

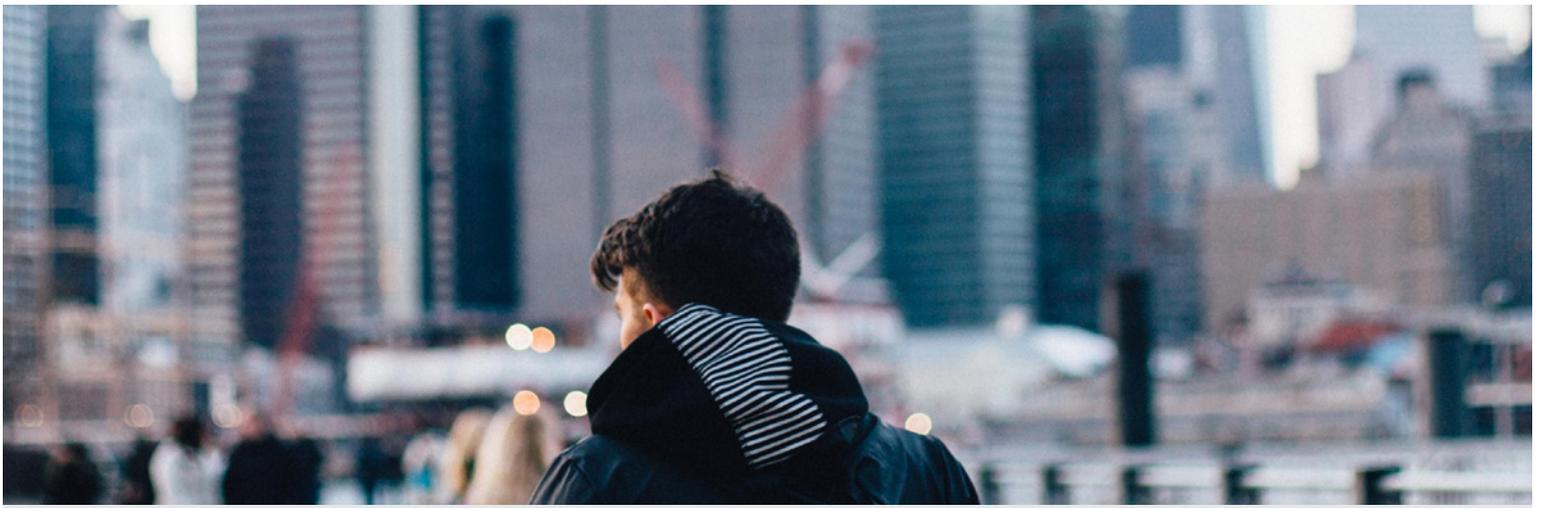


SKILLS WANTED

CUNY AS ENGINE OF ECONOMIC RECOVERY

TAMAR JACOBY

JUNE 2020



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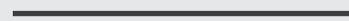
CUNY AS ENGINE OF ECONOMIC RECOVERY

New York City's community colleges face a historic opportunity as the city recovers and rebuilds in the wake of the global pandemic.

In New York, as elsewhere across America, higher education may never look the same—may never snap back to what it was before the virus struck. Covid-19, the social unrest that followed and the new, altered economy likely to emerge in years ahead: together, these shocks have transformed the landscape—upending what Americans want and need from higher education and posing new, practical challenges for educators nationwide.

In New York, the new, post-Covid economy will require a new, post-Covid approach to post-secondary education and training. New Yorkers across a broad array of industries will need new skills to keep their jobs or reenter the labor market. And few institutions are better positioned to provide essential upskilling—short, targeted programs offered in partnership with employers—than the city's two-year public colleges.

But the challenges ahead are as big as the opportunity. Providing the education and training that's needed will require profound changes at the City University of New York (CUNY)—on its campuses and at the university's central administrative offices. It will also require new thinking from policymakers in Albany—most importantly, new, more flexible funding options tailored to the historic challenge of restarting one of the world's most dynamic economies.



Few institutions are better positioned to provide essential upskilling—short, targeted programs offered in partnership with employers—than CUNY community colleges.



The Moment

March 15, 1990

coming-out-of-nowhere moment
nothing
is
I-have-I-to-do-today-list
half a moment
of traffic stop
of I shot
silence
the

Lisa Sigal, Photo: 2010

STRUCTURAL ECONOMIC CHANGE

No one can predict exactly how the Covid shock will transform the New York City economy. Some sectors may never bounce back entirely. Others will grow. New technology and new ways of using technology are likely to change habits forever—and with them, labor market demand.

What can be predicted: three emerging trends will intensify demand for workers with up-to-date job skills.

The pandemic of 2020 will hasten the arrival of the 'future of work.'

First, in New York as elsewhere, workers in every setting will need to learn new safety protocols to protect themselves and others against the risk of infection.

