



American Youth
Policy Forum

The New Postsecondary Reality: Structured and Supported Pathways to Credential Attainment

Discussion Group Summary

March 20, 2017
Washington, DC

Meeting Overview

America's high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment rates have reached record highs in recent years, but a staggering portion of students who enroll in some form of college leave before attaining a credential. Research continues to indicate the labor market value of multiple types of postsecondary and technical credentials in addition to the traditional four-year degree, but completion rates at non-four year institutions are even lower than completion rates at four-year institutions. Over a third of America's college students attend community colleges, but nearly half of those do not attain a credential within eight years, leaving them no better off in the labor market than those with only a high school diploma.¹ Failure to support students to completion or credential attainment disproportionately affects first-generation college students, students from low-income families, and students of color, fueling concerns of an attainment gap.

On March 20, 2017, the American Youth Policy Forum [convened representatives](#) of national organizations, research institutions, congressional staff, and institution, district, city and state level leaders to share expertise, build relationships, and identify questions about improving postsecondary attainment. More specifically, participants:

- Learned about obstacles to credential attainment at different points along a pathway, particularly for traditionally underserved students;
- Better understood the role of various systems in providing a continuum of support to students, including K-12 institutions, community colleges, 4-year institutions, technical colleges, workforce systems, community-based organizations, and industry providers;
- Explored strategies to better support students based on research and examples of effective programs, practice, and policies; and
- Collectively identified opportunities in policy and practice to encourage cross-system coordination in providing structured and supported pathways to credential attainment for vulnerable youth.

The Current Landscape: Trends, Challenges, and Opportunities Across Policy and Practice

Dr. Anthony P. Carnevale, *Research Professor and Director, McCourt School of Public Policy, Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce*

Dr. Carnevale opened the meeting by providing historical context for the relationship between education and the workforce since the 19th century. Carnevale explained that since the beginning of the industrial revolution, education has been the social service that mediates the contradiction between democracy and capitalism, an economic system that often guarantees inequality. The role that education has played in preparing individuals for the workforce has shifted across history, fluctuating between focusing on core academic knowledge and viewing education as a means to provide job training and skills.

As an economist, Carnevale highlighted two major trends in the interaction between postsecondary education and the economy. The first trend is the rise in the value of college. The college wage premium, which is the difference between the average wage of college- and high school-educated workers, has increased significantly since 1967. While the college wage premium was only 37% for men and 54% for women in 1967, it reached 81% for both men and women by 2007. Additionally, the average wage advantages of college-educated workers compared to high school-educated workers has doubled, even

¹ Rosenbaum, J., Ahearn, C., Becker, K. *The New Forgotten Half and Research Directions to Support Them*. The William T. Grant Foundation. Retrieved at <http://wtgrantfoundation.org/library/uploads/2015/09/The-New-Forgotten-Half-and-Research-Directions-to-Support-Them.pdf>.

though the number of college graduates has quadrupled. Even though there is a higher saturation of people with college degrees, they still hold a significant advantage in the labor market. The second trend Carnevale described was the variation in the value of college based on the program of study. What a person [studies](#) often determines the amount of money that a person will make. For example, the annual earnings of someone who majored in petroleum engineering is \$136,000, while the annual earnings of social work majors is \$42,000.

Carnevale explained that although having structured and supported pathways to credential attainment is a compelling approach to providing success for all students, there remain various challenges that must be addressed in order to achieve equitable opportunity and success. Since the 1980s, inequality has grown largely due to the segregated nature of higher education and racial and class disparities in access and success in college. Since 1995, 82% of white students have attended one of 476 select colleges while approximately 72% of Hispanic students and 68% of African American students attend open admission schools. Furthermore, 80% of students that attend selective colleges are in the top socioeconomic status quartile, while only 3% of those students are in the bottom quartile.

Additionally, there is a general public bias against a “pathways for all” model. While people will say that college is not for everyone, and that workforce training is an important part of our education system, the “high school to Harvard” narrative is deeply rooted in the American psyche. Everyone wants their child to attend college, and therefore strong evidence is necessary to show that a variety of pathways allow for economic and social mobility inclusive of a variety of postsecondary education options. In developing various pathways for students, policymakers and practitioners must account for the potential of “tracking,” wherein affluent or white students have access to postsecondary education pathways and low-income students or students of color are more likely to access direct-to-career pathways.

