

# TRANSFORMING U.S. WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY CONFERENCE

## Panel Summary Report #4

### Emerging Trends in Education and Training Programs: Credentials, Competencies, and Curriculum

by Michelle Van Noy, Ph.D.

Shifting student demographics, changing technology, and a push for greater accountability and improved outcomes in the postsecondary education and training system are fostering new ideas about how U.S. postsecondary education and training can be structured and delivered. Reform efforts are under way to address current trends in postsecondary education and training and may help increase the credential attainment of public workforce system participants, especially low-income individuals. This panel covered a wide range of issues in postsecondary education and training related to these current trends and reform efforts.

The moderator, **Michelle Van Noy**, Associate Director at the Education and Employment Research Center at Rutgers University, began the discussion by asking for each panelist's thoughts on the biggest challenge and opportunity in meeting the needs of the workforce. **Jim Jacobs**, President of Macomb Community College in Michigan, discussed issues facing community colleges, including how their programs are organized across credit and noncredit programs and the implications for the types of credentials they offer their students. **Mau-reen Conway**, Vice President of The Aspen Institute, discussed the importance of connections between the education system and other institutions in the community to help students navigate the transition to the labor market; she also raised questions about how to measure postsecondary outcomes, whether

colleges are providing people with necessary skills, and whether there are enough good jobs for people with skills. **Judy Mortrude**, Director of the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways at the Center for Law and Social Policy, reflected on the need for system building to align education and career opportunities. **Stephen Crawford**, Research Professor at George Washington University, commented that part of the problem is a lack of coherence in how institutions organize their programs and therefore a lack of coherence and relevance in preparation for the workforce.

Based on his experience leading the Community College Workforce Consortium, Jacobs spoke about three lessons to help postsecondary education better meet workforce needs. First, institutions should engage in peer learning to see what does and does not work. Second, it is important for colleges to consider how workforce issues are dealt with and how their institution functions. Third, it is essential for colleges to understand their community through deep engagement with employers and understanding of industry trends. While most colleges' efforts are organized around student success, they need to reconsider that an important component of student success is employment and earnings.

Building on the idea of connecting student success with workforce issues, Mortrude discussed the importance of career pathways and the premise that these fundamentally start with labor market demand. Career pathways must be built upon credentials that have labor market value and can give individuals a chance to advance in their career as they gain education. At the same time, career pathway reforms have student success mechanisms in place to provide support services to students who need them, as well as advising to help students navigate their educational and labor market options. She commented on opportunity posed by the amount of investment in career pathways from foundations as well as U.S. Department of Labor Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grants. She highlighted the large opportunity posed by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act in terms of system building that can add to the work of the Alliance for Quality Career Pathways, where 10 states have built a framework of quality standards for a career pathways system. A major challenge in this type of system-building work is definitional in terms of getting partners in a system to understand each other's language and definitions.

In terms of system building, Conway discussed partnerships between community colleges and local nonprofit organizations. A challenge is determining appropriate metrics to measure outcomes, while keeping in mind that what is ultimately important is what will be best for the student. She also raised the issue of the difference in how institutions connect with employers. Often colleges have an exclusive focus on curriculum development whereas workforce partners may collect information on hiring requirements (i.e., is there a drug test and/or driver's license requirement?), expected hiring trends (i.e., do employers expect to hire?), and typical pay for workers (i.e., is it worth the time investment to pursue a credential?). However, the two sets of information are often not brought together.

Crawford then discussed the problem of the proliferation of certificates, certifications, and degrees, and the amount of confusion that exists in making sense of all of these credentials. He argued for a coherent common language for defining competencies to be available in a labor market

information system. This system would use common terminology to provide information on what a credential means, what its labor market value is, where it is applicable, and what skills it represents. He described a project he is currently involved in with the American National Standards Institute to develop a credentialing registry and a common set of terms to describe credentials.

On the issue of credentials, Conway noted her research suggests that much of the value of credentials comes from the relationship to the college. That is, if a local college has deep knowledge of industry, there will be trust — in the same way that there may be trust with a national industry-based credential. Jacobs also addressed the question of why credential requirements are being raised. He used nursing as an example where associate degrees are increasingly being replaced as requirements with the Bachelor's degree. He posed the question: *Is this trend to have students spend more time in the classroom a useful way to spend time rather than in more hands-on activities?*

The panelists offered ideas on how the system could be improved to better serve low-income populations. Jacobs highlighted the crucial importance of Pell Grants for low-income community college students. Others raised concerns about changes in Pell Grants, particularly the elimination of summer Pell Grants, which is an additional barrier for low-income students who need to follow non-traditional timing in their education. Conway and Jacobs both emphasized the importance of institutions providing students with information to navigate the labor market in terms of understanding real hiring requirements for jobs and equipping students with the skills to find jobs (as opposed to simply finding jobs for students). Furthermore, faculty have an important role in advising students for employment. Some may not be prepared to fill this role, while others may have deep industry connections. Either way, students have an implicit trust of faculty and are most likely to turn to them for career advice.

## About the Author

Michelle Van Noy, Ph.D. is a former researcher at the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University. She is now Associate Director at the Education and Employment Research Center at Rutgers.

## About this Series

In October 2014, the Federal Reserve Banks of Atlanta and Kansas City and the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University hosted a national conference titled, *Transforming U.S. Workforce Development Policies for the 21st Century*. The goal of the conference was to provide a forum for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to share perspectives on transformative education and workforce development policies.

Over 250 people, including business and labor leaders, scholars, educators, policy advocates, researchers, and workforce development professionals, attended the conference. More than 60 national and international experts shared recommendations for developing policies and programs that will meet the nation's needs for talented workers.

This publication, the fourth in a series of nine reports, highlights the discussions and recommendations that were offered during the panel, "Emerging Trends in Education and Training Programs: Credentials, Competencies, and Curriculum."

Previous reports in the series can be downloaded at the links below:

*Reforming Workforce Development Policies for American Workers*

*Strategies for Helping Long-term Unemployed Job Seekers Return to Work*

*Aligning Employers and Workforce Development Strategies*

## Conference Videos

View interviews with some of the members of this panel at the links below:

Stephen Crawford

Jim Jacobs

## Photo Gallery



*Michelle Van Noy*



*Judy Mortrude and Jim Jacobs (l-r)*





*Maureen Conway and Stephen Crawford (l-r)*



*Maureen Conway, Stephen Crawford, Michelle Van Noy, Judy Mortrude, and Jim Jacobs (l-r)*