

ELC National Essay Competition

Triston Francis
University of Pennsylvania
The Wharton School, Class of 2012

Creating a Corporate Family: The Road to Developing our Talent Pool of the Future

“Discuss how corporations should be working with academic institutions and school districts to help ensure that this talent pool of the future is continuing to be developed? What are the potential positives and pitfalls of such support and identify the potential ramifications of inaction?”

Even as a child, I sensed that the amount of support I received would translate into how successful I became. Indeed, the absence of caring peers and mentors demonstrated to me how crucial support is to educating youth. I became a lost child in a large city. Growing up in Jamaica Queens, I had no choice but to attend an inner-city public school with more than 30 students to a class. My first educational experiences entailed listening to teachers who didn't care enough to even learn my name. I knew something was wrong. Frustration with teachers and my indifference toward education overtook me. These feelings translated into poor academic performance. In both third and fourth grade, I was in danger of failing to advance. If I wanted to make something of my life, I had to escape my unsupportive academic environment. At age 11, I transferred to a boarding school in Massachusetts. Upon arriving, I was stunned to encounter supportive teachers and peers who helped transform me from a struggling child to a student who is now excelling at a top-notch university. After establishing a personal connection, my peers and teachers showed they cared about my future. This support reenergized my life. Far too many students; however, do not receive the attention they need. By collaborating with educational institutions, corporations have an opportunity to extend care to all students. By offering meaningful support to youth throughout their education, corporations could ensure that the future's talent pool has the knowledge and skills to meet future needs and help create a smooth transition to the corporate world.

Being more proactive will allow corporations to strengthen their connection with students while demonstrating their commitment to academic institutions. Students may repay such efforts through loyalty to the corporate brand from the students whose lives have been touched directly. For example,

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Nestlé actively markets opportunities in the firm by hosting the annual Diversity Leadership Symposium. This event brings together diverse student group leaders at Nestlé's corporate headquarters in Glendale, California. As one of 30 fortunate students to attend this event, I appreciated Nestlé's efforts to supplement the leadership opportunities I have had in college. The exposure I received will be helpful as I transition to the corporate world. Such programs add immense value to Nestlé as well. By connecting with campus leaders, Nestlé has collected a vocal group of leaders that will further enhance their reputation through word of mouth.

To provide the best possible support for youth, however, corporations need to reach further back in the education chain to elementary schools. They need to reach students before they fall behind or become disillusioned. Research shows that academic performance as early as fourth grade correlates with life outcomes:

Tests as early as fourth grade are powerful predictors of future achievement. For example, 87 percent of fourth grade students scoring in the bottom quartile on New York City math achievement tests remained in the bottom half in eighth grade. Students who scored in the top quartile in math in eighth grade had a 40 percent higher median income 12 years later than students who scored in the bottom quartile.¹

Elementary school provides the crucial foundation in a child's educational and personal development. Corporations must balance a supporting presence without dominating the process or impressing young minds with marketing messages rather than general knowledge. While lending their support, businesses must avoid pigeonholing students into pre-professional trajectories. This balancing act requires corporations to engage with youth creatively to provide the support they need.

Another downside of corporations providing meaningful support is the initial investment it requires. First, this support consumes precious human capital hours. Sending representatives to events is costly because employees could alternatively be focusing on activities that drive revenue. This is especially true when a corporation decides to send senior-level executives to support youth. Another

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factor that might impede corporate support is a lack of immediate, measureable impact and an inability to calculate their return on investment. This might erode corporate support because companies rely on metrics to demonstrate their success to stakeholders. Consequently, companies risk adding expenses without immediate returns. For publicly traded companies, these initiatives could potentially reflect poorly on management in shareholders' eyes. Support for elementary education, therefore, would put a company at risk in the short term for the benefit of long-term talent development programs. Despite these detractors, corporations that address social issues do change lives.