To address these challenges, Carnevale offered suggestions to strengthen the development of pathways in the education system. Currently, the occupational training in postsecondary education is typically not linked to labor market needs. Education reflective of the workforce needs within a state or community could more effectively lead to gainful employment and/or relevant postsecondary credentials for students. Carnevale explained that research that uses Statewide Longitudinal Data Systems (SLDS) to investigate and link transcript, wage, and occupational data and information, will foster a more comprehensive understanding of various student outcomes. Federal programs like the Workforce and Innovation Opportunity Act (WIOA) are one area in which this research can be done. Once this information is available, it can serve as a roadmap for creating effective career pathways for students. Carnevale also shared how strong labor market evidence has demonstrated that a complexity of skills is now required in this post-industrial economy and that some of those skills are contextual to the occupation. Thus, if the education system intends to prepare students for success in the workforce, education must include technical skills as well as 21st century or employer-desired skills.

Perspectives on Pathways: Lessons from Effective Practice

Scott Evenbeck, *President, CUNY Guttman Community College*

Erin Brown, *Executive Director, Denver Office of Children’s Affairs*

Dr. Ross Gittell, *Chancellor, Community College System of New Hampshire*

This panel session highlighted innovative systems and practices at the institution, city, and state level.

Scott Evenbeck, President of [Guttman Community College](#), a two-year institution in the City University of New York (CUNY) system, shared the foundational elements of the college that have increased the number of successful graduates. Guttman serves many traditionally underserved populations: over half of Guttman students are first in their family to attend college, approximately 90% of the student body are

students of color, and nearly 70% of students receive financial aid. Additionally, many Guttman students have high academic needs, receiving some of the lowest scores on the CUNY Assessment Test.

At Guttman, first-year students are required to attend orientation and a [Summer Bridge program](#). During this program, students are exposed to a rigorous college environment and community supports, and begin taking college preparatory coursework with other peers in their cohort. [First-year students](#) also take two multiple-semester core courses: a City Seminar, in which students experience liberal arts in action by examining a relevant issue in New York City through the lens of multiple disciplines, and an Ethnographies of Work class, in which students study careers and workplace environments through critical examination of hiring, salaries, and other elements of the world of work. Evenbeck noted that this course “ensures that students are not in the ivory tower, but rather getting out into the world.”

New York City

- Most Guttman students reside in either the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, or Queens
- Fall 2014 cohort 1-yr retention was 73%
- Fall 2012 3-yr graduation rate was 49%

Denver

- By 2020, 74% of jobs in Colorado will require a postsecondary education
- Denver Public Schools (DPS) is the fastest growing urban school district in the country
- DPS has a large population of undocumented students, thus DEAN’s focus on DREAMer support

Erin Brown, the Executive Director of the Denver Office of Children’s Affairs, spoke of the strong collective action in Denver centered on creating a continuum of educational support from secondary education to the workforce. Mayor Hancock, within his first hundred days, jumpstarted this movement through the creation of [the Denver Education Compact](#), which brings together stakeholders in the education, business, government, and nonprofit sectors, to streamline previously isolated action and align strategies to increase the number of high

school students who complete postsecondary pathways and obtain a job with a living wage. A collective impact strategy is also used by the [Denver Education Attainment Network](#) (DEAN), an initiative comprised of over 40 community partners focused on increasing educational attainment and closing the attainment gap for Denver Public Schools students. DEAN targets its efforts around three key areas: transition to college, college completion, and DREAMer support², through facilitating Action Teams of stakeholders in each area that meet every 45 days. Through these networks and intentional efforts to increase data sharing and access, DEAN is creating the civic infrastructure for effective collective action.

Ross Gittel, Chancellor of [the Community College System of New Hampshire](#) (CCSNH), described the context of New Hampshire and how it shapes the pathways and services the system provides for students. Since 2010, New Hampshire has seen a decline in the number of high school graduates, and of those who do graduate, over half attend college out of state: twice the national average. Since unemployment in New Hampshire is the lowest of any state in the U.S., and as industries are looking to grow skilled workers for their businesses, there is a strong need for the state to think strategically about pathways and how they can support regional economic development. Given this context, CCSNH has focused efforts on furthering post-secondary matriculation of NH high school overall and within the state, and the development of strong and affordable pathways from secondary to postsecondary education and into NH employment. As a community college system that serves a large

