

Training Tomorrow's Workers: Next Steps for New York Community Colleges

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Executive Summary

As the Covid-19 pandemic ebbs, thousands of New Yorkers are searching for jobs, and employers across the state are struggling to fill empty positions. New York's publicly funded city and state community colleges are uniquely positioned to help bridge this gap, providing more job-focused education for mid-career adults and traditional college-age students.

The need for job training is sure to grow in years ahead as automation and business restructuring transform the New York labor market. But meeting the need will require new thinking and new priorities—in Albany, at city hall, and on community college campuses across the state.

Steps that could make the most difference include new State University of New York (SUNY) leadership focused on workforce education; state incentives and guidance for colleges preparing students to earn industry certifications; blurring the line between credit and noncredit education; and increased funding for short, job-focused reskilling programs.

ABOUT US

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Introduction

In New York, as nationwide, job training has rarely seemed so important: it is critical today and likely to be increasingly essential in the years ahead.

New York City lost a larger share of jobs to the Covid-19 pandemic than any other city in America—nearly 12%, compared with 4% nationwide.¹ Even as the city rebounds at about the same pace as the rest of the U.S., the unemployment rate is still more than twice as high—8.8% in NYC, compared with 4% nationwide.² Many workers are disenchanted with their pre-pandemic jobs, quitting at record rates and looking for something new. Perhaps most important, in New York State as elsewhere, Covid has sharply accelerated the automation and business restructuring we once called “the future of work,” creating new openings for skilled workers at businesses across the state and increasing the number of New Yorkers who need to find new jobs in new industries—often, jobs that require some skills training.

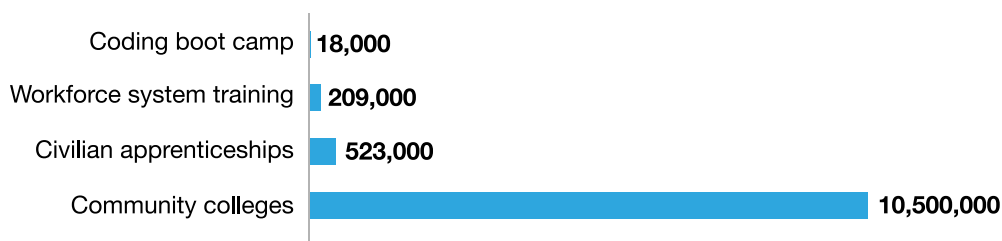
Few institutions are better positioned to meet the growing U.S. need for human capital development than the nation's 1,100 community colleges. Two-year public colleges educate more Americans than coding boot camps, apprenticeship programs, and government job training combined—nearly 11 million students a year before the pandemic, compared with just 18,000 at boot camps and 209,000 in government reskilling programs.³ (See **FIGURE 1.**)

Unlike most four-year institutions, many community colleges have a long tradition of working with employers to offer in-demand skills training. Even those traditionally focused more on academic than occupational learning have seen a burst of innovation in the last decade—changes that moved job training and career success closer to the center of their mission and culture. And many two-year schools have extensive experience serving mid-career adults in search of fast, job-focused upskilling and reskilling.

Figure 1

Only Community Colleges Have the Reach and Scale to Offer the Job-Focused Education Likely to Be Needed Nationwide

Number of learners by institution, 2019



Note: All data are for 2019

Source: Jacoby, “The Indispensable Institution,” Opportunity America, September 2021, p. 9, fig. 1.

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But community colleges vary widely. Quality is highly uneven. Graduation rates are stubbornly low. And the Covid crisis has not been kind to schools focused largely on a traditional academic mission. Higher-education enrollment has fallen sharply during the pandemic, with community colleges losing 15% of their traditional degree-seeking student body.⁴ No one knows whether this is temporary or permanent. But over the same period, polling found a majority of adults saying that if they went back to school, they would opt for skills training and nondegree programs.⁵

Some educators and state education agencies have responded to this shift in demand by adjusting their mission, placing more emphasis on short skills training to help bridge the gap between unemployed workers and employers struggling to fill jobs. What is still unclear: How widespread is this reemphasis? Is it a long-term trend? And how many community colleges nationwide will pivot to meet the needs of the changing economy, living up to their potential as the nation's premier provider of workforce education and training?

