



## A Regional Plan for College Readiness

EVAN S. DOBELLE

**T**he late urban activist Jane Jacobs knew well the connection between a vibrant city and a healthy economy. In her landmark work, *The Death and Life of Great Cities*, she observed, “Whenever and wherever societies have flourished and prospered rather than stagnated and decayed, creative and workable cities have been at the core of the phenomenon. ... Decaying cities, declining economies, and mounting social troubles travel together. The combination is not coincidental.”

The health of any city—or for that matter, any state or region—depends, in turn, upon the educational attainment of its residents. The more our New England students, urban and rural, earn college degrees and find good jobs, the better able they will be to build strong communities.

But recent studies suggest that New England is failing those students. Despite the quality of our colleges and universities, we lag behind the rest of the nation in making college available to minorities and students from working-class backgrounds. Our universities may be gateways to opportunity, but too many urban and rural youths and adults retooling for a new workplace cannot get in the door.

We delude ourselves if we imagine that this is not a serious problem, or if we think the welfare of New England will be ensured by the success of its most elite institutions, which educate only a small share of the region’s students. The global economy demands ever-increasing skills of all our workers, and the gaps in income and in quality of life continue to grow between those with college degrees and those without. Most good jobs formerly open to smart,

ambitious high school graduates now require a bachelor’s degree for entry. Each year, there are fewer avenues to success for those who have not attended college.

Some communities are suffering disproportionately under these pressures. Recent studies report unemployment as high as 50 percent among urban African-American men in their 20s without college degrees. Among those who didn’t finish high school, that number soars to 72 percent. With numbers like that, it is only a matter of time before a major crisis develops.

We must prepare and motivate our young people earlier and better for college so they will have a place in today’s economy. We need to listen to researchers who report that mandatory preschool for three-year-olds hugely enhances prospects for later success. We must celebrate and fully fund the mission of access and affordability of our community colleges in both occupational and transfer programs. And we must give our students the financial tools to afford a good education.

We also need to prepare for the approaching drop in our traditional high-school-age population. New England’s high school graduating class is projected to peak in 2008 and then begin a long decline. Meanwhile other parts of the country are getting younger; one of every four 18-year-olds lives in California. If New England is to stay economically competitive, we need more of our young people to succeed in college.

That is why the six New England states have joined forces with the New England Board of Higher Education to launch College Ready New England

(CRNE). The initiative marks the first time in history that all the region’s governors, state higher education executives and education commissioners have come together with the business community to increase college preparedness and success.

College Ready New England aims to “widen the pipeline” by increasing the number of students who graduate from high school prepared for college study and then go on to earn college degrees.

To achieve these goals, College Ready New England will develop a regional network of policymakers and educators, from pre-kindergarten through college, to share the best ideas and the most successful methods for reaching our common goals. Through active collaboration across the six states, we can make our schools more responsive to student needs and more aligned with the demands of higher learning—and we can point out who isn’t doing it.

College Ready New England will work with the states to develop marketing campaigns targeted at those students who face the most difficulty in entering and succeeding in college. The campaigns will impress upon these students and their parents the value of a college degree in today’s job market and provide them with the information and resources they need to successfully navigate the available options. Too many New Englanders think that college is a perk, an extra; it isn’t. More and more, it’s what allows you to sustain a vibrant life in the future.

---

*Evan S. Dobelle is president and CEO of the New England Board of Higher Education and publisher of CONNECTION. Email: edobelle@nebhe.org.*