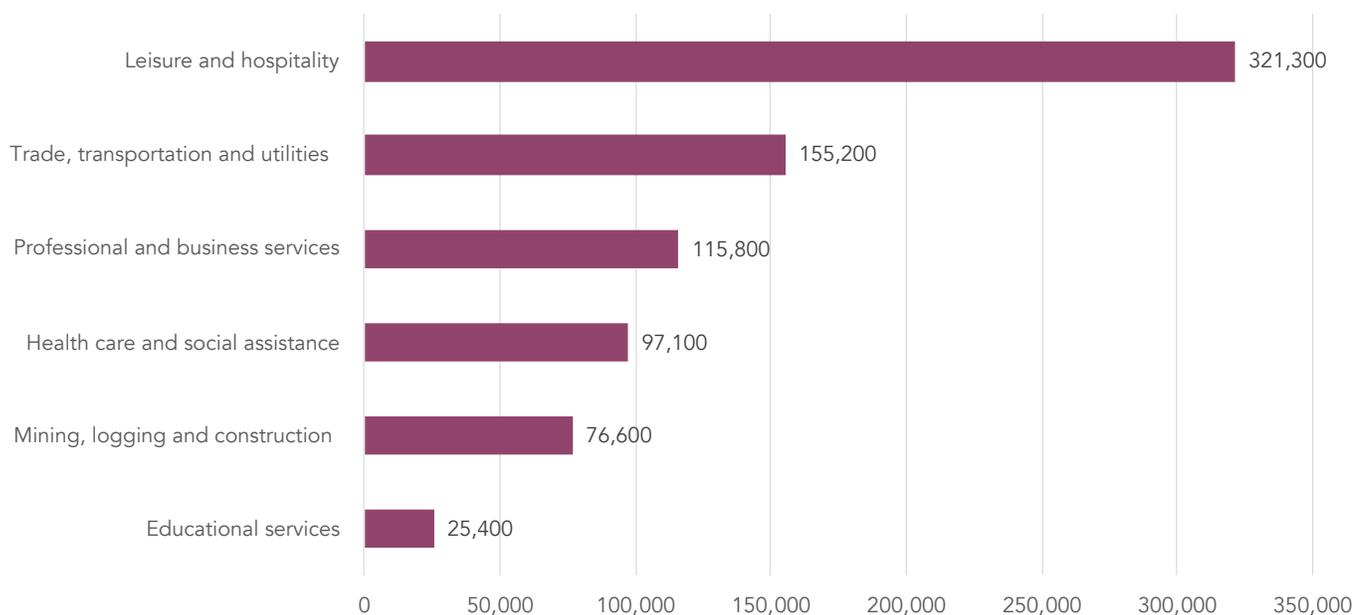
Hotels, restaurants, shops, schools, salons, professional offices, entertainment venues and transportation hubs: changes will vary from industry to industry, some regulated by the city or state, others made voluntarily. For some workers, this will mean new on-the-job precautions; for others, a permanent shift to remote work. In some instances, informal upskilling may be enough. Other workers will need formal safety training.

Second, in New York as elsewhere, the pandemic of 2020 will hasten the arrival of what was once called the “future of work.”

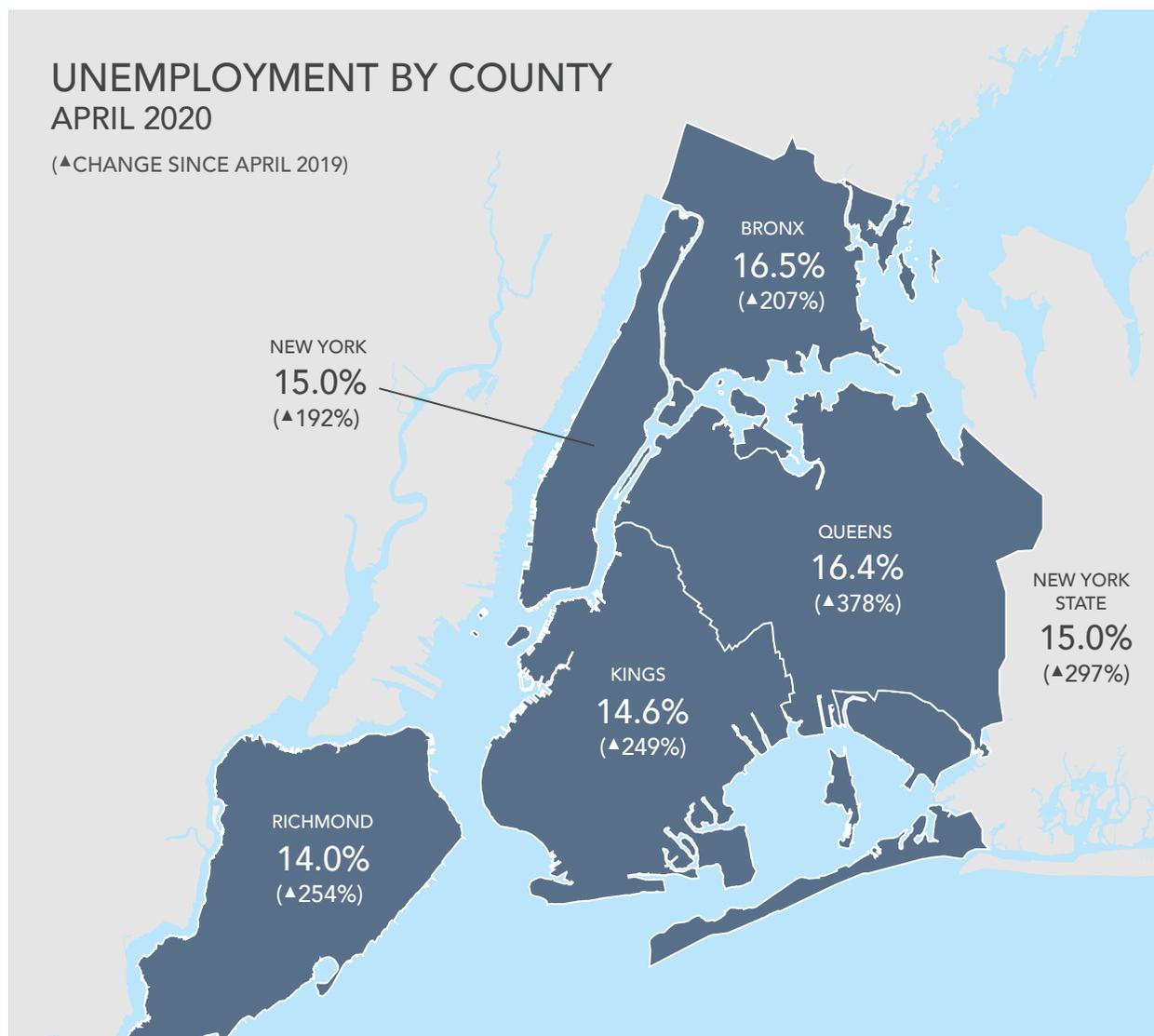
Some sectors will turn to automation as a means of enhancing safety for workers or consumers. Other employers, now facing thinner margins, will look to labor-saving technology to boost productivity. Still other firms reshoring production from abroad will turn to robotics and artificial intelligence to replace the inexpensive labor they relied on in other countries.

In all three cases, companies will shed less-skilled workers and replace them with a smaller

Job losses by sector, February to April 2020



Source: New York State Department of Labor.



Source: New York State Department of Labor.

cadre of more highly trained, better-paid talent with the skills to manage new technology.

Third, in New York as nationwide, the months and perhaps years ahead will be a tale of two economies—one struggling to stay afloat and likely shrinking, the other, healthier and more dynamic, looking to hire workers.

