



John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development

Transcript Episode 8: Aaron Fichtner

Podcast Introduction (*music playing*): Welcome to *Work Trends RU*, presented by the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. In this podcast, we speak with experts, policymakers, and thought leaders about issues affecting work, education, training, the economy, and well-being. Each episode of *Work Trends RU* provides insights into important topics like changes in the job market, economic challenges, and how artificial intelligence is shaping the future of work. Our guests share their thoughts and reflections on how public and private sectors can better address the needs of workers, job seekers, and employers. Join us as we discuss the evolving landscape of work and education on *Work Trends RU*. (*music ends*)

Carl Van Horn: Welcome to *Work Trends RU*. I'm Carl Van Horn and I'm the director of the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development and a professor at Rutgers University and I'm the host of the program today.

Today we're fortunate to have as our guest Dr. Aaron Fichtner, who is the president of the New Jersey Council of Community Colleges.

Aaron's had a distinguished career. He started his career here the at the Heldrich Center probably about 25 years ago as a graduate research assistant, one of the first employee of the center, and then he eventually became the Assistant Director for Research, left to take a senior position in the state's Labor department, eventually becoming commissioner of the Department of Labor. And now for several years, he's been the president of the Council of New Jersey Community Colleges. So, Aaron, thanks so much for joining us today.

Aaron Fichtner: Carl, thank you. It's an honor to be here to have this conversation with you.

Carl Van Horn: Aaron, for people who may not be familiar with what the council does, could you just say a few words about what the work of the council is and what its goals are?

Aaron Fichtner: Sure. So, we have 18 community colleges here in New Jersey. They serve about 250,000 students. But as many people may know, we have a very decentralized structure of higher education in New Jersey. So, our council is enshrined in state law as the coordinating body for the 18 community colleges. So, we have a network system of community colleges. I'm sure we'll talk more about that in the conversation about what that means - implementation, governance, strategy. But our council exists to coordinate and to strengthen the 18 community colleges.

Our governance structure is interesting. We have a council of 36 members. Every president of every of the 18 colleges and every board chair is on our council. So, everything that we do as a council is driven by the will, the interests, the guidance, the consensus of those 18 colleges and their two representatives.

Carl Van Horn: Let's talk a little bit about community colleges. Talk about some of the positive impacts that you think community colleges have on students, employers, and the counties where they're located.

Aaron Fichtner: The colleges have a, a really significant impact in many ways. I talked about our 250,000 students. At the core of our mission for the last 50 years has been to expand access to higher education. As we have as a country and as a state put more emphasis on the need for more people to have post-secondary college degrees and credentials, community colleges have been essential in New Jersey and around the country in allowing more people who may not have had opportunities to pursue a college education. So, many, many of our students are first-generation college students. They are working parents. They are from diverse backgrounds all over the entire state. Our colleges offer an incredibly affordable way to start a college journey. They are open access institutions, which means that if you come to our college with a high school diploma, we will find a place for you and to help you on your journey. So, for many, many people across our state, community colleges are the only way to start a journey to a post-secondary degree or credential.

So, that really was the history of community colleges. But over time, the role of community colleges that we play in making sure that we have a skilled workforce for many of the key industries - go to your dentist, you go to a healthcare provider, go to any manufacturer in New Jersey, you are likely to find community college graduates in vital and essential roles throughout the economy. The role and the importance we have as community colleges in expanding access to everyone in New Jersey to some post-secondary experience and the role that we play in making sure that we've got a skilled workforce to propel economic growth, both of those are critical to the core mission of our colleges.

Carl Van Horn: Now, obviously, this has changed over time, and I'm sure it changes from one community college to another, but roughly speaking, what percentage of the students go on for a baccalaureate degree versus those who stop at, after two years, getting a credential and then go directly into the workforce, maybe later on getting a bachelor's degree, but not immediately.

