

The Future of Community Colleges on the Higher Education Landscape

What most distinguishes successful areas in Michigan is their concentrations of talent, where talent is defined as a combination of knowledge, creativity and entrepreneurship. Quite simply, in a knowledge-driven and entrepreneurial economy, the places with the greatest concentrations of talent win.

Lou Glazier
President and Co-founder of Michigan Future, Inc.

These are trying times for higher education, at a time when, at least in theory, college no longer is a privilege of the few. The cost of higher education and associated student debt are of concern to millions. Higher education's practical value is questioned when a degree does not guarantee employment or sufficient pay. And even among our community colleges, completion and success rates for students are being questioned as enrollments are generally on the decline nationally. Now is a good time to think seriously about the future, especially community colleges, the sector of higher education considered most locally attuned, nimble and able to contribute to collective community impact while adjusting to emerging community and student needs.

If there are institutions in America that are underleveraged in the fight for economic inclusion, it is the 1,100 community colleges that can provide young people and adults with an opportunity to gain skills in the rapidly changing workforce of the global economy. Community colleges are the closest institution American has to a sustainable employer-employee apprenticeship system, and in many places, business in collaboration with community colleges have created structured career pathways. They have not been elevated within public policy and public budget decisions to the extent these schools deserve..."

Bruce Katz and Jeremy Nowak
The New Localism: How cities can thrive in the age of populism

What follows is a brief compilation of events, trends and insightful patterns that will influence and shape our community colleges. Listening to local employers and entrepreneurs, individuals likely to have a disproportionate influence on the future vitality of our local communities often is a good place to start.

1. Transformational Framework

The Great Recession. The 2008 Recession set the stage for a new reality. Low skill, high wage jobs disappeared, as did much of the middle class. Bi-furcation of the haves and have-nots became a stark reality and a motivational force for local action, collective impact and personal initiative. In Michigan, for example, over-reliance on a single industry has caused us to work intentionally to diversify our economy and encouraged entrepreneurial activity to explore new avenues.



The Age of Acceleration. According to economist Thomas Friedman, three interconnected changes have brought us to the Age of Acceleration. These are 1) Technology—anything mentally routine or predictable can now be replaced by technology, 2) Market—has moved from connected to hyper-connected to interdependent and 3) Climate— which is driving shifts in energy markets and changes in human migration. These three interlocking accelerations are redefining geopolitics, community, learning and work. In the past, once you earned a degree or credential, you were good for life. Today, that same dose of learning acquired in our 20s may last into our thirties at best.

Community Colleges as New Job Creators. In the aftermath of the Recession, 7.9 million jobs were lost in the U.S.—some of them forever. The slow recovery demonstrated that there were not enough jobs to meet the need for employment in many communities. Where job opportunities did exist, it was clear that education beyond high school (but not necessarily a baccalaureate degree) was required. More and more community college workforce development activities today include programs that can stimulate entrepreneurial development. Creating programs to support entrepreneurs (e.g. business assistance centers, business incubators, maker spaces) are yet another way that community colleges can play a new and prominent role in reversing local economic decline. This also involves the inclusion of power skills across the curriculum (critical thinking, teamwork, communication, problem solving, etc.).

Donor Investors are Pivotal. The aspirations of today’s community colleges to serve their learners and communities far exceed traditional resources. Dwindling state and federal resources for community colleges are the norm. This reality constrains community colleges at a time when expectations to do more are high. We are starving the solution to future workforce development and social progress. Over the past decade there has been more interest and investment from philanthropic organizations—foundations and corporations (Mott, Kresge and Wal-Mart to name a few) that value the power of community colleges to change lives, build community and fuel economic development. Individual donor investment in community colleges has not been consistently or vigorously sought, but it must become a hallmark for the future.

2. The Community College Environment: Trends likely to impact community colleges

- a. Middle skill jobs are becoming more respected, attractive and lucrative. New-collar jobs are positions that require some vocational or skills training (e.g. tech, nursing, mortgage industry) but not a bachelor’s degree and typically pay far better than strictly blue-collar roles.

