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Testimony - October 2005

A Workforce Vision for Continuing Education

CUF project director David Fischer recently spoke to the Continuing Education Association of New York about the increasing convergence of continuing ed programs within colleges and universities, and publicly funded and run workforce development systems.

by David Jason Fischer

I'm David Fischer of the Center for an Urban Future, a New York City-based think tank that conducts policy research in the areas of economic development, education, workforce development and other fields of social policy. The City University of New York has been an especial focus for our organization since 1999, when we released a study titled "Putting CUNY to Work" detailing the system's role as a training institution for New York City's emerging workforce. We followed that up last year with a second report, "CUNY on the Job," that tracked the system's emerging role as a workforce provider during the intervening years. I've brought about 20 copies and set them out here, for those interested who haven't seen it.

A lot of the numbers I'm going to cite come from that report, but I wanted to start by talking about how we believe higher education fits into a workforce development system.

College education is both the single biggest determinant in what an individual is likely to earn, and the biggest asset for self-determination in terms of the labor market. A college degree essentially confers upon its holder a measure of freedom in terms of what jobs he or she will take that high school graduates very rarely possess. This doesn't mean that every individual in every workforce program should be pushed toward higher education, but it does mean that every career ladder and almost every path to self-sufficiency will pass through a college campus. College is an enormous asset for both career development and personal development, and the linchpin in the model of lifelong learning toward which our workforce system is gradually orienting itself.

With that in mind, I have three major points I'd like to make briefly.

Workforce development is now a key mission of educational systems.

- Adult education enrollment at CUNY is now close to 150,000. Closer to 250,000 in all categories of continuing education. It rose by about 30 percent between the 1998-99 and 2003-04 school years. SUNY also serves over 50,000 continuing education students per year, and is increasingly assertive in claiming a prominent role within the state's workforce development system.
- The New York Times recently profiled CUNY's worker support programs, noting that government agencies, private businesses, labor unions and foundations contribute as much as $100 million toward these programs. Enrollment rose 91 percent, to nearly 110,000, from the 1999-2000 academic year to the 2003-4 year.
- CUNY's School of Professional Studies offers credit-bearing programs. As of the time our report was released, well over 90 percent of CUNY's continuing education programs weren't for credit.
- Despite the increasingly prominent role workforce development is playing at colleges, there's still tremendous roomfor growth here. Business spends $60 billion a year on training; that dwarfs the public commitment at all levels of government many times over. Doug Lynch, the former head of NYU's corporate learning division, notes that higher education has just five percent of that market. "That's terrible because higher education knows more about educating people, and we can do it better and cheaper than these so-so training providers out there."

Government sees the higher education community as both a resource and a stakeholder within local, state and national workforce systems.

- In New York City, CUNY is a member of the 1-stop system operating consortium, an equal partner with the state Department of Labor and the designated city entity. Two CUNY campuses have become 1-stop affiliates, and the Workforce Investment Board is developing other strategic initiatives in which the City University will play a crucial role.
- The federal Higher Education Act is "by far the largest single source of federal funds for workforce development." Some of the provisions in the newest bill—a bipartisan effort that was unanimously supported by the Senate HELP committee—clearly show that the government is increasingly thinking of education as a labor force asset. These include:
- Expansion of Pell Grants to students enrolled less than half time
- Competitive grants to college-business partnerships that provide training to "non-traditional" students for high-growth jobs
- More funding for student support services, including those for low-income and adult learners
- Consider also that President Bush made community colleges a key talking point in his 2004 campaign—-the "Jobs for the 21st Century" proposal, which pledged "$250 million to fund partnerships between community colleges and employers in high-demand job sectors." While the numbers were disingenuous—-the $250 million came from other needed workforce programs, not new money--the administration saw this as a chance to support employers.
- There are states where the community college system has essentially "taken over" provision of workforce services. North Carolina most prominently. Minnesota and Washington have made big commitments as well.

The economy and the labor market are both changing in ways that will deeply impact the educational community. Whether it strengthens colleges or renders them increasingly irrelevant largely has to do with how colleges respond.

- The advantage to instruction at a traditional college as opposed to a corporate academy or for-profit institution is that something larger is presumably at work. It's not just short-term utilitarian: it's the crucially important effort of "learning to learn." Considering that a young person entering the workforce today is likely to change careers 10 to 14 times in their lifetimes, that mindset is more durably important than any short-term course of instruction.
- Roger Smith, the former president of General Motors, is quoted on p. 64 of The Jobs Revolution, an important book

released last year about the multiple workforce challenges now facing U.S. policymakers: “People trained in the liberal arts… learn to tolerate ambiguity and to bring order out of apparent confusion. They have the kind of sideways thinking and cross-classifying habit of mind that comes from learning, among other things, the many different ways of looking at literary works, social systems, chemical processes, or languages.”

- But as the labor market accelerates, colleges have to shorten their reaction time. One estimate is that a bachelor’s degree might now have a shelf life as short as five years. Knowledge is becoming outdated at an ever-faster rate.
- The American Society for Training and Development reports that in the last two years, organizations in the U.S. invested more money that ever before on employee training, made more hours of training available, and relied on technology to deliver training—-in other words, they used new models, not just teacher-to-students classroom instruction.

Continuing education offers workers and jobseekers a chance to increase their earning power, and employers the means to up-skill their workforce to better compete. The workforce system offers colleges a way to reach prospective students who want to work towards a degree, but need flexibility and might have the shorter-term goal of career advancement. So there’s ample motivation on both sides for a closer alignment.

Thanks very much.

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