Aaron Fichtner: The data is not as good as we would like it to be. It's something I think we hope to work with the state data system and other partners. But I think about 40% of our students will go on to pursue a bachelor's degree. We have about 20,000 graduates every year, 40% I think will go right into a four-year experience and transfer. Many will go into the workforce and pursue a career. Others will take a more less-linear approach to getting that four-year degree, maybe work for a while, save some money, go to a four-year college later. This is a really fluid situation in the sense that I think gone are the days when people would have a linear or full-time path to a four-year degree. I think more and more people are coming in and coming out of higher education, giving them opportunities to earn, to be able to have the money to be able to go to college, but also the other expectations in their lives. So, we have found, I think, over time, more and more of our students are in that flexible part-time mode of

trying to advance their lives and maybe not in a position where they can go full-time and in a linear way transfer to a four-year institution.

Carl Van Horn: That's certainly changed over time. I think many people have the image that this is just a pathway to a four-year degree. But obviously, it's much more than that. How do the counties differ in terms of their focus on those more vocationally oriented credentials? How do they work with employers to decide what they should focus on in their particular county?

Aaron Fichtner: Well, so I would say that, you know, we've seen a real transformation of our colleges over the last five to 10 years. Many of the colleges were created as transfer institutions 50 years ago when the focus was on expanding access. Over the last 10 plus years, more and more of our colleges have adopted a broader view, really embracing the notion that they are comprehensive institutions that have multiple purposes, not just helping people transfer, which is core to the mission that we talked about before. And so many of our colleges are on that journey to a much more comprehensive approach. All of them, though, have strong and increasingly strong relationships with employers. Our community colleges, as you may know, have had a long history of being one of the most important entities that prepare people for jobs in the healthcare industry. So, that's been a kind of core to the mission of community colleges with strong relationships with hospital systems and local health care employers. But, increasingly over the last, I think, five to 10 years, our colleges have expanded their relationships with manufacturing employers, with utilities, with tech companies, with a variety of partners, which has required the colleges to really rethink and restructure the work that they do to build those stronger partnerships with the broader economy.

Carl Van Horn: Can you give us some concrete examples of how some of those partnerships have worked in any of the counties that come to mind?

Aaron Fichtner: I think one good example is a really interesting partnership between three of our community colleges, Raritan Valley Community College, Middlesex College, and Mercer County Community College, to work with the pharmaceutical industry. We have a growing aseptic clean room manufacturing industry in New Jersey around cell therapy and cell and gene therapy, which is demanding a larger number of people who can work in clean room environments. Those three colleges have got together as part of a work that we're doing here at the council with employers to develop a curriculum to prepare students to work in aseptic manufacturing and biotechnology manufacturing. Those colleges were able to secure a significant investment from Johnson & Johnson as a corporate partner. So, building that kind of public-private partnership that we would like to see. These are programs that are on our non-credit side of our colleges, but all of them will have paths to students to be able to continue their journey to be able to earn an associate's degree over time. So, you may go to a, a manufacturing program that allows you to work in a clean room. You go to work for Johnson & Johnson. You can come back to community college. You can get additional credits that would earn you an associate's degree and then get you on a path to a bachelor's degree and maybe even more.

So, it's really the kind of stackable model that we are seeing our colleges really embrace working closely with employers who are helping us develop the curriculum. So, that's one example, but we're also doing similar work in everything from data science to manufacturing to renewable electric vehicle maintenance, a whole set of other industries that we've really, our

colleges have begun to work together to develop strong pathway curriculum that would help students get jobs but also continue their education over time.

Carl Van Horn: And when we talk about students, I think it's important for some of the listeners to hear a bit more about the diversity of those students because they're not all 18- and 19-year-olds or just coming out of high school. Say a little bit about those who are young adults or even older that are at enroll at the community college.