My organization, Opportunity America, recently produced two studies—a national survey of community colleges and an in-depth exploration of workforce education at the City University of New York (CUNY)—that provide a body of evidence to draw on in assessing New York colleges and charting a path forward for New York State in years ahead.⁶

I. The Many Missions of Community Colleges

Community colleges are many things to many kinds of learners—there is no such thing as a “typical” two-year college student.

Most community college student bodies divide along three fault lines: traditional college-age students or mid-career adults; learners preparing to go straight to the world of work versus those hoping to transfer to a four-year college or university; and those focused primarily on academic credentials versus those more interested in acquiring skills.

This variety can give rise to countless permutations. Imagine four representative students:

- Zach, 19, is aiming for a career as a white-collar professional. He is enrolled on the traditional degree-granting side of the college, majoring in political science, and expects to transfer next year to a four-year university.
- Jenny, 24, is studying to be a nurse and is also enrolled on the degree-granting side of the college; but unlike Zach, she expects to go straight to work as soon as she graduates.
- Yvette, 32, is studying to be a certified nursing assistant—no degree needed—and is enrolled in a short, “noncredit” program that will prepare her for a state certification exam.
- Marisol, 38, is also enrolled on the noncredit side of the college but with a different set of aspirations: she is acquiring language skills in a noncredit English-as-a-second-language (ESL) program.

Many community colleges seek to serve all these diverse learners—the educational equivalent of a Swiss army knife. But colleges and statewide college systems find different ways to balance their competing claims, and the emphasis varies widely from school to school.

A first, often defining distinction: What is the balance between job-focused programs and traditional academic education? Community colleges have historically been among the leading providers of training for entry-level health-care workers, law enforcement, skilled tradesmen—manufacturing and automotive technicians, plumbers, electricians, HVAC workers, among others—and, more recently, entry-level IT workers. But they also fill an important role as a stepping-stone for academically oriented students seeking to transfer to four-year colleges and universities.

A second key determinant: What is the mix of credit and noncredit education?

Sometimes called the “hidden college,” noncredit programs serve nondegree-seeking students, traditional college-age and older, who are more interested in acquiring skills than earning academic credentials. Programs are usually shorter than a semester and come with no additional academic requirements—no English, math, or electives. Learners don’t enroll in the college, only in the courses that interest them. In most cases, they earn no credit toward an academic degree or certificate.

Both the credit and noncredit sides of the college generally offer workforce education—remember Jenny, the aspiring nurse, and Yvette, training to be a nurse’s assistant. Some colleges even offer similar courses in both divisions. What is different might be the length of the course, whether learners are required to take additional classes, and how agile the college can be in aligning instruction with labor-market demand.

Unlike slow-moving academic departments, which often need up to two years to obtain approval for a new program, noncredit departments do not answer to accreditors or faculty committees. So they can respond in real time to the changing needs of employers and job seekers—and this flexibility makes noncredit education, sometimes called “continuing education,” among the best tools we have for delivering fast, job-focused upskilling and reskilling.

Credit-bearing programs are often longer and more comprehensive, and some students put a premium on attaining academic credentials, whether two-year associate degrees or shorter credit-bearing certificates. But many learners seeking to retrain for a new job prefer short, streamlined, skills-centered courses. Noncredit programs are ideal for students who want to switch jobs in a hurry or land a quick promotion, and in the best cases, they lay the groundwork for additional learning later in life.

Not all noncredit learning is job-focused. Some schools devote the bulk of their noncredit resources to remedial education. Other continuing-education divisions focus on adult literacy or ESL. Still others, albeit a declining share, primarily offer personal interest courses—classes such as French cooking and photography.