The achievement gap in the United States manifests itself in several ways:

1. Between the United States and other nations
2. Between black and Latino students and white students
3. Between students of different income levels
4. Between similar students schooled in different systems or regions¹

Clearly, the achievement gap is not breaking news. The United States, however, has ignored the economic implications of this problem. As a nation, we must increase awareness of our nation's ever-growing gap. One excellent example is McKinsey & Company's *Economic Impact of the Achievement Gap in America's Schools*. Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education, highlighted how this report provided an excellent picture of our educational crisis. The report highlights that human potential is underdeveloped to the detriment of advancing our society.

Such examples of the progressive visibility of economic impacts have increased the demand for business people within education. Corporations should use the existing infrastructure to gain a footing within academic institutions and school districts. For example, corporations could actively participate in the Broad Superintendents Academy, a program described as follows: "...a 10-month executive management training program run by The Broad Center to prepare prominent leaders from education, military, business, nonprofit and government sectors to lead urban public school systems."² By participating in such initiatives, corporations develop a network of future superintendants. This initiative

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gives corporations the opportunity to leverage developed relationships in years to come. Supporting leaders who have already committed themselves to education is one way to support youth throughout their education. Another tangible way to support future educational leaders is to support superintendents financially. This can be done by sponsoring academic institutions to create tuition-free doctoral programs within educational leadership. For example, in September 2009, “the Harvard Graduate School of Education announced a tuition-free, three-year doctoral program in education leadership, the first new degree at the school in 74 years”³. The program is wildly successful: 1,363 people had started the application process for 25 spots. With astronomical demand for such programs, they should strive to provide opportunities for more than just 2% of applicants. With corporate subsidies, such programs and universities such as Harvard could accommodate additional students into tuition-free programs.

Although it is crucial to develop leadership within education, it is equally important that corporations provide direct support to children by engaging students in creative ways. To excite children about education effectively, corporations should help foster a 24/7 pro-learning environment. By developing entertaining ways to connect with students, corporations can encourage students to commit themselves to developing skills that will eventually allow them to thrive in a corporate setting. One highly effective way to engage today’s students is by using technology to develop a learning forum that is easily accessible to students. For example, if a corporation funded a web site featuring entertaining games with an educational undertone, they would be supporting students while allowing them to enjoy the learning process. Furthermore, this adds value to the corporation because they are associated with a subject that excites students. Because corporations cannot always be available to be in the classroom, they should create a proxy that allows them to have an impact, even in their physical absence.

With the goal of continuous support in mind, corporations should capitalize on realms that have already captured youth’s attention. In the current generation, children spend a large portion of their time

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watching television. Consequently, corporations can use the broadcasting and media industry to increase their impact by advocating for more programming that promotes education. This does not have to be a financial burden for the corporation because it is possible to develop shows with both entertainment and education value. For example, Bill Cosby's "Fat Albert" television show was widely successful, and each show promoted education. Each episode started with the theme song:

This is Bill Cosby comin' at you with music and fun,
and if you're not careful you may learn something before it's done.
So let's get ready, OK? Hey, hey, hey!

As a huge success, the "Fat Albert" series enjoyed one of the longest runs in the history of Saturday morning cartoons. This success story should challenge businesses to develop creative ways of reinforcing the importance of education in venues beyond the classroom.

Further, creative approaches could provide corporations with an excellent opportunity to excite students about a career in their particular industry. Another alternative would be to develop games that support learning. Technology could be a low-cost substitute to gaining the attention of students. If corporations are able to keep students excited about learning, they could effectively decrease the dropout rate in the United States which "contributes about \$60,000 less in federal and state income taxes. Each cohort of dropouts costs the U.S. \$192 billion in lost income and taxes.⁴ Increasing the high school completion rate by just one percent for all men ages 20 to 60 would save the U.S. up to \$1.4 billion per year in reduced costs from crime.⁵" In addition to the economic benefits of engaging students in education, corporations have an opportunity to strengthen the education system by marketing the importance of learning outside of the classroom. With increased attention on academics in all areas of their lives, students have an opportunity to strengthen their strategic thinking and problem solving skills, thus preparing them for the corporate world.

