

DOL/Job Corps '04

Alpha Leadership Conference



Grace Kilbane

Remarks at the 2004 Alpha Conference

July 28, 2004

Thank you for the kind introduction and warm welcome! This is quite an event, and I want to extend my compliments to everyone who has made this annual conference possible. I am excited to be here. Job Corps is such an important program, and judging by the electricity in the air here today, I can see how it got that way.

It is only natural that you should want to know a little more about who I am. I'd like to take a few minutes today to take you on a short biographical and career travelogue.

Let's start at my first job. After graduating from my all-girls Catholic High School, I went to work for the telephone company as a draftswoman in the engineering department. I did not stay at the telephone company too long-- and that was a good thing. After I left to pursue a bachelor's degree, I learned computers are now doing my old job.

You may find it interesting that I first heard of Job Corps while I was at my first job. I was on our softball team. We were called the "Hardhats" in the Cleveland city league, and one evening we played a team called the "Jobettes" from the local Job Corps center. I think I remember this so well because they killed us that night! Today, many years later, I cannot tell you what a pleasure it is to be part of the winning Job Corps team.

After college, I went to work in the criminal justice system in a federally funded program to help crime victims. In this program, we worked to connect families with community services, although I must admit to you we did not take advantage of those offered by Job Corps. I became the director of that program after a year, and I have directed public programs ever since.

In 1983, I moved to Columbus to take the job of Deputy Administrator of the Ohio Bureau of Employment Services. This is how I got started in the employment and training business. Although we knew Job Corps was "out there" in the state, we had no interaction with the program nor thought we should.

After almost six years at the state agency, I left Ohio to take a job as Regional Administrator for ETA and moved to Kansas City. It was there I learned what Job Corps was, and the regional director at the time made sure I visited several centers. We also collaborated on the annual Heartland Conference.

I left Kansas City for Washington in 1993 to head up the new One-Stop initiative. Since that time, I have had the privilege of serving as administrator of almost every major program in ETA.

I'll let you in on a little secret... I think the two best administrator jobs are here at Job Corps, and at Unemployment Insurance. That's because these two programs have a number of things in common: super staff, dedicated external support systems, good data, and clear purposes.

Like so many of my generation, it was President Kennedy's call to "do for your country" that brought me to public service. I have always been motivated to make a difference, just like all of you here today.

Moreover, I am very pleased that we are going to be making a difference together. In light of the fact that I struck out against the Jobettes, now I am pleased to be on the winning side. But even the best teams must tackle challenges to become better. Because we exist to train young people for the current and future marketplace, our program is known as "demand-driven."

I know you have heard Assistant Secretary DeRocco talk about demand-driven programs many times over the past few years. Put simply, this means training our students to meet the demands businesses have for employees - especially in high-growth occupations or new and emerging areas.

I think we would all agree that neither our students nor our program would be well-served if we were training students for my old job at the telephone company. We must anticipate trends and provide training for the occupations that will last and grow in the years ahead.

The best way to anticipate these trends is by having a close relationship with employers. I am pleased to see that the National Job Corps Association, the national employer partnership program, and individual contractors are conducting high-level and frequent dialogues with employers. These linkages put Job Corps way ahead of other programs.

In addition to dialogue with employers, there is a host of tools at our disposal that help us keep Job Corps an innovative program. Tools like local labor market information that enables a student to map out an effective and relevant career path. ETA is putting into place a new labor market strategy, and I will be working with the national and regional staffs to make sure we are connected.

We will also be continuing to make sure our academic programs are up-to-snuff. We know that 80 percent of jobs will require some post-secondary education or training. Working together, I want to ensure our graduating students have clear pathways to these opportunities. We should continue to look outside the box at things like e-learning and distance learning to see if we can increase their use in our program.

I understand there have been efforts across the regions to have vocational programs certified or recertified. I applaud those initiatives. We will be looking at the Department's high-growth job training initiative and how we integrate our own efforts with the training offered on centers. We will also be investigating how to ensure high-tech training equipment on centers is up-to-date and in line with industry needs.

Looking ahead, I see some very real opportunities for Job Corps to fill a critical role in preparing our citizens for employment. We all are aware that there are experts who predict we will not have enough workers with needed skills to fill all the jobs in the U.S. in the near future.

When I look at the demographic data for the young people we serve, I see an opportunity. Consider this: the number of 16- to 24-year-olds is projected to increase by more than 12 percent. Most of that growth will be concentrated in large urban areas.

Right now, upwards of 50 percent of urban youth in our age group are dropping out of school, and have neither the education nor the training to prepare them for the workforce.

I can see some surprised looks with that last statistic, but I see our program as one that can offer some very real solutions to these challenges. Job Corps now serves less than 2 percent of our demographic. If the numbers hold true, there may very well be an opportunity for this program to step up and serve an even greater number in the coming years.

These are big issues, but I am looking forward to working with you on the day-to-day operational chores as well. I want to continue to make improvements in our overall performance and efficiency. I am looking forward to seeing firsthand the creativity and innovation that have been the hallmark of Job Corps. I am excited at the prospect of working together with all of you.

Last week I had the opportunity to see Tom Peters, the famous management guru. During his presentation, he stated several times that what we do in developing talent is the “most important job needed now for our economy,” and he went on to say, “don’t screw it up!”

To support his challenge, he shared several slides, a few of which I would like to share with you.

- SLIDE 11: *“Knowledge becomes obsolete incredibly fast. The continuing professional education of adults is the No. 1 industry in the next 30 years ... mostly on line.”* –Peter Drucker, *Business 2.0* (22August2000)
- SLIDE 12: *“When land was the scarce resource, nations battled over it. The same is happening now for talented people.”* –Stan Davis & Christopher Meyer, *futureWEALTH*
- SLIDE 13: *“The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.”* –Michelangelo

I hope you agree with me that this is exciting stuff. We get to set the direction for this key program in the new economy, and there is a lot riding on our success.

Within the next few months, I’ll be on a bit of a “road show.” I plan to visit every region and several centers as a part of my effort to learn, listen, and encourage staff, students, and employer partners.

We can’t forget that during this special year, we celebrate the 40th anniversary of Job Corps and acknowledge the important work that has been accomplished in training 2 million young people who have gone on to make important contributions to society—That’s quite an achievement!

I am confident that, together, our next 40 years will see the same kinds of successes – that our program will be the benchmark against which all others are measured. And, most importantly—we will continue to bring success to our young people, one career at a time.

Again, I thank you for the kind and warm welcome - the notes, e-mails and phone calls.

A short congratulations note that I received from a regional ETA colleague simply read *“Nicely done. Now you’re at the head of a very popular parade instead of trying to convince people that having a parade would be good”*

To me, this shows the high regard that Job Corps is held in by the system insiders. I am glad I’m now part of the parade!