Center for an Urban Future
Innovative Ideas. Independent Policy.



Commentary/Op-Ed - May 2015

Fulfilling CUNY's workforce promise

In this commentary, CUF senior fellow David Jason Fischer takes a close look at the City University of New York's role as a workforce development provider. While he finds that CUNY's adult and continuing education programs provide a path to economic advancement for thousands of New Yorkers, he argues that CUNY must address several structural, funding and cultural obstacles if it is to reach its potential as an engine of economic mobility and high-volume source of workforce talent for city employers.

by David Jason Fischer

For hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers, the path to economic advancement winds through the City University of New York's adult and continuing education programs. CUNY's potential power to help close the deep skills gaps and intractable disparities in educational outcomes that are partly driving income inequality motivates policymakers as well as students and workers: Mayor de Blasio has described CUNY as "the engine that [drives] New York's economy,"[1] and his Jobs for New Yorkers Task Force, convened last year to set a new course for workforce development in New York City, named CUNY as a vital partner in its final report (PDF). The City University itself weighed in with a thoughtful 2012 report, Jobs for New York's Future (PDF), that assessed opportunities in the local labor market and considered how CUNY could better prepare students for employment and careers.

Given all this attention, and CUNY's central place in the economic and cultural life of the city, its workforce-focused programs should serve as a pipeline of continuous talent replenishment in healthcare, information technology, professional services and other crucial economic sectors in New York City. Ideally, employers in these fields would closely inform curricula and define key skills to be taught, and seamlessly and routinely hire large numbers of program completers into entry-level, career track positions.

Yet for all its reach and resources, CUNY has never truly emerged as a vehicle for providing workforce solutions at scale. Data on CUNY's workforce outcomes are difficult to come by—itself suggesting workforce remains too low a priority to collect and publish relevant information—but the information available confirms that job placements happen by the handful, not the hundreds. And while virtually every campus maintains employer relationships, most are driven by individual rather than institutional ties and never grow beyond very modest size and limited focus. This commentary examines CUNY's adult and continuing education programs focused on workforce outcomes—credential attainment, employment, and advancement—as

distinct from its degree-track program offerings.

The reasons why CUNY has fallen short of its workforce potential range from how workforce programs are structured and funded, to the organization and culture of CUNY itself. Indeed, one challenge in assessing CUNY's institutional progress toward effective workforce development is the premise that CUNY functions as a singular institution. Reflecting the general dynamic of decentralization within CUNY, its campuses operate with near-total autonomy when it comes to workforce—a fact that renders CUNY a uniquely challenging potential partner for other city agencies and employers that operate citywide.

Within the CUNY system, no central funding source exists to support workforce programs, nor does CUNY require itsschools to report their employment or training outcomes. Incentives around funding and outcomes—specifically, the ability of each campus to place students without competition and claim unique relationships with employers and other stakeholders—provide motivation for schools to go it alone. Finally, many campus level administrators and faculty resist the notion that their mission is to produce "workers," particularly if doing so means ceding their autonomy through partnership with other CUNY schools. For all these reasons, CUNY cannot speak to employers, funders or government with one voice, and cannot leverage the economies of scale that should be available within such a large system.

Another obstacle is the longstanding gulf between campus-level continuing education (CE) programs, which explicitly focus on helping students achieve employment outcomes, and academic, for-credit programs that lead to degrees. Traditionally, CE programs do not offer course credit toward higher education degrees. (Similarly, academic programs rarely include opportunities to earn industry credentials that employers often value.) Beyond operational differences, schools' credit and CE divisions are separated by culture: while credit programs are relatively static, CE programs can change or disappear from one year to the next based on employer demand and available funding.

* * *

Daunting as these challenges are, recent developments offer some hope that CUNY is moving toward a more collective and effective approach to workforce programming. In September 2014, the system successfully concluded a three-year grant from the US Department of Labor's Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (TAACCCT) program for nearly $20 million. The grant launched CUNY CareerPATH (Preparation for Adults Through Training and Higher Education), an unprecedented eight-campus workforce collaboration[2] offering training in five industry tracks: allied health, business and entrepreneurship, education, food and hospitality, and manufacturing. In partnership with the NYC Labor Market Information Service, an office within CUNY's Center for Urban Research, participating schools identified job titles to target within each track; among these were community healthcare workers, medical billing specialists, cooks and hotel clerks, and mechanical engineering technicians.

CareerPATH served nearly 2,500 participants, mostly unemployed adults, through a mix of skills training, for-creditclassroom instruction, and employment assistance; 1,335 participants earned college credit[3] The programs featured innovative integration of academic and vocational content, such as math instruction within culinary training.

Beyond the quantifiable outcomes, CareerPATH helped move the system forward by creating structure and processes to support cross-campus collaboration. CUNY Central's workforce staff, responsible for managing CareerPATH, provided technical assistance for campus-level job developers and tools to support academic and career advisement and employer engagement as well as a framework to extend academic credit for some workforce programs at participating schools. The office continues to convene all Continuing Education deans and related program staff on a regular basis to share best practices and discuss possible collaborative partnerships, and has strengthened its analytical capacity through both LMIS and access to the Wage Reporting System data secured by state legislation last year.