But the changing economy is driving new emphasis nationwide on noncredit workforce education. Not only is it a natural fit for adults seeking to reskill for a new industry; it also appeals to a growing number of college-age learners. With fewer and fewer good jobs available for people with only a high school diploma, many students who could once get by without college are looking for fast, skills-centered programs likely to pay off in the labor market.

The federal government tracks no data on noncredit programs or students. But according to the Opportunity America community college survey, noncredit education accounts for roughly one-third of the nation’s 10.5 million two-year enrollments—some 3.7 million learners who attend college under the radar.

How New York Community Colleges Compare with Those in Other States

Two-year institutions and outcomes vary widely across New York State. Schools fall into three broad categories, each governed and funded separately: 10 associate-degree-granting CUNY colleges; 30 two-year schools overseen by SUNY; and some two dozen postsecondary vocational education programs—mostly diploma nursing schools—offered by Boards of Cooperative Educational Service (BOCES) districts.⁷

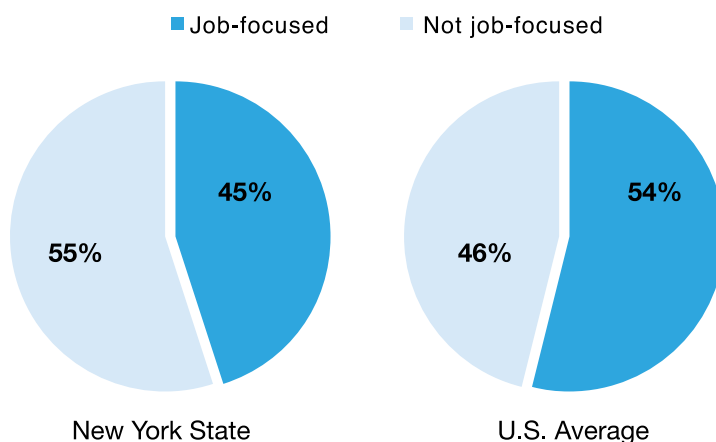
The Opportunity America community college survey allows for many different kinds of comparisons—among New York schools and between New York and other states. Among the most revealing comparisons: the types of programs offered, student demographics, engagement with employers, the integration of credit and noncredit learning, and funding—who pays for workforce education.

At community colleges nationwide, the mix of programs skews slightly in favor of job-focused instruction. Students preparing for the world of work account for 54% of enrollments; those studying traditional academic subjects account for 46%. In New York State, the ratio is reversed: 55% academic education to 45% vocational programs.⁸ (See **FIGURE 2**.)

Figure 2

The Mix of Academic and Occupational Programs Is Different in New York from Nationwide

Community college enrollments, by type of program



Source: Opportunity America, “The Indispensable Institution”, Interactive Data Portal: New York State

This skew plays out across New York colleges—in most schools’ credit and noncredit divisions.

There is no perfect mix of programs—no ideal ratio of credit to noncredit and no ideal way to deploy noncredit education. But New York’s allocation stands out for two reasons.

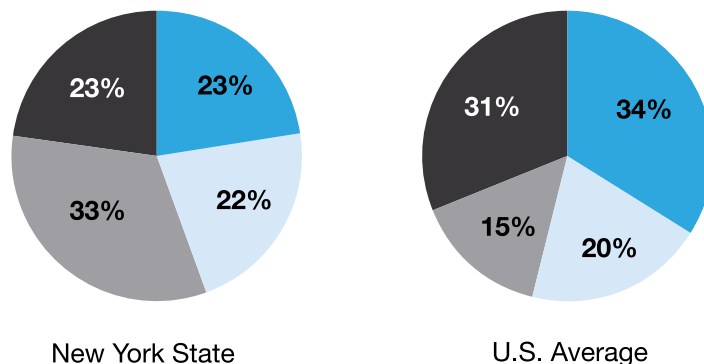
First, and perhaps most striking, New York community colleges offer far less credit-eligible workforce education than many other schools nationwide. Just 23% of New York community college credit enrollments are job-focused learners, compared with a national average of 34%. (See **FIGURE 3**.)

