

Educating All Learners for the New Economy

Region needs more varied range of learning opportunities

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New England's population and labor force growth have slowed considerably in recent years. What relatively little growth that has occurred has been concentrated in immigrant and other populations that have not been well-served historically by our educational and economic institutions. In an economy that is demanding ever more advanced skills from its workers, the region cannot allow this pattern of educational inequity to persist.

A recent Nellie Mae Education Foundation report, *What It Takes to Succeed in the 21st Century — and How New Englanders Are Faring*, reveals that as New England's profile becomes more diverse, the region's economy is transforming into one that is increasingly knowledge-based, requiring enhanced and expanded skills and knowledge from its participants.

Employers are now looking for a broad set of what have been referred to as "21st century skills," such as critical thinking, problem identification and problem solving, along with practical skills such as time management, the ability to work in teams and the capacity to adapt effectively to changing work situations. Employer surveys suggest that managers increasingly value creativity and the capacity to innovate.

In fact, the best indicator of the skills employers want to see — in terms of academic skills as well as non-academic knowledge, experience and maturity — is a postsecondary credential of some kind. A consensus has emerged that a two-year credential or its equivalent (such as a formal apprenticeship or one year of college credits plus an industry-recognized certificate) should be the minimum goal for all individuals in today's economy. A credential has far greater economic value — particularly in a technical field and for lower-income students — than taking some college courses without obtaining a degree.

In any case, educational attainment and achievement indicators show we are not preparing the fastest-growing segments of our population for success in this burgeoning knowledge-based economy. Urban minority and immigrant populations lag in high school completion and achievement, and they also trail their white peers in persistence to and through college. Low-income New Englanders, no matter where they live, are far less likely to complete high school, enter and complete college, and secure family-supporting jobs and careers than their more affluent peers.

It is true that by some indicators of social welfare, New England states fare well compared with other

regions. However, these relative strengths obscure serious challenges: child poverty rates hover between 12% and 18% across the region, and opportunity and economic advantage are unevenly distributed across states, communities and population groups. All these trends pose serious problems for the region's economic growth and vitality.

Our region will rise and fall, as it has in past eras, on the ingenuity, entrepreneurship and quality of its residents' collective human capital. Making sure that skills and knowledge are cultivated broadly and that gaps in preparedness are redressed will require significant creativity and commitment from New England's educational institutions and other stakeholders in the region's future. To be sure, there is work to be done.

Currently, the region's educational institutions are not well-equipped to help all students graduate high school ready to succeed in college and/or develop additional work-related skills and knowledge valued in the labor market. Too many young people and working adults are leaving school academically underprepared for the new economy, especially those from low-income and other traditionally underserved groups who have had weak education experiences.

This must change if we are to fulfill New England's promise of prosperity.

Closing the opportunity gap will require nothing less than a strong commitment to motivating and supporting all students to succeed, beginning with enriched learning experiences early, continuing through primary and secondary school options and programs to help those who fall behind get back on track, and culminating in postsecondary learning as a routine component of all schooling. And if the recent financial crisis has impacted the ability to move forward with such commitments across the region, it has also profoundly underscored the need to have as many citizens as possible with viable economic options.

New England needs a much more varied range of schools, programs, supports and opportunities for learning, inside and outside traditional school buildings and time constraints, as well as alternatives to the current school continuums. In order for the region's young people and underprepared workers to succeed in the new economy, we will need to expand our previous, limited notions of higher learning and begin to provide multiple pathways to a *variety of effective* postsecondary options.

Underprepared learners of all ages will need new rigorous routes that can help them advance quickly and efficiently from wherever they start — and enable them to meet the higher expectations of colleges and employers. For example, a laid-off, mid-career adult may need opportunities to obtain new skills that make her highly employable once again, while a first-time college student can gain crucial exposure to postsecondary learning and even save money by obtaining college credits before having graduated high school. There is no doubt that all of this would be a major undertaking but one that the region cannot afford to ignore.

To be truly transformative, this effort cannot come solely from educators and schools. Rather, a long-term, regional campaign of political commitment and public will is needed. We will need effective messaging about the challenges facing our region, improvements and innovation in practice that can help more underprepared youth and adults advance and succeed, and policy changes that can spread and sustain more effective learning opportunities and outcomes.

Such efforts may spur a wave of invention of new options and models for serving struggling and underprepared individuals and enable them to benefit from postsecondary learning. These could include models that blend high school with early college and postsecondary apprenticeship programs that quickly prepare disconnected young adults for decent-paying

careers. Sound investments in the infrastructure of policies and partnerships for change could be sustained over time and lead to significant upgrading of knowledge, skills and economic success.

To spur innovation and improvement, philanthropic institutions must play a critical role. These organizations can expand their visions to help the region respond to the challenges that come with transformative change, for they are uniquely positioned to strategically support and prod New England's educational institutions to improve prospects for the region's underserved residents.

New England's reputation for educational excellence and intellectual capital is well-documented. To maintain that reputation in a knowledge-based economy and society, we need to challenge some long-held assumptions about what it means for all citizens to be sufficiently educated.

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The Future of the Skilled Labor Force

New England's supply of recent college graduates

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One of New England's greatest assets is its skilled labor force, which has historically been an engine of economic growth in the region. But the skilled labor force of the future is growing more slowly in New England than in the rest of the United States. Since 2000, the population of "recent college graduates" — individuals ages 22 to 27 with a bachelor's degree or higher — has grown by less than 9% in New England, roughly half the U.S. increase. This is better than the 11% drop in the number of recent college graduates that the region faced in the previous decade. But the increase since 2000 has not offset those earlier losses, making New England the only region to see a decline in this population since 1990. [See Figure 1.]

The need to attract and retain recent college graduates has become a salient issue in every New England state. Policymakers and business leaders alike are concerned that an inadequate supply of skilled workers will hamper economic growth by creating barriers for companies looking to locate or expand in New England. Yet few steps have been taken to tackle this challenge.

Factors Affecting Stock of Recent Grads

Every year, the region adds to its stock of recent college graduates, as each successive cohort of young adults flows through the education pipeline: entering college, completing degrees and choosing where to locate. Three main factors affect the stock of recent college graduates:

- The supply of young adults to be educated at New England institutions — whether native to the region, from other parts of the United States or from abroad — is the primary source of growth for the region's