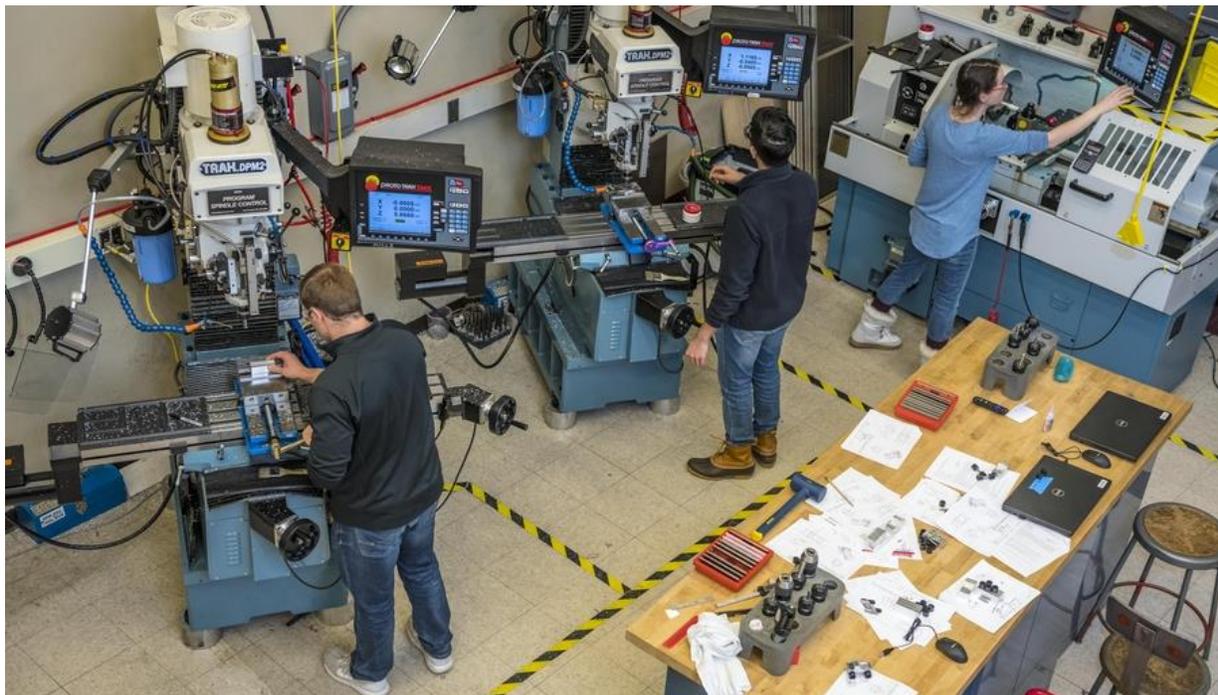


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Can community colleges be a post-Covid engine of economic recovery?

Q&A with Tamar Jacoby, January 27, 2021



*Many of the trends and changes foreseen for the future of work – automation, displacement and the need for midcareer training – have come crashing into the present during the coronavirus pandemic. Tamar Jacoby, president and CEO of **Opportunity America**, is at the forefront of the movement to utilize community colleges as laboratories to prepare Americans for the challenges of the new workplace. She spoke with *Spotlight* about a new study that attempts to assess the level of innovation in job training programs at community colleges across the nation. The conversation has been lightly edited for length and content.*

***Spotlight:* Let's start with some background and scene-setting on community colleges and how they have been impacted by the pandemic.**

Jacoby: Let's start with an even bigger frame, pre-COVID. The big change that's been happening in the world, and COVID has intensified it, is what we used to quaintly call the "future of work" – meaning automation and the restructuring of the workplace that goes with it. That's been coming at us for 60 years. It has already transformed manufacturing in

America and, even before COVID, it had started to transform retail. It's been encroaching on sectors across the economy, and now COVID has sharply accelerated it. Changes people thought might take a decade happened in a week during the pandemic – obvious changes like Zoom, but also things that no one ever thought would happen, like robots in meatpacking plants.

What the future of work means for education: it's going to exacerbate the divide between education haves and education have-nots. It's creating high rewards for every increment of postsecondary education, but the people who used to get by with just high school are going to be lost unless they get something more. They need technical skills, but also problem-solving skills they didn't necessarily need in the past. Automation creates new jobs that require familiarity with technology – that's obvious. But it also creates jobs that require what some people call "human" skills – critical thinking, problem solving, communication. Someone has to program the robots and repair them when they break down – a job that requires technical skills, but also thinking through the problem and getting to the bottom of it.

Bottom line: Even before the pandemic, the divide was growing between college-educated people facing lots of opportunities and high school-educated people with few job prospects. And COVID has sharpened that divide in an alarming way. The faster automation arrives, the more high school graduates need something beyond high school. And now of course there are also thousands of waiters and salespeople and hotel clerks who need to find new jobs in new industries. And that doesn't happen automatically – they need training.

So, the question for the country is who's going to provide the postsecondary education and training that's needed to bridge this divide – training people who need something more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree? We have lots of different kinds of training providers in America: boot camps and apprenticeships and government job training. But none of them have the reach and scale of community colleges. There are 18,000 people in boot camps, or there were before the pandemic. There are 12 million people in community colleges.