Figure 3

New York Community Colleges Offer Significantly Less Credit-Eligible Job Training

Community college enrollments, by type of program

- Degree-seeking students in job-focused programs
- Noncredit students in job-focused programs
- Noncredit students in remedial and recreational programs
- Degree-seeking students in academic programs



Source: Opportunity America community college survey and Opportunity America calculations based on National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, "Fall 2019 Current Term Enrollment Estimates"

Second, noncredit education accounts for a significantly larger share of New York enrollments—55% in New York, compared with 35% nationwide. And yet, a third discrepancy, the mix of noncredit programming is very different in New York from nationwide, with job-focused offerings once again accounting for a much smaller share. (See **FIGURE 4.**)

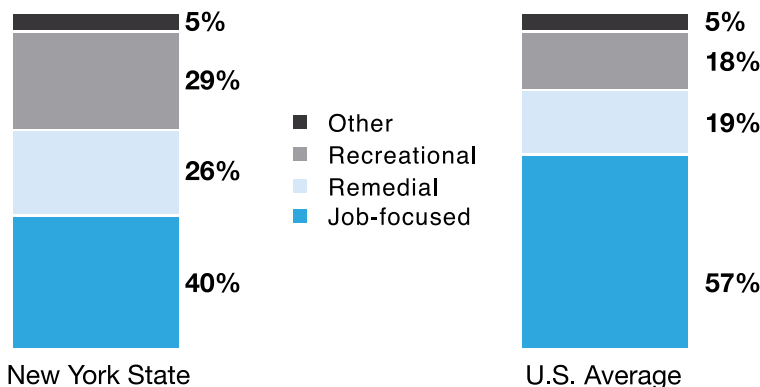
Nationally, on average, nearly 60% of noncredit enrollments are job-focused, with the rest split almost evenly between remedial and recreational courses. In New York, just 40% of noncredit education is job-focused, while nearly 25% is remedial and nearly 30% recreational.

Figure 4

In New York, Noncredit Education Is Also Less Likely to Be Job-Focused

Noncredit enrollments, by type of program

- Other
- Recreational
- Remedial
- Job-focused



Source: Opportunity America community college survey

Bottom line: not only do New York colleges offer significantly less credit-bearing workforce education than other schools nationwide; they are also much less likely to take advantage of the noncredit division's signature strength: its unique ability to provide just-in-time job training aligned with local labor-market demand.

Instead, New York community colleges focus much of their energy on remedial and recreational programs—college prep classes, ESL, and personal interest courses. On average, one-third of all noncredit enrollments at New York community colleges are remedial or recreational—compared with just 15% nationwide.

Within this broader framework, CUNY and SUNY systems differ slightly. Workforce education accounts for about 40% of noncredit enrollments in both systems. But at CUNY, most of the rest—43% of noncredit enrollments—are remedial. At SUNY, in contrast, the balance is 46% recreational.

A Missed Opportunity for Mid-Career Learners

Another important set of questions about New York community colleges centers on students. Does the face of the student body mirror the population in the region? Does the student profile skew older or younger than the national average? More male or female? And if it skews one way or other, what does that say about the schools in question?

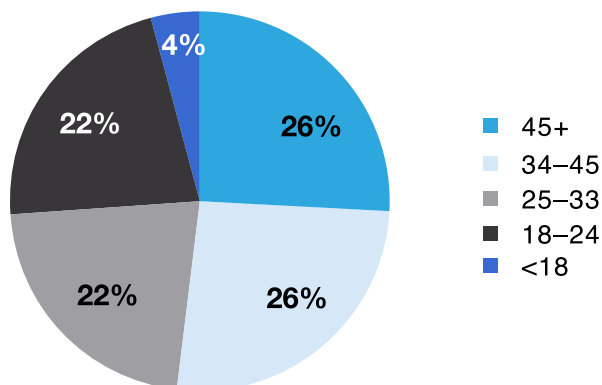
A handful of patterns stand out in New York:

- Credit-eligible students at both CUNY and SUNY are notably younger than the national average: 10–15 percentage points more likely to be traditional college age.⁹ We can only surmise why this is so, but it's consistent with both systems' heavy emphasis on traditional academic education—preparing young people to matriculate at four-year colleges and universities.
- Noncredit workforce students at both CUNY and SUNY resemble noncredit students everywhere: roughly three-quarters are 25 or older—with at least half over 35 and many in their forties and older. This is not surprising: in New York State, as elsewhere, mid-career adults in search of reskilling look to short, skills-driven noncredit programs. (See **FIGURE 5**.)

Figure 5

In New York, as Nationwide, Roughly 75% of Noncredit Workforce Students Are Over 24

New York State noncredit workforce students, by age



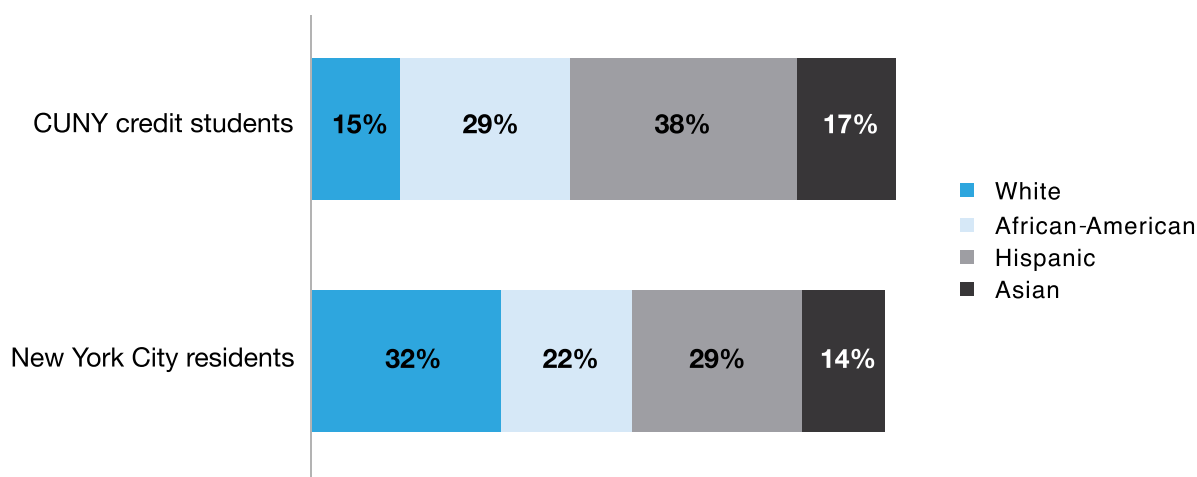
Source: Opportunity America community college survey

- Looking at gender, New York credit-eligible students mirror the national average: 55%–60% of community college students are women.¹⁰
- But the gender mix among noncredit workforce students appears somewhat different in New York. Nationwide, job-focused noncredit students appear to be a roughly even mix: one-third women, one-third men, and one-third unknown. In New York, about half are women and one-third men, with just 17% unknown.
- When it comes to race and ethnicity, CUNY and SUNY report data somewhat differently, but the credit-seeking student bodies in both systems skew heavily minority—by 15–20 percentage points, in comparison with the city and state population.¹¹ (See FIGURE 6.)

Figure 6

CUNY Community College Students Are More Likely than New York Residents to Identify as People of Color

Race and ethnicity, CUNY community college credit students and New York City residents



Source: CUNY Office of Institutional Research and Assessment Student Data Book, 2019; and U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2018

Some observers will see this as cause for concern: Why are these students of color attending community colleges rather than four-year schools? But for many of these learners, the choice may not be between two types of colleges. More likely, it's whether they attend college at all. By that measure, schools that skew heavily minority—whether on the academic or workforce side of the house—are essential engines of opportunity and upward mobility.