New Hampshire

- CCSNH includes seven main campuses, and five satellite centers
- Many of NH’s community colleges serve rural populations
- 30% of funding for CCSNH comes from the state government

² DREAMer support refers to support of undocumented students. DEAN’s specific goal is to increase the number of undocumented students who enroll, persist, and complete at the Auraria Campus and Emily Griffith Technical College.

rural population and has limited resources, Gittell and his colleagues face particular challenges in providing a full range of educational and workforce opportunities to students who are more isolated geographically. Efforts in developing and sharing programs and resources across the seven colleges that comprise the state’s community college system are helping to address the rural area challenges. Finally, Gittell described the growth and success of the [Running Start program](#), a dual enrollment program within almost every high school in the state. Running Start classes are taught by an appropriately credentialed high school teacher, who is mentored by a college faculty member. This program allows students to begin earning college credit while still in high school at very minimal cost to the student.

Moderated Discussion: Implications for Policy

Betsy Brand, Executive Director, American Youth Policy Forum

Dr. Lynne Gilli, Assistant State Superintendent, Division of College and Career Readiness, Maryland State Department of Education

Kathy Mannes, Vice President, Building Economic Opportunity Group, Jobs for the Future

Dr. Johan Uvin, President, Institute for Educational Leadership

Following group discussion of the primary gaps and areas for inquiry in research, practice, and policy, four policy thought leaders working at the intersection of education and the workforce offered their perspective on promising next steps and areas for opportunity.

Betsy Brand offered a variety of suggestions to strengthen credential attainment, including reducing the time it takes to get a degree, reducing the time between graduating high school and beginning college, prioritizing guidance and counseling services, and simplifying course options to make it easier to navigate the “postsecondary jungle.” **Johan Uvin** shared that “the notion of career pathways is starting to take hold in the public arena,” offering a window of opportunity for policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and advocates to push a pathways agenda with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act (HEA) and the implementation of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). **Kathy Mannes** highlighted the importance of applying an equity lens to all action taken, and actively sharing the research of what we know does work with the new Administration and considering how it can be brought to scale. **Lynne Gilli** explained that, as a graduate of a career and technical education (CTE) program, she considers the needs of students like her who participate in CTE when being asked to redesign CTE in Maryland. Gilli shared that bringing industry representatives and postsecondary educators together in dialogue allowed for more informed discussion of pathways and effective CTE in Maryland.

“The notion of career pathways is starting to take hold in the public arena.”

-Johan Uvin

Key Themes and Topics for Consideration

Several key themes emerged from discussion among panelists, respondents, and participants.

System Alignment and Breaking Down Silos

The practitioners on the first panel articulated the ways in which they have been able to create systems that are more cohesive and centered around common goals. Guttman offers a structured curriculum for their students centered on pathways as opposed to a disjointed “cafeteria-style” menu of options. The Denver Education Compact and DEAN have created an infrastructure that supports system alignment, including common goals that incentivize stakeholders to continue to participate. In New Hampshire, although the seven community colleges within the system used to be independently accredited, as

Chancellor, Gittell has been able to increase the collaboration between institutions and better understand how best practices at one college can be shared throughout the system. In discussion of the importance of community colleges in these pathways, Gittell shared that community colleges are bridging institutions: bridges between secondary and four-year institutions, and bridges between education and the workforce. The discussion throughout the day underscored that the pathways model, and the institutions that foster these pathways, must continue to bridge the silos of education and the workforce.

“Community colleges are bridging institutions between secondary and four-year institutions, and between education and the workforce.”
-Ross Gittell

The policy panel furthered the discussion by offering insight into how certain structures are necessary to incentivize and encourage cross-system collaboration and system alignment. Brand noted that legislation

“Legislation can sound great on a piece of paper, but in reality it doesn’t work if there are not facilitators at the state and local levels.”
-Betsy Brand

must create structures and processes that foster relationship building between the necessary parties at various levels of government. Brand mentioned that certain “Legislation can sound great on a piece of paper, but in reality it doesn’t work if there are not facilitators at the state and local levels.” While agencies might want to build capacity, they may not be aware of who to partner with, or how to build partnerships that are sustainable. Similar to Brand’s emphasis on effective structures, Uvin encouraged participants to remember that silos among programs, agencies, and fields are rooted in the histories of who these groups serve. Policymakers must start realizing that systems collaboration is not just preferable, it is necessary, due to lack of resources. Uvin pointed to the

strong statutory framework in WIOA and the flexibility of [P3 grants](#) as evidence that cross-system collaboration is possible.

