

FOREWORD

– GARRETT MORAN –

Today in America we have a full employment economy in which our employers are increasingly confounded by a scarcity of candidates adequately prepared for employment. At the same time, we know there are millions of ambitious young adults who struggle unsuccessfully to get the preparation needed to capture these opportunities. And this “opportunity divide” seems to keep getting worse each year.

Is there something our employers and educators are missing? Are young adults failing to seize sensible choices that would solve a lot of this problem? What should we expect from our employers, educators, and young adults in partnering to close this gap? How should we go about diagnosing this affliction and prescribing a cure? Approaching it from the supply side (young adults as career aspirants) and the demand side (employers who want to recruit talent and grow their businesses), we should ask three questions:

- What do the aspirants and the employers see when they approach the labor market from their respective sides of the field?
- What do they want or expect from the market? In the case of job aspirants, the “market” includes educators and trainers who help provide access to employers.
- And, finally, what do we know about what works, especially proven approaches that can readily be applied more broadly?

The demand side complaints are familiar: that the candidate pool of young adults is technically unprepared for work, and that their feeder colleges are

failing to keep up with an evolving market and have been unsuccessful in forging effective business partnerships that are dynamic and durable. An even larger issue for most companies seeking young employees, however, is the social-emotional gap. This is most often described as a fundamental disconnect about what is expected in the employer-employee relationship. This includes simple things like punctuality and respectful workplace behavior and extends to having realistic expectations for personal advancement and being an effective project team member.

But as Nancy Hoffman and Michael Lawrence Collins's new volume argues, the answer on the supply side isn't just to get better and more up-to-date technical training, take part in a workshop about teamwork and collaboration, and complete your degree. Their book steps back to ask: What should college faculty know and help students understand about the world of work? The book synthesizes research in the sociology and psychology of work for an audience focused on promoting economic mobility of the many low-income students who see community colleges as a lifeline and who sacrifice so much to stay enrolled.

As a number of chapters suggest, students who have few professional connections and whose only work history consists of hourly-wage jobs will certainly need postsecondary education, but that won't be enough to launch a career. This volume proposes that community college faculty and students make the world of work a subject of study. Colleges should help students answer the big questions, such as: What satisfactions do people get from work beyond adequate compensation? What makes an employer a good employer? When is a job just a job and when is it a career? And what are soft skills and who defines them? If everyone knows it's good to network, how does one make valuable contacts and begin building useful relationships? The book also argues that the best way to learn about the workplace is through "real time" workplace experiences—if not paid internships, then job shadows, structured visits, and opportunities to interact with business leaders.

Everyone has a role to play in helping our young adults prepare for work, but educators have a central role in linking their students to careers. I know about the value of comprehensive preparation for the work world from my five years' experience as president of Year Up. Year Up serves low-income eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old high school graduates who are not sustainably

in work or school. It's a high-expectations, high-support twelve-month program divided between six months of training in hard skills and soft/professional skills followed by a six-month paid internship with one of our corporate partners. We seek out ambitious young adults whom we believe can succeed in our program and in the white-collar jobs that follow. They have typically graduated from weak high schools and have undistinguished high school GPAs, but they have demonstrated that they have the brains, talent, and drive to thrive in jobs that are frequently reserved for four-year college graduates.

For our students, Year Up is transformative. Eighty percent of our graduates are in jobs earning an average of \$40,000 per year within months of completing the program. We have over twenty thousand total graduates today and a growing roster of corporate partners who will offer our students over four thousand internships this year. Our success strongly supports the arguments made in this volume about the nature of the labor market today, the workforce of tomorrow, and the special steps that can be taken to prepare talented young adults.

In the simplest terms, we have a program that offers a big dose of what community colleges may aspire to but can't afford to provide—individual attention and support, including career training and guidance, academic counseling, and personal help that might otherwise be offered by a social worker or a parent with a mainstream career. A key to our program is effectively building in students that sense of excitement and confidence in a career path that is within their reach if they work hard and make important sacrifices.

Year Up, of course, is not the only program that provides the powerful mix of professional skills training, technical education, and internships. There are additional standalone programs as well as a good number associated with community colleges—often called “Learn and Earn” programs. But even with twenty thousand graduates over nineteen years of operation, Year Up and other programs are small and often have high per-student costs. Community colleges are, in effect, our nation's comprehensive workforce development system; they educate nearly nine million students a year, including the majority of low-income students and students of color. The challenge is bringing approaches like Year Up's to scale in these important institutions.

Young adults entering community colleges are presented with an overwhelming array of academic options with limited academic guidance or

career planning to help them make good choices. This is no wonder because, as college budgets have been squeezed over recent decades, guidance resources have been crushed. Students also see low degree completion rates and may find out that the sacrifices required for degree completion do not yield a career payoff. At the same time, the world of work is rapidly evolving. Matching up academic degrees, industry certifications, and real job opportunities has become a bewildering challenge. And getting access to interviews and jobs without serious help too often seems like an impossible hurdle. Students want to understand potential career pathways and the training required. They need the information, support, and experience to navigate the choices and tradeoffs that present a big challenge even for a well-resourced, well-supported young adult.

Beyond choosing among technical programs, students want to fully understand the real world of potential career pathways. They can get exposure to these pathways through work-based learning, meetings with industry leaders, and coaching on the nuances of a career progression and the ups and downs of life in the foreign world that is the modern workplace. They want to know how to “walk the walk” because they understand that it is a competitive advantage, builds confidence, and will help them fit effectively into the workplace.

Ideally much of this learning would come in the form of one-on-one support, but failing the resources for that kind of investment, community colleges can integrate into courses the topics that prepare students for work, as well as encourage faculty to incorporate out-of-classroom experiences that introduce students to a variety of workplaces and professions. While developing paid internships at scale is an enormous challenge, colleges can provide job shadows, hold networking events, and facilitate group activities that provide much of the desired engagement.

As Pam Eddinger—the president of Boston’s Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC)—and Richard Kazis explain in chapter 2: “The interest in and power of internships for community college students is evident in school after school. . . . Community college leaders and personnel are beginning to act on the recognition that their students need both stronger connections to employers and work experience—and that their institutions must develop programs that are better tailored to their students’ needs.” But, they also note,

“the aspiration of placing every learner into an internship they would find attractive is remote, even impossible. But that does not mean that students cannot learn in a formal, structured way from the low-wage, part-time jobs they hold while in school, or dig deeply into how the professions operate.” BHCC is integrating many of the topics in this book into its learning community courses. While not a substitute for a paid internship, the courses “provides students with analytical tools that are helpful in seeking entrance to new areas in the labor market.”

We can't expect that students will gain all of this learning unless they are taught and actively supported. Thinking about my own children's and their friends' search for work, I recognize that they began with so many advantages: no college debt; access to internships and information about various professions and occupations; adults willing and eager to open doors; professionals whose behavior they have observed over years; and, perhaps most of all, the expectation that they could choose a career that would satisfy and challenge them while offering the prospect of a life of continuous learning. This volume supports the notion that our community colleges can take important strides toward replicating many of these advantages and more effectively provide the opportunities that their students so ardently desire.

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