- Looking at race and ethnicity among noncredit workforce students, CUNY and SUNY diverge noticeably. Job-focused noncredit learners in the SUNY system are largely representative of the New York State population: 55%–60% white.¹²

In contrast, noncredit workforce students at CUNY are nearly twice as likely as the NYC population to identify as African-American or Hispanic.¹³ At the CUNY colleges that provided demographic data to the Opportunity America survey, 5% or fewer noncredit workforce students are white.

CUNY wears this skew as a badge of pride, and rightly so: these are mostly mid-career adults in their thirties, forties, and fifties returning to school to learn new skills and improve their position in the labor market. But there is also an opportunity lost: surely, some mid-career white NYC residents would benefit from a chance to upgrade their marketable skills.

Employer Engagement

Among the biggest challenges for community colleges is keeping up with the changing labor market. Precision machining skills, no matter how advanced, have no value in a region where there is little or no manufacturing. And the coding language in demand five years ago is unlikely to command top dollar in today's job market.

Many colleges use labor-market data—government data and information about job postings—to track which occupations are in demand in their area. But the best way to stay current is by asking local employers or, even more effectively, partnering with them to provide instruction.

Employers are more likely than the government to have granular information about changing industry trends. They often collaborate with educators to design programs. In the closest and most intensive partnerships, they commit to hiring graduates and help the college improve instruction by providing feedback on their skills.

One crude measure of a college's collaboration with business and industry is the number of employers it reports engaging with over the course of a year. But these raw counts are not the last word—they generally mask a wide variety of relationships.

At one end of the spectrum are relatively light-touch, once- or twice-a-year consultations. An employer driven by corporate social responsibility may donate equipment and visit the campus occasionally, or a local tradesman may sit on a college advisory committee that meets annually over lunch. At the other end of the spectrum, and far rarer, are intensive partnerships where the employer checks in once a week, if not more often, and has input—often the deciding voice—on virtually all important decisions.

The most significant difference between casual collaboration and intensive partnership: in stronger relationships, the employer regularly hires program graduates and provides feedback on their skills. For job-focused educators, both credit and noncredit, this is the most meaningful form of quality control.

Even a light-touch relationship can be useful for the college, making the difference between an old, outmoded curriculum geared to a disappearing industry and adaptable, up-to-date instruction focused on today's in-demand skills. But, as in many realms, the more effort you put in, the more you tend to get out, and high-intensity employer partnerships—including most apprenticeship programs—generally produce the best outcomes for learners.

The challenge: virtually no schools or states track the intensity of community college employer relationships. There is no established taxonomy and no data. Indeed, many educators are only dimly aware of the options; they are generally appreciative of any collaboration, no matter how casual, and are often unable to imagine anything more intensive.

How New York Community Colleges Partner with Employers

How do New York employer–education relationships compare with the national norm? It's hard to say because the categories are poorly understood, and self-reported data are often unreliable.

Nationwide, colleges that responded to the Opportunity America survey reported an average of 191 employer partners. The New York average was less than half that number: 86 employers per school.

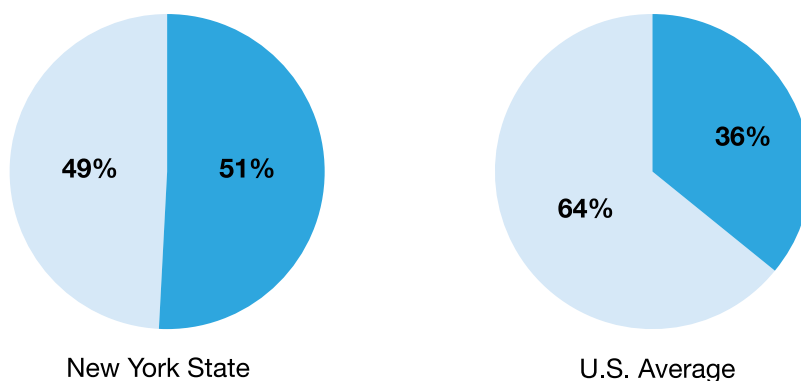
Many CUNY and SUNY schools appear to place a heavy premium on work-based learning. They look to employers primarily for short-term job placements—most commonly, internships—rather than a broad spectrum of input and advice; on this score, both systems report results that surpass the national average. Nearly half of their employer partners offer some form of internship or other on-the-job work experience, as compared with roughly one-third nationwide. (See **FIGURE 7**.)