While CareerPATH clearly achieved its outcome and system-building objectives, its long-term significance remainsuncertain. With the exception of healthcare, the initiative still featured separate tracks at different campuses—culinary arts at Kingsborough, entrepreneurship at the College of Staten Island, and so on—rather than true programmatic collaboration across multiple campuses. CUNY's application for a subsequent TAACCCT grant was unsuccessful, leaving the system without an obvious successor effort. The Central office hopes to bring their lessons learned to bear in multi-campus projects being developed by its new Office of Workforce Partnerships, created in response to the 2012 "Jobs for New York's Future" report, that will align to the city's emerging Industry Partnerships, starting with the Tech Talent Pipeline. The success of short-term training institutions like The Flatiron School and General Assembly has opened eyes across the CUNY system to opportunities missed in an emerging market for adult training.

Meanwhile, the long-standing walls between CE and degree programs are finally showing some cracks. At Kingsborough, school staff created articulation agreements after a number of CE hospitality students expressed interest in degree programs; at the same time, Kingsborough is creating programs for degree students to earn industry certifications that will help them secure employment. LaGuardia Community College similarly has begun to build bridges to credit toward degrees for CE students. At Hostos Community College, the statewide Next Generation NY Job Linkage program has helped the Career Services office push faculty to more closely engage with employers connected to the school's Aging/Health Studies and Office Technology programs. The progress on these campuses suggests potentially helpful directions to pursue change across the system.

* * *

Some of the resistance among CUNY educators and campus leaders to greater focus on workforce is driven by concern that the system might pursue this priority at the expense of CUNY's other missions: intellectual inquiry, academic research, and broadly educating informed, engaged citizens. Such worries are understandable, particularly in light of attacks on higher education systems elsewhere in the US.[4]

Yet CUNY is large enough and sufficiently well resourced—both in terms of dollars and in the universal sense of its importance to New York City—to do more to improve employment and career outcomes for its more than half a million students while maintaining its traditional missions. If anything, greater attention to students' subsequent career success and economic security should strengthen them as citizens and community members. With this in mind, we recommend the following steps for the City University is to fulfill its potential as an engine of human capital development and serve the role Mayor de Blasio and others have envisioned for it:

1. **CUNY Central should take a more active role in resource development for multi-campus workforce programs**. With a few exceptions such as the now-completed TAACCCT grant, CUNY campuses have been responsible for identifying their own funding streams for CE and training/placement. This works against the spread of best practices—since campuses are

actually or potentially competing against each other—and erodes the system's potential to function at scale. As the Office of Workforce Partnerships expands its role, a top priority should be to help multi-campus collaborations engage public and philanthropic funders for shared work.

2. **CUNY leaders and city policymakers should encourage and incentivize campuses to publicly report their workforce outcomes in detail**. CUNY's annual Performance Management Process publicly reports six-month job and educational placement rates for career and technical education program graduates on selected campuses.[5] This information is of limited value, however: the results are informed only by a voluntary survey of graduates, and make no connection between the efforts of campus workforce departments and students' subsequent outcomes. Asking all campuses to provide detail on program menus, enrollment and outcomes would send an important signal that these programs are an institutional priority—and raise the stakes around their performance.

3. **Interested campuses should explore aligning aspects of selected workforce programs**. As CUNY considers how best to engage the rest of the public workforce system through Industry Partnerships and other program connections, building greater commonality across campuses would strengthen the value proposition to employers and funders alike. If programs in healthcare, information technology and other priority sectors offer the same core set of skills and credentials for students—while retaining latitude for campus-level and employer-specific customization—the prospects for scalable collaboration with businesses in those sectors will improve.

[1] State of the City Remarks by Mayor de Blasio, as Prepared for Delivery, February 10, 2014: online at http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/045-14/state-the-city-remarks-mayor-de-blasio-prepared-delivery#/0

[2] Participating CUNY campuses were Borough of Manhattan Community College, Bronx Community College, College of Staten Island, Hostos Community College, Kingsborough Community College, LaGuardia Community College, New York City College of Technology, and Queensborough Community College.

[3] "CUNY Institutional Change as a Result of CUNY CareerPATH," online at http://www.cuny.edu/academics/conted/library/2014-11_PATH_Institutional_Change.pdf, accessed 3/25/15

[4] As one example, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, a likely 2016 Republican presidential candidate, proposed earlier this year to cut $300 million from the University of Wisconsin while changing its stated mission from supporting values of truth and service to "meet[ing] the state's work-force needs." See Julie Bosman, "2016 Ambitions Seen in Walker's Push for University Cuts in Wisconsin," New York Times, Feb. 16, 2015: online at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/17/us/politics/scott-walker-university-wisconsin.html

[5] City University of New York, Performance Management Report, 2013-14: online at http://cuny.edu/about/administration/offices/ira/ir/data-book/current/accountability/PMPUniversityReport_2013-14_Final.pdf, accessed 4/3/15

"Fulfilling CUNY's Workforce Promise" is part of a series of commentaries about workforce development and human capital issues that was generously funded by the Altman Foundation.

RELATED PRESS

Can CUNY Career Programs STEM Income Inequality?

City Limits, by Marc Bussanich, July 02, 2015

CENTER FOR AN URBAN FUTURE
120 Wall Street, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10005

cuf@nycfuture.org © All Rights Reserved.