Among leading New York City industries expected to struggle even as the economy reopens: hospitality, tourism, traditional retail and live entertainment. Among occupations and industries where demand can be expected to

grow: technology, essential health care, supply chain logistics and distribution.

This tale of two economies is already unfolding in New York. In the first two months of the pandemic, nearly 900,000 New York City workers filed for unemployment insurance.¹ Leisure and hospitality accounted for more than 35 percent of those who had been let go, leaving an estimated 325,000 to 400,000 hotel and restaurant employees out of work.² Non-essential health care and social assistance accounted for 11 percent of layoffs.³

Employment change, April 2019 to April 2020

Full-service restaurants	▼88%
Performing arts, spectator sports and related industries	▼77%
Museums, historical sites and similar institutions	▼67%
Clothing stores	▼64%
Personal and laundry services	▼62%
Building construction	▼43%
Transit and ground passenger transportation	▼36%
Physicians' offices	▼27%
Educational services	▼15%
Real estate	▼13%

Source: New York State Department of Labor.

No sector was immune: even information technology took a hit. But by early May, online job posting platforms were reporting increased demand in IT, essential health care and transportation and logistics, among other sectors.

New Yorkers at all education levels will need to adjust. But the burden is likely to weigh most heavily on workers with less education and fewer in-demand skills.

After more than a decade of racially disparate employment and wage growth, workers of color were finally narrowing the gap in the year before the virus struck.⁴ Then, in the first month of the pandemic, unemployment more than tripled across the city, peaking in the Bronx, where it rose to 16.5 percent.⁵ Citywide, Latino workers took the biggest hit. According to a CUNY survey, 29 percent of New York City residents reported that they or someone in their household had lost a job in the first two weeks of the Covid lockdown. Among Hispanic families, the figure was 41 percent.⁶

FAST, JOB-FOCUSED UPSKILLING

Taken together, these three trends—retooling for safety, accelerated innovation and a bifurcated economy—are expected to sharply increase demand for workforce training. Hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers will need fast, job-focused reskilling or upskilling to remain competitive in a rapidly changing labor market.

HVAC workers in hotels and hospitals will need to learn the latest high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) technology so they can install

The burden is likely to weigh most heavily on workers with less education and fewer in-demand skills.

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and maintain air filters. Food service workers still hanging onto their jobs will need a crash course in new food safety techniques. Former airline employees with no prospect of quick employment may exit the industry—and look for fast, job-focused training in, say, IT skills or online customer service management.

The list goes on and on—and these are just the examples we can imagine now. There will be countless variations on the theme as a new economy emerges and the labor market adjusts—a period likely to bring dramatic changes to who and how New Yorkers hire.

The two urgent questions this poses for the city: who will provide this essential upskilling, and how to pay for it?

New York City does not lack for education and training providers. For-profits, nonprofits, trade schools, community groups, employer-provided upskilling, public and private colleges and universities: options abound. But few institutions are better positioned to provide what's needed on the scale that's needed than community colleges.

CUNY's seven community colleges bring a number of advantages to the challenge ahead.

First, size: more than 200,000 students a year passed through CUNY community colleges before the pandemic, just over half of them nondegree-seeking learners in the institutions' adult and continuing education divisions.⁷

Second, only community colleges have the infrastructure—instructors, classrooms, newly minted online capacity, hands-on technical training labs and student services—to mount a large-scale effort of the kind likely to be needed.

In the past, much of this infrastructure has been devoted to preparing students in traditional academic programs seeking to transfer to four-year colleges or universities. But CUNY community colleges also have long experience preparing students for jobs—career and technical programs for learners who are heading directly into the labor market, no further education sought or required.

Much of this job-focused education takes place in the colleges' noncredit continuing education divisions.

At CUNY colleges, as elsewhere nationwide, the noncredit continuing education division is generally a realm apart, funded and administered separately and often all but invisible to the rest of the institution. Courses are offered à la carte and outside the usual semester schedule. Students need not matriculate at the college; they simply sign up for the class or classes that interest them.

Noncredit programs come with some inherent disadvantages: learners are not typically eligible for financial aid, and their time spent in class does not count toward a college degree.

But the continuing education division is ideally poised to deliver the fast, job-focused upskilling and reskilling that will be needed in New York in months and perhaps years ahead.

Noncredit programs, at community colleges and some four-year schools, bring several unique strengths to the task.

The continuing education division is ideally poised to deliver fast, job-focused upskilling and reskilling.

First, noncredit educators don't have to answer to faculty committees or regional accreditors, so they can respond more quickly and nimbly to the training needs of local employers. Instead of the year or two typically required for program approval on the credit side of the college, the continuing education division can stand up a new course in a matter of weeks or months.

Second, most noncredit divisions have robust business outreach offices that seek to build

relationships with employers. Many if not most noncredit educators see career preparation as their principal mission.

Third, nationwide survey research suggests that many Americans seeking education in the wake of the pandemic will look to community colleges and prefer nondegree course offerings.

The Strada Education Network has partnered with survey research firm Heart + Mind Strategies to conduct weekly soundings of some 6,000 adults navigating the Covid crisis and its consequences for work and education.

One-third of those surveyed believe that if they lose their jobs, they will need additional education and new skills to find a position with a comparable wage or salary. Roughly half expect to enroll in postsecondary education or training in the next five years. Among training providers, community colleges and trade schools vie in popularity with four-year colleges and universities. Perhaps most striking, three in five of those considering going back to school would prefer a nondegree program.⁸

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

The vast, sprawling CUNY system—it educates more than a half million students each year on 25 far-flung campuses—is like a giant ocean liner.⁹ Changing course by even a few degrees is a major undertaking, and many adjustments will be needed if the system is to seize the opportunity ahead.

The CUNY system has a long, distinguished history of serving students with the poorest chances of succeeding in America. Intel cofounder Andrew Grove, who attended the original CUNY institution, the City College of New York, described his alma mater as “an American dream machine”—an engine of upward mobility and equity for generations of New Yorkers.¹⁰

University leadership works hard to keep this legacy alive. CUNY won widespread acclaim in recent years for the Accelerated Study in

Associate Programs (ASAP) initiative designed to boost graduation rates for low-income learners—an innovation now being emulated across the US that nearly doubled the percentage of less-prepared New York City students who earn associate degrees.¹¹

CUNY has a long history of serving students with the poorest chances of succeeding.

