

Tom Barkin

Building the Post-COVID Pipeline: Invigorating Community Colleges



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In February, more than 61 percent of the U.S. population was working—the largest share since the Great Recession. In April, the share dropped almost 10 percentage points, to 51.3 percent, with even larger declines for younger workers, women, minorities, and people with less education. While there has been steady recovery, in October the employment-to-population ratio was still 3.7 percentage points lower than before the pandemic. There are 9 million fewer people employed today than in February.

With so many people looking for work, how is it possible that so many employers tell us they are struggling to find workers? In October, a survey by the National Federation of Independent Businesses found 33 percent of small-business owners couldn't fill current openings. In addition, almost 90 percent of the businesses that were trying to hire (55 percent of all the businesses surveyed) reported having a hard time finding qualified applicants for their openings. In our own Fifth District surveys of the manufacturing and service sectors, firms also report that it's difficult to find workers with the necessary skills.

Clearly, there are frictions in the labor market that are preventing the people who are looking for work from connecting with employers who are looking for workers. One friction might be skill mismatch—a displaced waiter can't get a new job as a nurse or in construction overnight. And some workers might not be *interested* in switching to new industries right now. Starting over in a new field takes time, can cost money, can feel like taking a step back, and may be uncomfortable for someone who enjoyed what they were doing.

There is geographic mismatch as well. For example, we've heard from furniture manufacturers in Hickory, N.C, that are overwhelmed. But the great majority of those who have been laid off are in bigger cities with significant leisure and hospitality sectors. Are they ready to move to a smaller town?

In the context of these mismatches, I am distressed by the current drop in community

college enrollment. Community colleges serve those who have been hit hardest by recent job loss: women, minorities, and young people. They are the first college experience for many low-income students. Community colleges provide the skills people need to land good jobs and can connect students to employers. They also offer certificate programs that can deliver new skills in a relatively short period of time.

But enrollment is way down. Relative to last fall, undergraduate enrollment is down 9.4 percent at public two-year schools, compared with only 1.4 percent at public four-year schools. First-time student enrollment at community colleges fell by 22.7 percent. Enrollment is down more for black and Hispanic men than for white men and more for black women than white women.

Why is this? In conversations with community college presidents around the Fifth District, we've heard several key themes.

The first is uncertainty—what will the virus do this fall and winter? Will the businesses that have closed their doors be able to reopen? Will the jobs come back? All this uncertainty makes it tough to commit to a plan for the future.

Another theme is child care. Many presidents told us that their typical female student is a single or working mother. With kids at home in virtual school, these women aren't coming in the door.

Cost may also be an issue; about 80 percent of community college students work, but the loss of service sector jobs could be limiting their ability to fund their schooling. And while there are a variety of resources available to help—presidents by and large say they can “fill the gap” for just about any student—potential students who are unfamiliar with the financial aid process might not know those resources are out there or how to apply for them.

Finally, particularly for students who just graduated from high school, decisions about the following year were being made last spring, at the height of the pandemic. It's easy to imagine that in the midst of the shutdown, decisions were delayed and counseling opportunities were missed. And many of these students may not be attracted to remote learning. But research shows that if students don't start college right out of high school, they are much less likely to ever go back.

So how can we help people make the investments in themselves that will lead to long-term inclusive growth?

First, businesses can invest through partnerships to fund community college programs that teach the skills they need. We've seen a number of successful examples of this in our district. It's a win for the student, who gets connected to a job, and for the employer, who gets a skilled worker at a time when they remain scarce.

States can invest by directing funding to where it's needed most. Here in Virginia, for example, \$30 million in CARES Act funding is being used to provide scholarships for

workers who were displaced by COVID-19. They can use the money for workforce credential or community college programs in high-demand fields such as health care, skilled trades, and early childhood education.

Schools can invest in making online education work. For example, Germanna Community College, part of the Northern Virginia Community College system, moved very quickly to put everything online, including all student services. Their enrollment is actually up this fall; students knew relatively early on what to expect. And Germanna has been intentional about making sure students have access to wraparound services in partnership with community-based organizations. This lets them address what can be some of the most difficult barriers to education: housing and food insecurity, transportation, technology, child care, and mental health. This program—Germanna Cares—has helped their students connect with \$140,000 in benefits, both internal and external.

Communities can also invest more in getting information out to high school students about the application and financial aid processes. Many high school guidance programs were already stretched thin, and the pandemic can only be making funding and student access more challenging—so perhaps state or local educators could create and market guides to entrance exams, FAFSA, and the like.

The pandemic has disproportionately affected a number of lower-income service sector workers. At the same time, employers in industries like health care and manufacturing are short staffed. Community colleges play a critical connecting role in making the labor market function. It's important we address the barriers to leveraging them fully.

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