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State of the City: A Promising New NYC Human Capital Agenda from Mayor de Blasio

In this February 2014 commentary, Center senior fellow David Jason Fischer applauds Mayor de Blasio for pledging a new focus on job training and skills building in his State of the City address.

by David Jason Fischer

In his first State of the City speech Monday at LaGuardia Community College, Mayor de Blasio began to flesh out his plans for reducing inequality in New York City. As expected, the mayor expanded upon campaign themes, such as raising the minimum wage and pushing to create more affordable housing. The address included an important new direction as well, as the mayor signaled his intention to take dead aim at closing the skills gap that walls off nearly half the city's population from opportunities in emerging sectors of the economy. He described higher education as "the key to lifting oneself into the middle class," and promised to "focus on the training and skills that individuals need to meet the demands generated by large and small employers of our city."

Mayor de Blasio's focus on skills building is refreshing. As the Center for an Urban Future has extensively reported, New York City residents face an inequality of educational attainment that mirrors—and reinforces—the stark inequality of wages and wealth against which de Blasio campaigned in last year's mayoral election.

Perhaps appropriately given the setting for his speech, the mayor named the City University of New York as a powerful vehicle for connecting New Yorkers to high-value jobs and careers in emerging fields such as technology, green jobs, food exports and advanced manufacturing. Showing an appreciation for the importance of degree completion—and a grasp that community colleges offer the clearest path for low- and moderate-income New Yorkers to succeed in higher education—he indicated a coming shift in spending "from corporate subsidies to tuition assistance." And he set an audacious objective: filling the majority of skilled technology jobs in New York City with graduates of city schools within the next eight years.

To achieve this goal will require unprecedented focus on creating a pipeline from high school, through college to the workplace. Both the NYC Department of Education and CUNY would need to embrace career track employment as a key

objective of their work and pay much closer attention to the needs and priorities of employers in targeted industries. Models exist for this shift, including the Sector Panels developed in Seattle, Washington and highlighted in CUF's July 2013 commentary on workforce innovations. This would represent a new and welcome direction in New York City's workforce system.

CUNY's institutional capacity and appetite for a workforce mission presents another challenge for the mayor. Federal and state government have hinted at a commitment to utilizing community colleges to boost economic mobility, suggesting the potential to furnish CUNY with the resources it would need to deliver strong workforce outcomes. And CUNY itself has weighed in as well: its excellent 2012 report "Jobs for New York's Future" urged closer ties to industry and stronger career guidance and facilitating work experience for students before they graduate.

Unfortunately, CUNY currently has limited power as a system to convince or compel its campuses to embrace best practices in workforce development. Worse, a stark divide often separates academic departments from campus-level offices of adult and continuing education (ACE)—even in the case of very strong ACE offices, such as LaGuardia's. Too many academics within the system seem to disdain the notion that students are looking above all to strengthen their employability and earning power. Until resources are linked to positive labor market outcomes, it is difficult to picture how and why CUNY would shift its institutional behavior in a way that would enable it to serve in the role Mayor de Blasio described.

The mayor has yet to divulge his plans to overhaul workforce development in New York City, though his overall agenda suggests greater emphasis on long-term training and skill development rather than simply placing jobseekers into low-wage work. One line in today's speech, however, hinted at a direction to come. He pledged to "reinvent our maze of overlapping and often-ineffective job training programs." This worthy goal—one the Center has urged in numerous reports over the years—requires both an understanding of why the programs overlap, and a clear sense of how to untangle the mess.

By and large, the programs New Yorkers utilize for job training and employment services devolve from federal and state funding streams. The Workforce Investment Act, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, Community Development Block Grant and many other programs each carry unique targeted outcomes and explicit guidance on how funds can and cannot be used. Even worse, different New York City agencies are responsible for administering the programs that these funds support—and, as the mayor implied, they do not coordinate their efforts.

Happily, the mayor suggested an answer to this conundrum toward the end of his speech, stating, "New Yorkers don't look at government as federal and state and local. They look at it … to make a difference in their lives." The irony of workforce development in the city has been how distinct federal funding streams and agency silos have obscured the truth that these programs essentially serve the same New Yorkers, at different points and in different circumstances. Whether by aggressively seeking federal and state waivers to blend funding streams and negotiate new outcomes, or by more closely coordinating these disparate sources to forge a cohesive and holistic system of services, Mayor de Blasio is well positioned to bring positive change on this front—without new spending or structures.

"State of the City: A Promising New NYC Human Capital Agenda from Mayor de Blasio" is part of a series of commentaries about workforce development and human capital issues that was generously funded by the Altman Foundation.



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