In 2017, a groundbreaking study by Stanford economist Raj Chetty ranked CUNY among top colleges nationwide in boosting intergenerational economic mobility. Chetty and his research team found that CUNY colleges propel almost six times as many low-income learners into the middle class as all eight Ivy League colleges combined.¹²

CUNY colleges—community colleges and four-year institutions—also have a long, often impressive history of preparing students for the world of work. Several schools were initially conceived as technical institutes; others were founded to feed emerging New York industries. Most of the system’s noncredit adult and continuing education (ACE) divisions work hard to build relationships with local employers. And university leadership has been taking steps to support these nondegree divisions, providing resources and looking for ways to incorporate their perspective in systemwide planning and decisions.

Still, even with these strengths, job-focused education and training has traditionally been a second-tier priority for the CUNY system. As at most colleges and universities nationwide, the system’s primary goal is college completion—four-year college completion and a bachelor’s degree. Community colleges have been seen largely as feeder institutions: the first step in what is often called a “two plus two”

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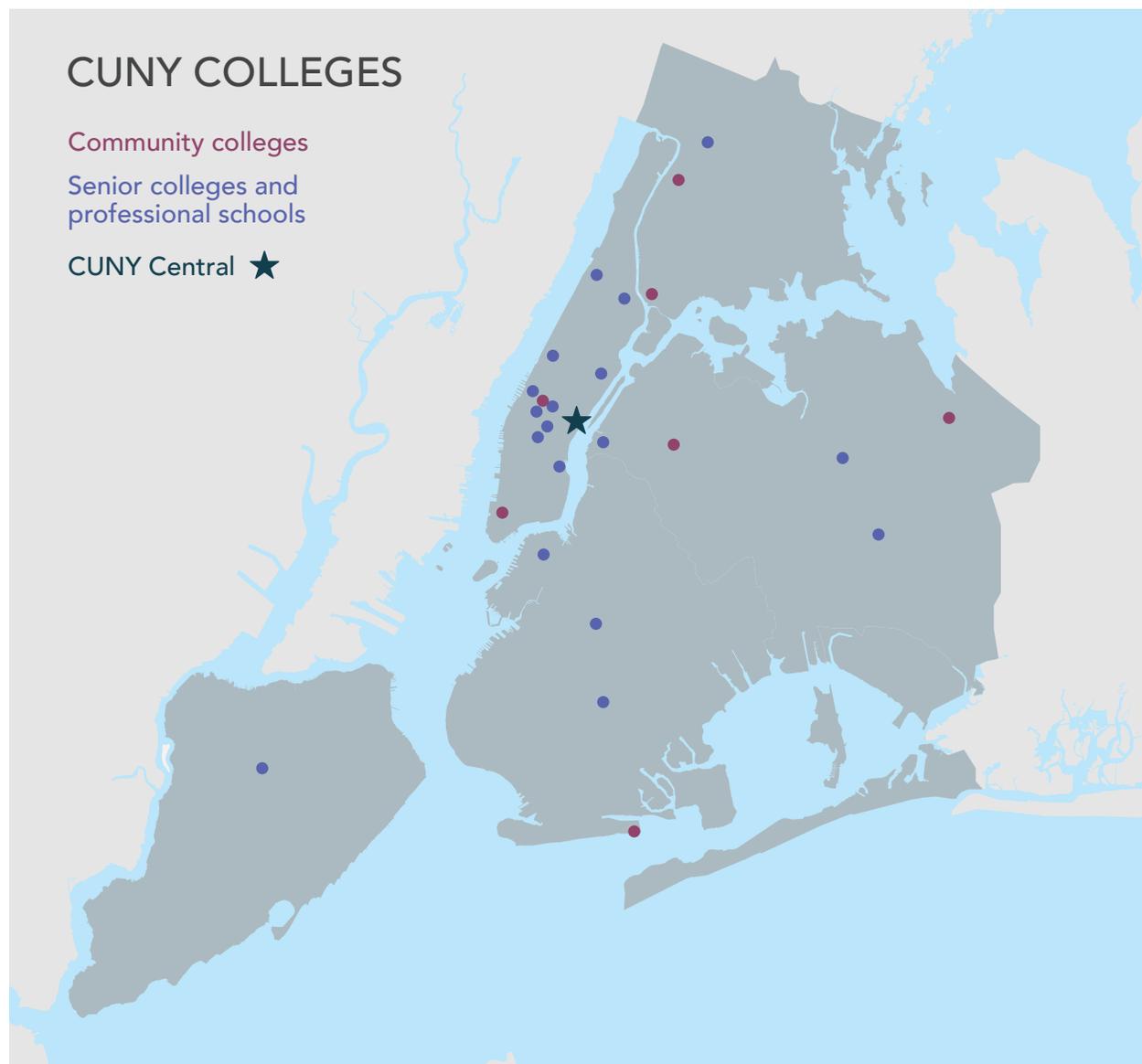
pathway—two years at a community college followed by two years at a four-year school equals a bachelor's degree.

Given this focus, not surprisingly, the system is geared more toward traditional college-age students than adult learners. Unlike at most community colleges nationwide, nearly twice as many CUNY students attend full time as part time.¹³ And the city's 18 noncredit ACE divisions have often been treated as an afterthought—serving their purpose, successful on their own terms and popular with many learners, but seen

as peripheral in a system devoted to producing four-year college graduates.

A second major feature of the system, prized by many in normal times, that could make it difficult to rise to the challenge ahead: the university's decentralized governance structure.

Each of the 25 schools in the system—senior colleges, community colleges and postgraduate institutions—has its own president, provost and governance committees. Most funding flows through the system's central administrative office, which sets goals and parameters for



the colleges, regulating many aspects of what happens on campuses across the city.

Some CUNY chancellors have opted to assert more centralized authority. But as a rule, the colleges are fiercely independent: more competitive than cooperative, often unnecessarily duplicative and perplexing to employers and others seeking to partner with the system to provide education or training.

Over the years, an array of proponents have put forward proposals for reform—some centralizing, some decentralizing. Finding the optimum balance is likely to be difficult in any circumstances, but the Covid crisis may require a one-time, targeted adjustment.

A third major obstacle that must be overcome if CUNY is to take on the task of upskilling New Yorkers for the post-Covid era: funding.