Once corporations have captured students' attention, they can use this as an opportunity to work alongside academic intuitions to develop after-school programs. Businesses could sponsor student groups,

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which could then help define the type and amount of support they would like to provide. For example, innovative companies could sponsor business plan competitions that provide students with specific project goals. This would keep students productively busy while allowing companies to lend support. Such programs allow corporations to add a real life perspective to the schools' existing curricula. Similarly, corporations that need people with backgrounds in math or science could create specific programs to build a pipeline that would ultimately increase applicants with these skills. As part of these programs, corporations could assign representatives to various schools or events to serve as role models and convince students why their field of work is fulfilling.

Corporations should provide students with unified support. To do so, they need to begin by opening lines of communication with key figures. With talent development in mind, corporations should actively reach out to school district superintendents. Superintendents make decisions that directly influence hundreds of thousands of students. Out of respect for their future talent pool, corporations should get to know those who influence these individuals. If corporations have a strong understanding of what students are learning in the classroom, they can pinpoint areas that need to be developed once those students enter the corporate world. Companies cannot attain this knowledge on a broad scale through relationships with individual students; however, they can acquire this information by leveraging relationships with superintendents. Corporations should be direct with superintendents and develop a plan that outlines the value they have to offer in addition to what they want in return. Ideally, those in education should welcome support from the business realm. By fostering these relationships early, they can obtain a tremendous amount of insight on the intricacies of their future talent.

Corporations could establish connections within school districts through fostering close ties with superintendents. Corporations would then be able to fine-tune their talent development efforts by collaborating with academic institutions. Corporations' connections to superintendants will provide

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insight into the unique needs of various schools. This will enable corporations to develop programs and send representatives to schools that can address areas that the schools are not currently offering.

Companies could use a creative approach to deliver important corporate lessons while exciting students about the prospect of learning. Once they have the students' attention, corporate representatives will truly be able to support any given student with individual talent development exercises that compliment what they are learning in the classroom. Another method would be to host students on business visits that would allow youth to shadow professionals for a day in the office. This would provide them with a taste of real work experience. The minimal amount of productivity the professional would lose when hosting a student and explaining his or her routine activities would eventually be recouped with a stronger workforce. Such early exposure would be invaluable to motivating the students. Regardless of the activity, exposure at a young age will ensure that students thoroughly develop skills that will help them thrive in a professional setting. This access would allow of corporations to work side-by-side with academic institutions, on select days, to plan the lessons for a given day. This would provide students with an edge that would strengthen their ability to contribute to society once they become part of the workforce.

The sequence outlined above would connect corporations, school districts, academic institutions, and students. The key is for the corporations to establish a consistent presence. The onus should be on the corporations because they are the single entity that can opt to refrain from participating in youth education. Their involvement is not only needed, therefore, but inspirational. Students need as much support as possible. While school districts and academic institutions are designed to provide such support, with corporations participating as an additional outlet, students will be better prepared to enter and thrive in the professional world. Although I believe corporations should catalyze this movement, the initiative needs champions from all involved groups.

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With no shortage of initiatives, corporations should outline a plan of action detailing how they intend to strengthen education to ensure future talent is being developed. Moving forward, I encourage corporations to keep the following things in mind:

- 1) Be proactive
- 2) Creatively engage students
- 3) Provide personalized support
- 4) Create effective partnerships

With these tenets in mind, corporations will establish an effective connection with students that will allow them to build those relationships further. In my early academic days, I struggled. I needed support and was fortunate that a private boarding school in Massachusetts answered my call. I am able to see the drastic impact this opportunity has had on my life; yet, I am also conscious that many face the same situation that will never catch their break. Corporations have the ability to alleviate some of this achievement gap. If corporations are able to make students feel as though they are a part of an extended family, they will have the opportunity to understand their students, and thus have the chance to ensure that a future talent pool is being developed. Although the education crisis is a daunting task, it is a problem that can be solved. Corporations should collaborate with academic institutions and school districts to affect change. Making the effort would demonstrate that corporations intend to support students. This support would allow our youth reach their full potential and become better prepared to excel in the corporate world.

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