

NEW YORK'S POST-COVID COMMUNITY COLLEGE CHALLENGE

By Tamar Jacoby
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In New York, as nationwide, most community colleges have a split personality – part academically oriented junior college preparing students to transfer to four-year colleges and universities, part vocational school preparing learners for the workforce.

The academic mission has traditionally received more respect and funding, while the job-focused mission, although important to many students and the regional economy, is often seen as second-tier.

But the COVID economic shock is posing a host of new questions. At New York State's roughly 40 community colleges, as nationwide, the number of students enrolling in traditional, two-year academic education has plummeted, while at many schools, demand for short job-focused programs is soaring. Displaced by the pandemic and the economic change it's unleashing, millions of New Yorkers need to reskill for new jobs, often in new, unfamiliar industries.

The challenge for the state's community colleges: Can they pivot to address this changing demand, putting job training and career success more at the center of their mission and culture?

Even before the pandemic, many colleges in other states were rethinking their emphasis on academic programs. As more and more students, many of them midcareer adults, showed up at college looking for short, skills-focused courses rather than two-year degree programs, many schools responded by adjusting their mission. And the pandemic has only accelerated the shift, driving up demand for training to bridge the gap between unemployed workers and employers struggling to fill jobs.

New York's community colleges lag behind. They're moving toward a job-focused mission, but more slowly than many other states – to the detriment of job-focused learners and the New York economy.

At community colleges nationwide, students preparing for the world of work account for 54 percent of enrollments; those studying traditional academic subjects account for 46 percent. In New York – the City University of New York (CUNY) and the State University of New York (SUNY) – the ratio is reversed: 55 percent academic education to 45 percent vocational programs.

Nationwide, many colleges rely heavily on noncredit "continuing education" to provide job-focused courses. Among other advantages, unlike slow-moving academic departments, which often need up to two years to obtain approval for a new program, noncredit departments do not answer to accreditors or faculty committees. So they can respond in real time to the changing needs of employers and job seekers, making sure that the skills they teach are in demand in the local labor market.

Nationwide, nearly 60 percent of all noncredit learners are in job-focused programs. In New York, the number is just 40 percent, with most noncredit students enrolled in college prep courses or recreational classes like French cooking and photography.

Degree-seeking New York students are also much less likely to be preparing for the workplace. Just 23 percent of New York community college credit enrollments are job-focused, compared with a national average of 34 percent.

It isn't easy for colleges to rethink their mission. Obstacles include the school's traditional culture, academically-minded faculty and – perhaps most important – funding.

Workforce education is expensive. Technical programs must purchase costly equipment. Instructors with industry experience expect private-sector-level salaries. And unlike, say, English or sociology, phlebotomy cannot be taught in a lecture hall. Hands-on learning requires a much lower student-teacher ratio.

Yet few states provide adequate funding for workforce education, and noncredit programs are at a particular disadvantage. Despite the long-term benefits for the city and the state, Albany provides no funding at all for noncredit programs that prepare learners to succeed in the workplace.

It will require change in many quarters to remedy this imbalance, but both Albany and City Hall can help.

Gov. Hochul's proposed budget would expand the state's Tuition Assistance Program to cover some noncredit education – an important start that should be approved by the Legislature. But scholarship funding would cover only tuition, and only for some courses – not the full cost of career programs.

It's a golden opportunity for Mayor Adams, who has spoken often about the need to accelerate economic opportunity and reconnect forgotten communities to growing

industries. Why not create a fund to cover stipends for noncredit learners enrolled in programs leading to well-paying jobs in high-growth New York industries?

Stipends should come with strict conditions – clear definitions of well-paying jobs and high-demand industries. Only courses developed with input from employers should be eligible, and employer partners should have to promise to interview qualified graduates.

How much would it cost? At \$1,000 per student, perhaps \$45 million – not much more than a rounding error on the \$1.4 billion the city set aside this year for CUNY community colleges.

It would be a small price to pay for a big boost in economic mobility and, ultimately, a more competitive city.