In the past, CUNY ACE divisions often brought in substantial revenue: grant funding and fees paid by either employers or adult learners who dug into their own pockets to cover tuition. In the wake of the pandemic, many if not most adult learners will be unemployed, ruling out revenue from employers, and students will

A third major obstacle: funding.

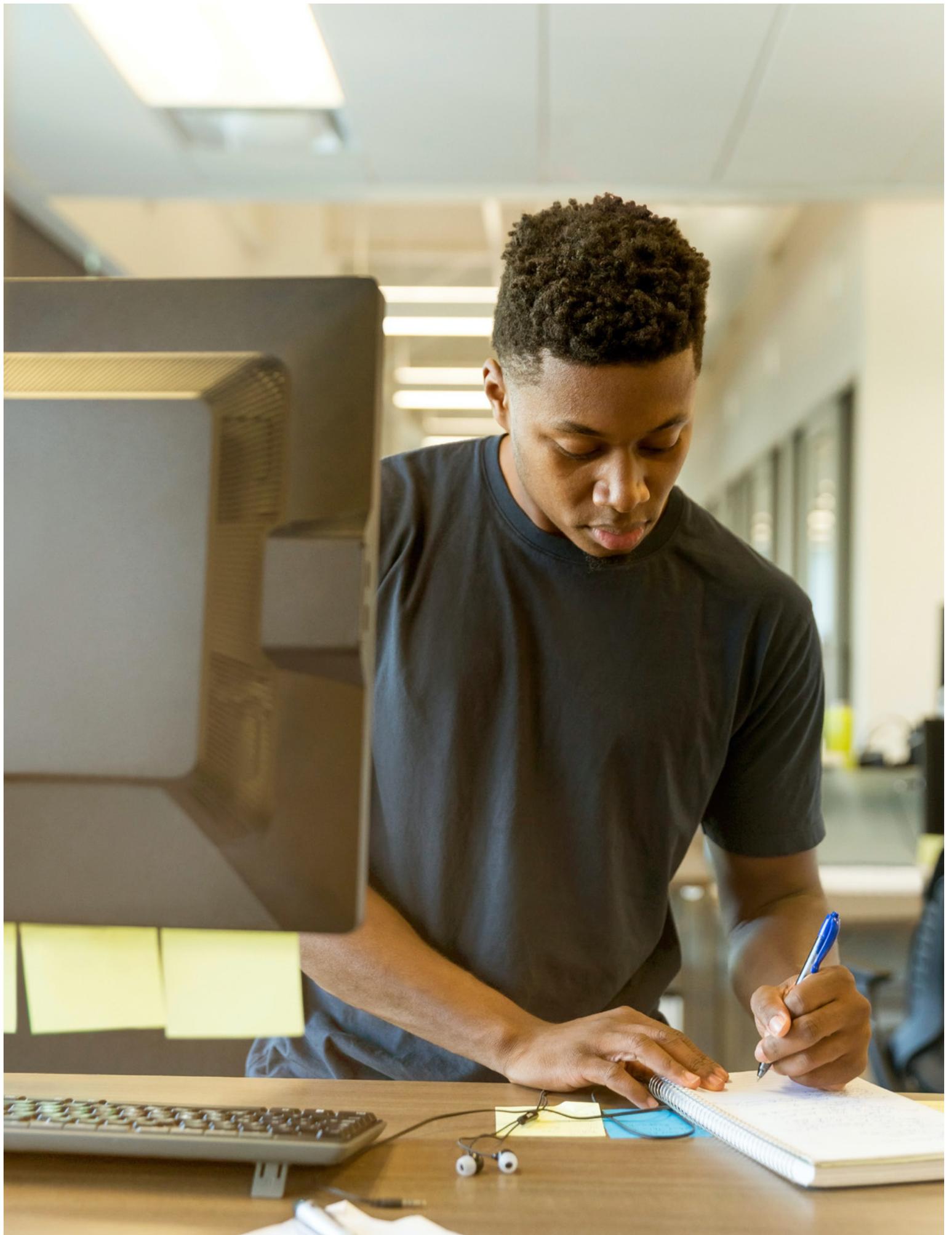
have scant reserves to draw on even for essential workforce preparation.

Yet as a practical matter, no financial aid—neither federal Pell Grants nor state scholarship funding—can be used to pay for nondegree programs or courses shorter than a semester.

These obstacles are significant but not insurmountable, and the payoff to overcoming them would be beyond reckoning for the New York economy and for many thousands of New Yorkers.

The new approach that's needed will require innovative thinking in many quarters—at CUNY colleges, in the central office and among policy-makers in Albany.

The pages that follow lay out a vision—a broad-brush, aspirational outline of changes to equip the CUNY system to meet the monumental challenge ahead.



RECOMMENDATIONS



WHAT'S NEEDED AT THE COLLEGE

CUNY community colleges start with a strong foundation, but the change that's needed will require a major pivot: a new orientation that puts responding to Covid job loss at the top of the agenda.

It will not be enough simply to add a program here and a new credential there. Tens of thousands of New Yorkers—perhaps hundreds of thousands—may need to acquire new skills in the next year or two. Pre-Covid curriculum may or may not be relevant—more likely not. Time is of the essence. The city's recovery could depend on the pace of change at CUNY.

Most important and perhaps the biggest stretch, CUNY colleges that take up this challenge will need to rethink their purpose and priorities, putting job skills and career education more at the center of their mission and culture.

A job waiting. Unlike many traditional job training programs, designed in a broad-brush, general way to meet demand in the local labor market, all new post-Covid upskilling and reskilling should be offered in partnership with employers—tailored to prepare learners for specific jobs open to students who complete the program successfully.

Not all new programs will fit under this rubric. CUNY colleges will continue to develop and debut an array of course offerings—academic programs and career education designed to meet broad-gauge future goals.

But new programs eligible for new, targeted post-Covid funding should be strictly end-focused—no coding, say, for coding's sake, or because educators believe it's a timely in-demand skill.

If there isn't a job waiting, there should be no recovery funding. Enrollments should be geared to the number of jobs on offer at partnering companies. And employer partners should be prepared to offer interviews to graduates.

Just the skills learners need. Unlike most traditional college programs designed to give learners a broad general grounding or comprehensive overview of a field of study, job-focused courses should be targeted and short—no longer than is necessary to teach the skills required to do the job.