The future of work threatens to exacerbate the divide between education haves and education have-nots.

So, community colleges have a lot of potential, but they also have a very mixed record – including stubbornly low graduation rates. And there's a lot of confusion, including among community college educators, about what exactly their mission should be. Is the mission primarily job-focused training, or are they really junior colleges preparing people to transfer to four-year institutions? Many community colleges try to be everything to everyone and end up doing nothing well.

The good news is that in the last decade or so, there's been a lot of exciting experimentation and innovation on community college campuses, particularly in the programs that offer job-focused learning. Educators at colleges across the US have grasped that they're positioned to play an essential role. They see that they're the only institution with the national infrastructure – the reach and scale and facilities – to provide the training we need, and many are working hard to find new ways to focus and deliver it. What we don't know is how wide or deep this innovation is, and that's where my current project comes in.

Institutions of higher education report abundant data to state and federal government, but a lot of the most effective job training happens on the noncredit, nondegree side of the college. People who need new skills to get a job or a better job don't necessarily want to sit in a classroom for two or three years slogging away at a degree – and by the way, that's one of the reasons community college enrollments have dropped in the pandemic. People in that position want a fast, focused eight- or 12-week course that leads directly to a job. And these short, job-focused programs are generally housed on the noncredit side of the college. But that division often reports little or no data to a state or federal agency. So, we have this big black box where we know a lot exciting work is happening, but because we have no data, we don't really know what's inside the box.

One-third of community colleges have responded to our survey.

My organization is trying to address that gap with a national survey, asking community colleges to tell us what they're doing to prepare people for the workforce, whether on the credit side or the noncredit side. Do they take their workforce mission seriously? Are they taking advantage of their noncredit division to offer shorter, more job-focused programs? Are they enrolling midcareer adults? How closely are they partnering with employers to make sure they're teaching up-to-date skills – as opposed to last year's or last decade's popular coding language that no one's using any more? Are they offering alternative credentials that measure skills rather than seat time?

We're in the middle of the survey – it will be in the field till early February, and so far, about a third of community colleges nationwide have responded. But meanwhile, 14 states were so eager to get our data before their legislatures convened in January that they encouraged their colleges to respond in late fall. And we were thrilled, because of course that's exactly what we hope people will use our data for – making a case to policymakers.

If you're a governor with a shrinking budget, you want to spend it on something that's going to put people back to work. And if you think of your community colleges as second-tier institutions with falling enrollments and poor graduation rates, you probably aren't going to give them much extra money. But if you think of them as engines of economic recovery, you're much more likely to invest in them. That's the case we want to help make to state policymakers, and our survey results – early data from 127 colleges in 14 states – support that case.

And what does that early data show?

The first thing we found is that the realities on the ground at these colleges are changing even faster than our questions could accommodate – that's really interesting, but of course it's also a challenge.

More concretely, we found that the noncredit side accounts for about a third of all community college enrollments. And I think by the time we're finished – by the time we look at the whole sample – that number will grow a little. About 60 percent of that noncredit enrollment is job training. And more than a third of community college students are earning competency-based credentials – industry certifications – that signal skills rather than seat time. That's great news.

The big challenge we found – and we knew we’d find it but had no idea of the scale – is funding. By law, you cannot use your Pell Grant for a short, noncredit course. I can use my Pell Grant to study Sociology 101 and earn an associate degree with zero value in the labor market. But I cannot use my Pell Grant to enroll in a 12-week welding program that will set me up to earn \$150,000 a year. I mean, how crazy is that? And our data show community colleges struggling to cover the costs of workforce programs. Employers pay for about 20 percent. Colleges cobble together TANF money and other means-tested federal benefits and federal and state workforce dollars. But the lion’s share of funding, more than 40 percent of it, comes from students – often unemployed workers trying to reboot their careers. And in my view, this is something we need to address. We as a nation need to be doing more to help learners pay for job-focused education and training.

Where is this issue on the priorities list of the new administration?

That’s a good question. There have been bipartisan bills of various kinds to create what’s called short-term Pell or workforce Pell. They’ve floated around for the past three, four, five years – usually envisioned as amendments to the Higher Education Act. Higher Education Act reauthorization is overdue – but who knows when it will happen. The Democratic Party is divided on the issue of free college, and many Republicans are opposed to it, so that will be a flashpoint, and I don’t know that the Higher Education Act is going to be the first priority in the new Congress.

Is there funding that would help community colleges in the new COVID stimulus proposal from the Biden administration?

There is, but it’s not targeted specifically for job-focused programs. In previous recessions – 2009 – we spent a lot of money on workforce training. And there are several proposals floating around today – money for the public workforce system and for a big, new competitive grants program for community colleges. But I’m not sure one-time grants, no matter how big, are really the best way to help community colleges. I think student aid – scholarships – is the best tool. Let’s put money in the pockets of the people who need training and give them as much information as we can – and then let them spend the money where they think they’ll get the upskilling or reskilling they need to improve their position in the labor market.

Tamar Jacoby is president of Opportunity America.