Figure 7

New York Colleges Recruit Employers to Offer Work-Based Learning

Employer partners, by intensity of engagement

- Share of employer partners that offer work-based learning
- Share that do not offer work-based learning



Source: Opportunity America community college survey

SUNY also places heavy emphasis on contractual relationships with local companies—a targeted kind of employer engagement known as customized contract training. Employers pay the college to provide instruction, frequently tailored to the firm's proprietary practices or brand-specific equipment and often offered exclusively to the company's existing employees. More than half of SUNY's employer partners are contract clients, compared with fewer than one-third nationwide.

Customized contract training generally requires a close, high-touch relationship, and it can be an important first step for a college seeking closer ties to local businesses. But it doesn't always translate into a wider web of employer partnerships, and educators don't always apply what they learn about industry trends from a contract client to the job training they offer students enrolled at the college.

CUNY community colleges provide significantly less customized training than SUNY schools. The client is often a city agency rather than a private employer, and the instruction is frequently offered by a dedicated division of the college—so it's not clear how often the relationship pays off in better training for ordinary CUNY students.

CUNY leadership has made a priority in recent years of improving ties to business and industry. The New York Jobs CEO Council, launched in August 2020 at JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon's initiative, is an important step forward for the university. Twenty-eight leading New York firms—finance, IT, health-care, real-estate, and media companies—have committed to working with CUNY colleges to provide career exposure and work-based learning. Their goal: to hire 100,000 low-income students of color between now and 2030, at least 25,000 of them from CUNY.¹⁴

But CUNY community colleges still have a long way to go in forging partnerships with New York employers. Qualitative research conducted by Opportunity America—interviews and focus groups with CUNY personnel and employers in a variety of sectors—found colleges as well as companies less than satisfied with the status quo.¹⁵ Too many campuses rely on the CUNY Central Office to recruit industry partners. Alongside the large firms in the CEO Council, colleges need relationships formed at the campus level with small to medium-size, borough-based firms. And relatively few colleges appear to maintain the kind of day-to-day, intensive employer partnerships that produce the best outcomes for students.

II. Lessons for New York from Elsewhere

All community colleges are local—deeply rooted in their communities and dedicated to serving local needs. Labor markets are also local, and so, in turn, should be workforce training. But that doesn't mean colleges can't learn from one another. On the contrary, the last 10 years have been a period of burgeoning innovation on two-year college campuses, and there is much that New York can borrow and adapt from other schools and other states.

Lesson 1: Track and Reward Industry Certifications That Pay Off in the Labor Market

Among the most promising innovations transforming job-focused education nationwide are nondegree credentials, including industry-driven certifications signaling that students have the skills they need to succeed on the job.

Employers in a growing number of fields—health care, IT, and the skilled trades, among others—look favorably on job applicants with industry certifications. Job seekers with in-demand credentials can supplement their incomes by as much as \$20,000. Nationwide, more than four-fifths of states are developing policy on certifications. New York State lags far behind.

Industry are another tool—alongside direct employer engagement—to ensure that college programs are aligned with shifting labor market demand. These credentials reflect skills standards developed by employers and other industry-related groups.