Aaron Fichtner: Yeah, it's a really, really good point. I'd say depending on the college, I'd say between 30 and 40% of our students are adults over the age of 25. That population has been growing over the last 10 years, I would say. And, so, we have an incredibly diverse set of students that come to community colleges, in different stages of their lives for different needs, for different goals. And I think one of the hallmarks of the community colleges is the ability to really serve those diverse students and their needs. So, we're seeing lot of students who may have come out of high school who went to work, worked in retail or other industries that they realized was not going to give them the pathway to advancement and decided to come back to a community college and to pursue a college dream. And so, I think that has been, that diversity of our students is really an important point. It's caused our colleges to really commit to serving people where they are in ways of changing, uh, our student services and our supports, our program schedules, the kinds of offerings that our colleges deliver.

Carl Van Horn: I assume that counties and, since they play a big role in supporting these colleges, have an important input into the shape of those colleges and what emphasis they should have in terms of their growing the economy within a particular county.

Aaron Fichtner: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that is actually one of the strengths of our system of community colleges is that they are driven by the needs of their local communities and by their counties. We have a unique model in New Jersey in that our community colleges are technically called county colleges. The majority of the board of trustees are appointed by the county. The governor gets to appoint two of our trustee members at each of our colleges. The original model for community college funding when they were created was that a third of the funding would come from the state, a third would come from the counties, and a third would come from tuition. We've seen that third, a third, a third model never really come to fruition. Tuition at our colleges covers about 45% of the cost of delivering education, much of which gets covered by financial aid, I should say. The counties support the colleges 35% of their funding and then the rest of the funding comes from the state. So, that gives the counties an important role as you said to make sure that the colleges are responsive to the needs, the vision of their local communities.

Carl Van Horn: So, talk a little bit about the role of the association. How do you determine your priorities and what are they this year or in the next year? What do you see the association doing to advance the interests of the college?

Aaron Fichtner: We have worked very very hard to bring the 18 colleges together in a variety of committees and groups to develop a common vision for the future of community colleges. We call it our *Opportunity Agenda*. It was adopted first about a year and a half ago, Spring 2024, and updated this year, that lays out the priorities of the colleges. That was developed by the presidents, by the committees of our colleges with the input of our affinity groups, which

are groups of senior staff in multiple roles, variety of roles across the colleges. So, we are focusing on four really important priorities that are going to and are really guiding the work that we do at the council to bring the colleges together. And I'll touch the four really briefly. The first is to expand opportunities for high school students. Colleges have a lot of partnerships with high schools to help students get on a path to a college degree through dual enrollment, career advising. We are committed to expanding those kinds of partnerships to make sure every high school student in New Jersey has an opportunity to know about college options and to feel like they are on a path to a college degree or credential. We are focusing on reaching the adult population, we talked about them earlier. While we are a highly educated state in many, many ways, about 41 % of our adult population in New Jersey does not have a post-secondary credential or degree. I think we all know that as the economy continues to evolve, there's going to be more demand, more requirement that people have some post-secondary education. So, we're focusing, number two, on that adult population. Number three, we are focused on ensuring that when students come to our colleges, that they have the supports and the services that will allow them to stay in college and complete their degrees or their credentials. So, we have a series of initiatives and priorities around student support services and other kinds of student support so it helps students complete. And then our fourth largest category is around building pathways that can respond to the changing needs of our students and to the changing economy. And that's a broad set of priorities, everything from continuing to strengthen the transfer opportunities for students who want to go to a four-year college. It includes embedding more industry credentials into our credit program so students can leave a community college with an associate's degree and an industry credential. It includes increasing focus on giving credit for prior learning for students who come to us with having worked for a long time or earned credentials from other institutions, making sure that we are valuing that work. It also includes continuing to expand our industry partnerships to make sure that students who come to our colleges are getting the skills that would be demanded in the economy. So, we have a very robust plan for the work that we need to do as colleges and that we are committed to doing with partners in state government and county government and with the business community, labor unions, and a whole set of other partners.

Carl Van Horn: That's an ambitious agenda. Do you think you're being successful in helping people understand the various roles that community colleges play in New Jersey?