Creating Communities of Practice

Practitioners on the panel and participants alike underscored the importance of creating communities of practice in which best practices are shared within and across systems. While each locality will face different barriers and opportunities given their local contexts and the population they serve, sharing of effective work can provide opportunities for bringing the practices to scale. Evenbeck used the term “transportable elements” to describe the practices at Guttman that can be brought to scale – for example, the Summer Bridge program or Ethnographies of Work class. Gittell underscored the value of transferable knowledge through communities of practice by sharing that CCSNH is working with the same people who developed the Ethnographies of Work class at Guttman for implementation in New Hampshire. Additionally, within his own state, Gittell meets with all seven community college presidents every two weeks and CCSNH has prioritized providing opportunities for faculty at different institutions to collaborate with one another, as a means of strong professional development, knowledge sharing, and joint program development and delivery.

During the debrief session, many participants expressed the need for additional, targeted research that provides evidence for what works. In addition to sharing best practices between institutions and systems, research should investigate what elements of certain pathways are effective, and how pathways affect various subgroups and diverse communities across the country. This research can then further inform communities of practice.

The discussion throughout the day also highlighted how change occurs through grassroots support and collaboration. Brand echoed this point in emphasizing that while legislation can set a standard for collaboration, interaction at the local level allows for more sustainable and effective collaboration. Similar to Gittell’s bi-monthly meetings with college presidents, Evenbeck explained how he intentionally allows time for professional development among professors and staff to communicate about how their courses

relate to one another and how they can best serve their students. Within the larger CUNY system, Evenbeck finds that initiatives and ideas that begin at the institution level and grow to other institutions can often be more effective than top-down programming since it is internally motivated.

Effective Data Use

The event highlighted the importance of using data to 1) inform the creation of pathways based on labor market needs and 2) to identify student outcomes for means of continuous improvement. Panelists and participants agreed that structured pathways will only be effective if they are reflective of trends in economic development and if credentials and skills learned are reflective of labor market needs. Reiterating Carnevale's suggestion, participants strongly indicated the need for data that tracks the educational and occupational outcomes for students. Long-term data collection shared across local, state, and federal agencies will better inform practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and advocates of the impact of certain pathways. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) is actively working with industry partners to better inform their career and technical education. MSDE works closely with the Governors Workforce Investment Board to align programming with workforce needs and worked in partnership with statewide industry advisory groups and business partners to develop [ten Career Clusters](#) and specific career pathways within those Clusters.

Redefining Success

Discussion throughout the day encouraged reflection about why pathways are important in keeping pace with the 21st century workforce and how a pathways model can become accepted and appealing to the public. Carnevale emphasized the increasingly complex nature of the economy, in which the skills necessary to compete in the labor market are constantly changing and differ based on occupation. Thus, if our education system intends to prepare students for success in postsecondary education and the workforce, it must include the development of those skills that may not necessarily fall into the category of traditional academic knowledge. Mannes explained that a pathways model creates opportunities to gain employability skills and competencies, like teamwork and leadership through work-based and/or project-based learning, at both the secondary and postsecondary levels.

As participants discussed the stigma that is often associated with programs, terminology, and philosophies related to the integration of education and workforce training, it became clear the need to reframe the conversation surrounding pathways as a model that expands opportunities as opposed to limiting them. In order to counter public bias against pathways and address the potential of tracking, there must be evidence of how pathways lead to various occupations and allow for social and economic mobility. Gilli highlighted that once people see high quality CTE in action, they will be more likely to send their children to participate in those programs. Mannes further explained that counselors and those advising students are key levers in expanding opportunities for children and that they must understand the various pathways available to serve all students.

Final Reflections and Next Steps

The discussion group illuminated the challenges and opportunities in developing structured and supported pathways to postsecondary credential attainment and careers for students. Participants noted the need for additional work and collaboration at both the local and national level in research, policy, and practice. The American Youth Policy Forum is continuing to work to understand the opportunities for policy to facilitate high quality pathways to ensure all young people have access to an array of postsecondary options. Stay tuned for further discussion of this topic at AYPF's upcoming Capitol Hill forum, to be scheduled for Summer 2017.