Learners will be in a hurry to get back into the labor market. Employers will be waiting impatiently, eager to resume operations or ramp up as quickly as possible.

If there isn't a job waiting,
there should be no
recovery funding.

General skills remain important—communication, creativity, problem solving and teamwork will be more essential than ever in the automated economy of the future. But this should not be the focus of the fast, job-centered upskilling and reskilling that needs to be available as New York recovers from the pandemic.

Course length will vary from job to job—from a few days to a few weeks to a few months, and perhaps longer. But programs should be offered on demand—not on a traditional semester schedule—and no learner should sit in class or work in a lab an hour longer than is necessary.

Hand in glove with employers. The upskilling and reskilling needed in the wake of the pandemic will require a new approach to collaborating with employers.

Like most two-year institutions nationwide, CUNY community colleges make an effort to reach out to local companies. Schools maintain rosters of employer partners and consult them periodically about course offerings.

But all too often, at CUNY as elsewhere, these partnerships are more perfunctory than meaningful. Many educators treat employer input as an afterthought—nice to have, but not essential. Many employers shy away from tough conversations. Others offer occasional advice but rarely if ever hire out of college programs.

Casual, halfhearted connections of this kind will not be enough to spur the economic resurgence that's needed in New York.

Some college programs may choose to partner with a single company—a firm large enough to hire a robust number of trainees. Other educators will focus on collaborating with public-sector employers—city agencies or departments with Covid-related training needs. In still other instances, the best partner may be a trade association or ad hoc employer collective—a group of firms with common needs that come together to develop a talent pipeline.

Whoever the partner, programs must be designed to employers' specifications: custom-

Programs must be designed to employers' specifications.

made, not off the rack—not plucked out of the course catalogue and repackaged or renamed.

The best collaboration is day to day, with no detail too small for company and college to consider together. Employers may dictate program duration, delivery models, curriculum, instructor qualifications and more. The more involved they are, the better—the more likely training will prepare learners to succeed on the job.

Certifications. Whenever possible, post-Covid upskilling should lead to a credential—if not an academic credential, unlikely in most cases, then ideally a third-party certification.

New Yorkers retraining in a hurry to improve their position in the labor market may not be thinking about the long term. They want a new job now or need training to hold onto the job they've got. But those who seek to change jobs in the future will want proof of their upskilling—a credential valued industrywide. Others may come back to college later in life for further education, and they should be able to leverage what they learned in a fast, job-focused post-Covid course.

Certifications will vary widely from occupation to occupation. Some may be industry-driven, others required by the city or state. CUNY colleges should be careful. Many industry credentials, even those developed by employer groups, have little or no currency in the labor market—too few firms are aware of or rely on them to make decisions about hiring.¹⁴ And not every short, job-focused program will lend itself to a culminating credential.

Still, even as they focus on fulfilling short-term labor market demand, educators should not lose sight of learners' likely longer-term needs, whether in the job market or academia.

Better bridges between divisions. Most Covid-related upskilling is likely to be offered by a non-credit ACE division—ACE can respond much more nimbly to employers’ needs and shifting labor market demand. But the credit side of the college should not be precluded from developing programs, and both divisions should take advantage of the opportunity to cooperate more closely.

Employers who collaborate with a noncredit division to create short Covid-related training may also, now or in the future, seek employees with academic certificates or degrees. And non-credit educators can do colleagues on the credit side an important service by introducing them to potential employer partners.

So too with learners. A recently laid-off worker who comes to the college seeking job-focused upskilling may decide that in fact the next year or two would be a good time to earn the degree they always wanted while looking for work or holding down a transitional job.

Noncredit educators attracting new learners to the college with the promise of job training should provide students with information about credit-eligible programs and make it as easy as possible for interested learners to enroll.

Just how resources are allocated and how funding flows between credit and noncredit divisions is often a contentious issue at CUNY colleges. But if new funding is made available for post-Covid upskilling and noncredit programs experience a surge of enrollment, there could be an opportunity to build a different kind of relationship.

Noncredit divisions that attract enrollments and raise revenue for the college can only gain in stature and respect.

Funding dependent on job placements. If new funding is made available to support fast, job-focused Covid-related upskilling, policy-makers and taxpayers should expect a return on the dollar—programs should be measured and rewarded on the basis of graduates’ employment outcomes.

Many traditional academic educators resist this kind of outcomes-based metric. Career-focused faculty and administrators may also be skittish. In the post-Covid era, no one can guarantee that even better-trained workers will be able to find jobs, and just how financial incentives are structured would be critically important.

But if new funding is made available for programs designed expressly to help learners get jobs or keep jobs, surely it makes sense to take account of employment outcomes—job placement and retention.

Unanswered questions. An influx of adult learners seeking fast, job-focused reskilling and upskilling would require many changes at CUNY colleges—few aspects of campus life would go untouched.

What kinds of instructors should be allowed to teach the new courses? What’s the right—or possible—mix of in-person, online and hybrid instruction? How can New York City’s other training and service providers—community groups, nonprofits, faith organizations and others—partner with CUNY colleges to enhance outcomes for students? How should student supports be reconfigured for older, working learners who do not matriculate at the college?

The vision laid out in these pages is just the beginning. If CUNY colleges take on the challenge of upskilling New Yorkers for the recovery, there are many decisions ahead and much work to be done.

Programs should be measured and rewarded on the basis of graduates’ employment outcomes.





WHAT'S NEEDED FROM THE SYSTEM

Just as no family can change direction without consequences for all family members, so there can be no significant shift at CUNY without change across the system—on college campuses, but also at the central administrative office.

In normal times, CUNY Central plays many roles—sharing information, setting standards, convening stakeholders, modeling best practices, enforcing regulations, maintaining shared infrastructure and collecting and funneling funding, among other activities.

The balance of power has shifted back and forth over the years—some central administrations have exerted more authority than others. Still, even when Central is strongest, the colleges march mostly to their own tune.

This decentralized structure has many advantages—every borough is different, student bodies vary. No one size fits all in New York City. But the Covid crisis—a global pandemic and an economy coming back from collapse—argues, at least in the short term, for stronger central authority.

What's needed: a system that plans and executes like a system, not a disjointed collection of campuses.