Aaron Fichtner: It is a complex and ever-changing challenge to make sure that New Jersey policymakers and our partners understand what our colleges do. I think there is a recognition when you're touching 250,000 lives every year, I think more New Jerseyans kind of understand the critical role that community colleges play. Probably most of us know somebody who's gone to a community college or whose kid has gone to a community college, so I think we're beginning to see some more traction. But, I think the point I would make is really, that we have been pushing is that the world of higher education is changing rapidly and that we are going to need to continue to think very differently about meeting students where they are, about giving people more opportunity for maybe shorter term credentials that can allow people to get a job and to come back to college over time, that we need to continue to focus more on that broader needs of the adult population and the economy.

Carl Van Horn: Overall, the demographics of the country and New Jersey is the total number of younger people going into post-secondary education is declining. Your market, if you will, is much larger than just people graduating from high school.

Aaron Fichtner: We've seen pretty steady declines in enrollment at our colleges since the Great Recession. We had a big peak in enrollment when unemployment spiked. People came back to community colleges, and we have seen kind of a steady and slow reduction in enrollment. So, we have to continue to think about how do we attract more people, how do we make sure that we are offering degrees, credentials, opportunities that are appealing to students, that can motivate students, and that can give them a path to a better life. And so, we are thinking a lot about those issues of being relevant. The decline of people going to post-secondary education is a real crisis, I think, for our state and for our country given the changing nature of the economy. And so, I think this is something that we will all be working on together is to think about what does the future of higher education look like so that it can be responsive, that it can attract more students. We have to continue to think about affordability. I think our colleges are very proud of the fact they offer a very affordable education. You can go to a community college full-time for a year about \$6,000. But still, for many, New Jerseyans, that is still too much. That is still too high of a cost, particularly when people are working multiple jobs to support their families and have to give up a job to come to a community college. So, we're going to need to continue to think about affordability, think about flexible models, more partnerships with employers to help people who are working have access to post-secondary opportunities. We're going to have to continue to think very, very creatively if we're going to meet this moment.

Carl Van Horn: Thank you very much for sharing that perspective. And I'm sure that if people want to learn more about it, they can dial into your website and find out what you're doing.

So, now I wanted to shift gears a little bit to sort of a fun part of our conversation. I like to ask everybody about their first job because I find that you learn a lot about a person and their perspective. So, what was the first pay job you had when you were a teenager or a young adult growing up in Georgia, as I recall, right?

Aaron Fichtner: Yeah. I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. In Junior year of high school, I took a job at Baskin-Robbins scooping ice cream at the local ice cream parlor. And, on my first day of work, they announced that not only would we have to serve the customers, but we would have to implement a new structure of different size scoops. And so, I spent, I think, the first two days of my job perfecting how to scoop a small, medium, and a large scoop of ice cream that met certain requirements on the scale. So, it was just my luck that they implemented that on my first day of, of work. But it was an important experience. Obviously, the usual things you would hear in a customer service job with large crowds out the door and trying to respond to a group of unruly customers looking for their ice cream and wanting it now and wanting it the way they wanted it.

But, y'know, I'm glad you asked this question because it is those jobs that teach us teamwork, customer service, how to work with diverse people, how to respond under pressure, all of those kind of core skills that stay with us no matter what career we pursue in the end.

Carl Van Horn: Well, Aaron, thank you so much for visiting with us. We wish you continued success in advancing the mission of the community colleges in New Jersey.

Aaron Fichtner: Thank you, Carl. The 13 years I spent at the Heldrich Center were very, very rewarding time for me. Appreciate the opportunity to work with you and all of the colleagues at the Heldrich Center.

Carl Van Horn: Thanks very much, Aaron, and we'll see you around soon.

Podcast Close (*music playing*): Thank you for joining us on today's episode of *Work Trends RU*, where we explore the issues affecting the future of work, education, and how the workforce can be better supported by both the public and private sectors. Tune in next time as we continue our conversations on the evolving landscape of work and education. (*music ends*)