- b. Blue-collar jobs require higher skill levels due to rapid advances in technology, and workforce demand exceeds supply.
- c. Community colleges are experiencing significant drops in traditional enrollment. The number of younger students (i.e. through high school dual enrollment or early college programs) may be masking the real degree of this decline.
- d. The rising cost of traditional degrees and college debt, which now exceeds \$1.56 trillion, is \$521 billion larger than U.S. national credit card debt. This has become a social and economic issue as debt repayment takes priority over investing, home buying, marriage and having children.
- e. Confidence in the value of higher education is eroding and skepticism is increasing. It is the end of an era when degrees were seen as a proxy for skills. (The Learner Revolution <https://eddesignlab.org/learnerrevolution/>) Many students coming out of universities are over qualified but not necessarily over skilled. A great number are not job ready.
- f. Education and developing workers is becoming an issue of corporate social responsibility. Corporations are offering courses that are highly specialized to help their employees become better equipped to deal with technological change and to be more successful in navigating organizational culture and expected workplace behavior. (Forbes: Why Business Leaders Need to Invest in their Employees' Education, April 2019)
- g. Access to community colleges is growing due to Promise-type programs that are sweeping the nation. (Caveat: This does not mean college is free. Additional expenses such as books, fees, housing, childcare, transportation, etc. are not covered.)
- h. Housing and food insecurity are daily worries for some students. The fragility of this student population segment is gaining greater awareness and attention.
- i. Frustration is increasing among employers and legislators with the slow pace of response and change in higher education.
- j. Employers are moving toward competency-based hiring and promotion—valuing experience and competence as well as degree/credential. This is likely to accelerate as more employers learn how to isolate and articulate their non-technical requirements. (U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation, *Defining the Learner Revolution*, April 4, 2019)
- k. Entire occupations and jobs are expanding and contracting and the skill set required for individual jobs is also rapidly changing (the Age of Acceleration). The educational journey will never end; adults will need to step in and out of learning experiences to gain skills and credentials that will be their currency in the job market. (Academic Partnership:

The Learner Revolution and What it Means for Higher Education.)

- l. The responsibility to resolve vexing economic, social and environmental challenges has largely moved down from national and state governments to cities and communities. It has also migrated horizontally from the public sector to networks of public, private and civic leaders. (The New Localism: How cities can thrive in the age of populism. 2017.)

3. Implications for Community Colleges

- a. As talent developers, and problem solvers we must be prepared to serve a backbone function, helping to resolve talent “bottlenecks” to economic diversity and stability. These backbone functions include:
 - i. Helping to guide regional vision and strategy
 - ii. Supporting aligned activities
 - iii. Establishing shared measurement practices
 - iv. Building public understanding and will
 - v. Advancing policy
 - vi. Mobilizing funding
- b. Community colleges must think beyond the core populations they are currently enrolling. Instead of managing declining enrollments, community colleges must create a new continuous (serial) learning relationship with students of all ages.
- c. Community colleges must invent a new pricing structure for the delivery of educational services and products. Consider variable tuition, continual learning subscriptions, frequent learner perks, etc.
- d. Community colleges must integrate “power skills” across the curriculum as employers re-emphasize the importance of initiative, collaboration, creative problem solving, critical thinking, intercultural fluency, communication and resilience. (See 21st Century Skills Badges Education Design Lab <https://eddesignlab.org/>)
- e. Community colleges must create stronger holistic, extra-academic support systems for student success (e.g. child care, transportation, housing, mental health), braiding social services into student services.
- f. Community colleges must create or curate a menu of courses, experiences, degrees, certificates, badges, micro-credentials and pathways for students. Think modular and flexible. Some will be offered by non-traditional partners (employers or other respected validators). These “menus” need to be eligible for financial aid (federal aid, local scholarships, employer-sponsorship, etc.).

- g. Community colleges must work more effectively with employers and “backwards map” curriculum to jobs as opposed to forward mapping from “old” degrees.

4. Questions to ask ourselves about our region

- a. What is our chosen community trajectory?
 - i. Is the status quo good enough? What does the region think of itself? Its potential?
 - 1. What are our most pressing problems or issues?
 - 2. What is our region noted for? What’s our brand?
- b. Who are we trying to keep in town or bring to town?
 - i. What will attract new arrivals?
 - ii. What will cause current residents to stay?
- c. Who is our competition? What makes us more competitive? Less competitive?
- d. How does higher education, broadly defined, meet the needs and priorities within our region? Does the average person know how the community college has made the region more successful?
- e. What are the barriers and challenges for our college as we work to implement our mission, vision, projects and programs?
- f. What opportunities will be important to consider as we evaluate future curriculum, delivery methods, professional development, funding requirements and fundraising opportunities?

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