More centralization might also yield surprising benefits for colleges: more support from Central and more freedom to focus on the campus issues that matter most to them.

Charting the new course. What's needed from Central starts with leadership: a decisive pivot, a new framing of the mission and a new sense of urgency—all communicated persuasively by the chancellor and his team.

Without leadership of that kind, it's unlikely that the system will respond adequately to the magnitude of the crisis. Experimentation and innovation on college campuses will be tentative and insufficient. Employers seeking to train or hire will not know to look to CUNY. Working adults in search of solutions will likely turn elsewhere—to training providers with a better track record of serving adult learners.

This is a moment for CUNY Central to declare that dramatic times require dramatic changes and the system is taking on a new role—engine of the city's economic recovery.

The system has many tools at its disposal in announcing this new direction: media, marketing, relationships with major employers and leverage with policymakers at City Hall and in Albany.

'We're open for business for unemployed adult learners. We're putting this challenge on a par with our traditional academic mission.'

The message that's needed: "We're open for business for unemployed adult learners. We're putting this challenge on a par with our traditional academic mission. And we're prepared to make hard choices if need be—we're going to put resources behind the new approach and support colleges that step up to help meet the goal."

Recruiting adult learners. A second core challenge for Central: recruiting adult learners, few of whom now think of CUNY as a destination for job training.

Individual campuses too must play a role in recruiting learners. But only Central has the resources—the voice and reach—to make the difference that’s needed, breaking through to a constituency that doesn’t think college is for them or has no knowledge of the CUNY system.

What’s needed: ads on the subways, stories in the media, an all-out social media campaign and, perhaps most important, a new kind of collaboration with community groups and the public workforce system—partners known and trusted by working adults who can direct them to CUNY programs.

But bringing midcareer learners to campus is only a first step. A 30- or 40-something adult with a job and a family has very different needs than the recent high school graduates who now make up the bulk of CUNY students—75 percent, compared to less than two-thirds at community colleges nationwide.¹⁵

As CUNY pivots to serve adult learners, Central should assess their needs and plan backward. The questions to ask: not what capacity do we have and how do we tweak it, but what do these learners need and how do we build it?

How should the system rethink course offerings and reengineer the way it delivers services to rise to the challenge of a dramatically different student body?

Labor market information and other infrastructure. In the post-Covid era, even more than in the past, CUNY colleges will need the central office to provide infrastructure—systemwide resources they can build on as they develop new course offerings.

The most important of these resources is labor market information.

What sectors are expected to reopen, when? What sectors are anticipating meaningful growth in the months and years ahead? What new skills

do workers need? How to ensure that supply matches demand? If the city needs 6,000 HVAC technicians equipped to install and manage HEPA filters, for example, CUNY should not be training 600—or 60,000.

As the city emerges from the Covid crisis, no one knows the answers to these questions, and traditional labor market information—from government sources and even job posting platforms—may be of little use.

What’s needed at CUNY Central: a state-of-the-art labor market information research center that provides granular, real-time data to guide colleges’ decisions about programming.

What’s needed at CUNY Central: a state-of-the-art labor market information research center.

The New York City Labor Market Information Service housed at the CUNY Graduate Center has the kind of research capability that’s needed but currently caters primarily to non-CUNY clients. Why not bring that center to scale and harness it as a compass for CUNY colleges?

Other common infrastructure needs that Central can and should help with: online capacity, ACE division data, perhaps a centralized system of student supports for older learners.

Every campus administrator will have a list, and the system is unlikely to have the resources to meet every request.

But even in lean times, CUNY Central will have access to philanthropic dollars out of reach to individual colleges, and it should use this funding to bolster innovation on campuses across the system.

Systemwide strategic planning. A last critical challenge for CUNY Central: aligning offerings across campuses to build on comparative advantage and eliminate redundancy.

Consider one of the most popular fields among workforce students, in New York as elsewhere in America: allied health programs.

Virtually every CUNY campus offers courses in allied health. Some colleges have more experience than others and a better reputation among health care employers. Colleges compete with each other to partner with hospitals to provide opportunities for nursing clinicals. And little if any thinking is devoted to matching supply with demand—in health care or other in-demand industries.

It's a recipe for inefficiency, troubling even in the best of times, and CUNY will need a better-tooled, more precise approach to meet demand in the post-Covid era.

Among other new challenges: every college program that requires hands-on learning—nursing, automotive, the skilled trades—is working to reinvent itself to accommodate online instruction and social distancing.

A more strategic, systemwide approach would eliminate this duplication and redundancy.

CUNY Central need not pick winners and losers among college campuses—that kind of central planning is all but sure to backfire, especially in a fluid post-Covid economy.

But there are other, subtler ways to approach the challenge: outcomes-based incentives, rewards for colleges that collaborate to provide instruction, perhaps a citywide planning process built around centers of excellence.

What's needed from CUNY Central: clear goals, systemwide standards and a method for rewarding campuses that meet these standards, helping the university achieve its objectives.

Bottom line: the Covid crisis puts new pressure on CUNY to think like a system and organize for efficiency. Challenging times require bottom-up innovation but also centralized planning and coordination, and what's needed in the post-Covid era is a systemic, citywide approach.

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FUNDING

Finding new funding for education—especially career and technical education—is a challenge at any time, let alone in a state facing a \$13.3 billion budget shortfall and worse fiscal prospects ahead.

But the political calculus is also surely different now as the number of unemployed Americans approaches the number left jobless in the depth of the Great Depression.

Budget priorities, state and federal, are shifting dramatically. Immediate needs are rising to the fore—and what need could be more immediate than putting people back to work? What policymaker can ignore the need for fast, job-focused reskilling and upskilling to fuel economic recovery?

There are three possible sources of funding for the pivot that's needed at CUNY colleges: federal funding, state funding and private philanthropic dollars.

The debate in Washington

Two months into the Covid crisis, bipartisan policymaking in Washington had all but ground to a halt. The willingness to compromise that prevailed briefly in the first days of the pandemic was in scarce supply as Congress considered a fourth stimulus package and, for the first time since the virus struck, addressed the workforce needs that lie ahead for the nation.

Democrats and Republicans differ sharply on how to confront these needs and how much to spend, but a handful of ideas have attracted interest on both sides of the aisle—most of them, proposals for federal funding to be channeled through the states.

