pick a topic that they are passionate about & want to dive deeper into, or join in on a topic that is currently being researched
- The overall theme is "Transforming Talent Acquisition from Data Driven to Intelligence Driven". We want to focus on moving away from having a massive amount of data to applying knowledge and intelligence in the process of making better decisions
- Write well-researched white papers worth reading and sharing as we have a platform to share your work with thousands of recruiters and leaders globally

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