

# CONNECTION

NEW ENGLAND'S JOURNAL  
OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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E D I T O R ' S M E M O

The demand side of New England's human capital equation is reflected each week in the "Help Wanted" sections of the region's major Sunday newspapers, the largest of which is the *Boston Sunday Globe*.

A manufacturer of loudspeakers seeks a design assurance technician with formal technical school training and technical experience — "and TQM experience would be a plus." A maker of high-tech medical instruments needs an international administrative manager with "strong interpersonal skills and import/export experience." A university institute is looking for an associate director for planning and development who has "demonstrated ability to work in a professionally and culturally diverse environment." A major bank needs a senior telecommunications specialist, ideally someone with a bachelor's degree, three to five years' experience with "intelligent wiring hub and router related technology" and strong written and verbal communication skills.

Many of the job descriptions are incomprehensible to the average reader — a testament to both the clipped language of the "Help Wanted" pages and the "high-tech" nature of New England's economy. Notably, however, these jobs are not confined to traditional high-tech firms. They are found throughout the economy — at banks, insurance companies, newspapers, hospitals, you name it.

"Strong communication skills" is an almost universal requirement, regardless of the specialty. A knack for "teamwork" is emerging as another. A college degree is the minimum qualification for most jobs. And the prevalence of terms such as "flexible" and "adaptable" underscores the fact that many employers consider a worker's single most important qualification to be the ability to learn more.

Which brings us to the supply side of New England's human capital equation — and the focus of this issue of CONNECTION.

If formal training — two-year or four-year, technical or liberal arts — powers today's economy (to say nothing of its role in informing politics, furthering the arts and promoting scientific understanding) then New England should be doing just fine. After all, the region is an overachiever in "degree production." Though the six states are home to only 5 percent of the U.S. population, the region's roughly 260 colleges and universities confer 6 percent of the associate degrees awarded in the United States, 8 percent of bachelor's degrees, 9 percent of master's degrees, 8 percent of law degrees and 8 percent of doctorates.

But alas, higher education's role as provider of human capital is in doubt. Recent proposals in Congress to do away with a host of education programs, pare down student financial aid and abandon Affirmative Action reveal that political rhetoric about the ever-increasing need for "knowledge workers" is not matched by a commitment to expand access to higher education. Some educators raise the prospect of a new stratification, in which affluent students attend selective institutions with rich educational offerings, while low-income students attend poorer institutions focused purely on vocationalism.

Employers, meanwhile, find the pace of change in higher education excruciatingly slow. Many of them — having found faster, cheaper ways to deliver their own products and services — figure colleges and universities should be able to more efficiently turn out educated people. Much of the public views higher education as arrogant, irrelevant and expensive. College administrators turn around and blame the faculty.

This dysfunctional relationship notwithstanding, New England educators and business leaders meeting in early spring at the New England Board of Higher Education's 40th anniversary conference *actually* explored together a more promising future, in which higher education makes do with less, reaches out to nontraditional students and emphasizes teaching students to learn. Their insights inspired this issue of CONNECTION.

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*John O. Harney is the editor of CONNECTION.*