Two of the most promising options on the table: more flexibility in how states can spend Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) dollars and Pell Grants for learners in short, job-focused college programs.

The political calculus is surely different now as the number of unemployed Americans approaches the number left jobless in the Great Depression.

As is, for all practical purposes, Pell funding is available only to students enrolled on the credit side of the college who are working to earn academic certificates or degrees, and it covers only programs that are at least a semester in length.

For several years now, a growing group of Democrats and Republicans has endorsed Pell reform—a proposal known as “workforce Pell” or “short-term Pell”—that would make grants available to students enrolled in short, job-focused programs that lead to industry-recognized credentials and skills in demand in the labor market.

This legislation is being discussed again now, and few federal fixes would be better suited to help learners pay for fast, job-focused upskilling and reskilling of the kind so badly needed in New York and elsewhere.

Also percolating among Republicans in Washington: personal reemployment accounts that laid-off workers who return to work in a timely

fashion could spend on reskilling programs of their choice.

Another idea under discussion among Democrats and Republicans: a new round of competitive grants modeled on the Obama-era Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) grant program.

Any and all of these ideas could increase spending on job-focused upskilling at CUNY and the State University of New York (SUNY).

But much will depend on whether or not colleges are ready to offer the training that's needed.

Workforce Pell, WIOA flexibility and personal reemployment accounts would all provide funding that followed learners to the career-focused programs of their choice. And education and training providers that are not competitive—not offering demand-driven programs or attracting learners—would expect to see far fewer dollars than those with robust enrollments.

What's needed in Albany

Policymakers in Albany face a twofold challenge: channeling federal Covid-relief funding as effectively as possible and leveraging state education dollars to spur a faster economic recovery.

The goal in both cases: to ensure that money gets into the hands of the learners who need it most and boosts programs in a position to put New Yorkers back to work.

Federal dollars. It's easy to squander federal spending that flows through the states for workforce education—to spend it mostly on administrative costs instead of training or on programs poorly aligned with rapidly changing labor market needs.

How to avoid these risks: state programs should be designed to ensure that as much federal money as possible goes directly to learners, and all training dollars should come with a requirement for robust employer engagement—including, for companies in a position to do their share, contributing toward the cost.

Also critically important: ensuring that ample WIOA funding flows to community college programs developed in partnership with employers.

State spending. Existing state education dollars should be targeted to accelerate economic recovery, and in Albany, as in Washington, what's needed starts with more flexibility.

Like Pell Grants, the state's Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) and Excelsior Scholarships are largely off limits to learners in noncredit programs and courses shorter than a semester. Even part-time students in credit-bearing programs have trouble gaining access—an all but insurmountable barrier for older learners of the kind who will need help most as the city recovers from the pandemic.

It's easy to squander federal spending that flows through the states for workforce education.

Even in the current budget crisis, there's a strong case for increased funding that helps New Yorkers acquire the skills they need to get back to work. But even if no new resources are available, policymakers in Albany can make a big difference by making TAP and Excelsior more flexible—opening the way for learners in short, job-focused, noncredit programs to get the training they need.

This won't happen by itself. What's needed on the ground across the state: advocacy—from educators at CUNY and SUNY, employers and employer groups in New York City and elsewhere, nonprofits that serve New Yorkers who would benefit from job-focused upskilling, faith groups, community leaders, influential media and others.

It shouldn't be hard to make the case or explain the need for short, job-focused programs to put people back to work and revitalize the New York economy.

Philanthropic dollars

Philanthropic dollars cannot replace public-sector spending on higher education. Community colleges are by definition taxpayer-funded—both a public good and a public responsibility—and only government can provide the backing that’s needed on the scale that’s needed in the wake of the pandemic.

But private philanthropy can play an important role in helping to underwrite the fast, job-focused training needed for a New York recovery.

New York’s robust philanthropic sector, the envy of cities nationwide, has made substantial investments over the years in CUNY and in workforce education. Increasingly in recent years, this support has included incentives for CUNY colleges to put career preparation more at the center of their mission and culture, partnering with noncollege training providers, building bridges to employers, improving access to credit for prior learning and other initiatives. A systemwide CUNY push to upskill New Yorkers

for the post-Covid economy would be a fitting next step and a major leap forward for CUNY career programs.

How can philanthropy help? Much will depend on the policy debate in Washington and Albany.

One option: if policymakers, state or federal, rewrite the rules to make workforce dollars or student financial aid more flexible, the New York philanthropic sector can provide badly needed supports for learners and for CUNY colleges. Among the most pressing needs: seeding colleges’ capacity to provide student supports for adult learners and opening a new labor market information research center, perhaps by repurposing the unit that already exists at the CUNY Graduate Center.

A second option, if neither Washington nor Albany comes through with new support: one or more philanthropic donors could fund a pilot—short, job-focused upskilling and reskilling offered by CUNY in partnership with employers in one or two in-demand sectors, perhaps IT or health care.



LOOKING AHEAD

As the nation battles the pandemic, many Americans are discovering what Albert Einstein grasped long ago: in the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity.

Covid is intensifying demand for fast, job-focused upskilling and reskilling for mid-career adults, employed and unemployed. But the need for skills training and career education is hardly new. Long before the Covid crisis, technological change was transforming the economy and with it, labor market needs—demanding more extensive and more sophisticated skills from workers in virtually every industry. Looking ahead, this trend can only accelerate as automation and artificial intelligence upend the economy and redouble the return the skills.

What this means for CUNY: what's needed now in response to the Covid crisis is of a piece with what will be needed increasingly in years ahead, as more and more New Yorkers see their jobs transformed by new technology and need timely reskilling to keep up with the pace of change.

The Covid crisis, tragic as it has been for many Americans, is an opportunity to accelerate the change that's needed across CUNY—to embrace a broader mission, develop new programs, launch new delivery models, recruit an expanded customer base and find new, more flexible funding streams, among other reforms.

The Covid contraction is the pressing challenge, and New Yorkers must act urgently to address it. But the crisis also creates an opportunity to rethink and rebuild for the future—CUNY colleges, CUNY Central and policymakers in Albany acting together to build a talent pipeline that will serve New York and New Yorkers for decades to come.

Covid is intensifying demand for fast, job-focused upskilling. But the need for skills training and career education is hardly new.

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