The bodies that create these standards vary widely from private industry associations representing, say, automotive employers or manufacturing firms, to government agencies like the New York State Department of Health and the Federal Aviation Administration to—yet a third category—government-sanctioned nonprofit groups such as the National Council of State Boards of Nursing.

These bodies develop and maintain occupation-specific lists of job-related skills—what workers need to know to succeed as, say, an EMT or an automotive technician. Standardized tests crafted by the industry group, not the college, assess whether students have acquired the requisite skills. Colleges prepare students to sit for the tests, but learners earn certifications issued by the third-party group—competency-based credentials that signal what they know and what job-related tasks they can perform.

Certifications may or may not count for college credit—that varies widely. But credit as well as noncredit students can improve their labor-market outcomes and boost their salaries by earning industry credentials.

For noncredit students, a certification can be an all-important substitute for a degree. Nationwide, according to the Opportunity America community college survey, between one-quarter and one-third of noncredit workforce students earn noncollege credentials—licenses and certifications—awarded on the basis of third-party tests.

CUNY and SUNY schools report similar numbers, although anecdotal evidence suggests that both systems are more heavily focused on public-sector industry credentials—a nursing license, say, or an EMT certification—than on those awarded by independent employer groups.

Where New York stands out—and not in a good way: its lack of state policy designed to advance the uptake of industry certifications.

The first challenge for lawmakers: sorting high-value certifications recognized by employers from those with little labor-market value—those that don't measure essential skills or have little currency among employers. This is not an easy undertaking, particularly for an educational institution. It requires robust labor-market data, input from employers, and regular updating to stay abreast of shifting workplace demand.

A growing number of states are shouldering the burden, developing and maintaining approved certification lists—essential guidance for educators seeking to identify which awards are likely to produce the most meaningful earnings gains for students. Other states focus on incentives, financial and other kinds, to encourage schools to teach to or require the third-party tests. Virginia and Iowa were among the first states to offer financial aid to college students in programs designed to lead to industry certifications. Florida offers an incentive to the college—\$1,000 per student per certification.

New York State maintains a list of credentials that can be offered in high schools and count toward a high school diploma. But state approval isn't geared to employment outcomes, and there is no recognition of how certifications can pay off for adults or for community colleges seeking to align training with labor-market demand.

New York State has no list of approved credentials for postsecondary programs, no incentives for uptake, no financial aid tied to credential attainment, and Albany makes no effort to track the number of certifications earned or the economic return to credential holders.

The upshot for CUNY and SUNY: they are left to their own devices to distinguish high-value credentials from those with little currency in the labor market. This is an all-but-impossible task for a college acting alone, without support from the state or the public workforce system, and it puts educators in a position of encouraging students to earn credentials that may or may not improve their labor-market outcomes.

LEARNING FROM FLORIDA

New York policymakers looking for a better answer can learn from Florida, among the states with the most sophisticated approach to industry certifications.

Florida has been encouraging the uptake of industry credentials since 2007. The first incentives focused on high school students, and early efforts proved so successful that the initiative was expanded to college students in 2013.

The state workforce board shoulders the burden of developing and maintaining an approved certification list, reviewed and updated regularly by local workforce boards, regional economic-development agencies, secondary and postsecondary educators, and the state commissioner of education.

Performance-based funding has driven exponential growth in credential attainment at the high school and college levels. Between 2008 and 2018, high school attainment surged from a mere 954 credentials a year to 123,829; in the current academic year, policymakers expect some 14,000 college students to take and pass certification assessments.¹⁶

Tallahassee also devotes robust resources to tracking the number of credentials earned and the outcomes for learners—increased high school graduation rates, increased college-going, and higher earnings across an array of industries.¹⁷

Florida's most recent innovation is a statewide articulation framework that confers college credit for high-value certifications. Learners who earn approved credentials in high school, on the job, or in a noncredit college program are guaranteed advanced standing at all Florida two-year colleges, saving them time and money and increasing associate-degree attainment.

Interest in third-party certification is growing at CUNY and SUNY. Both systems are moving to identify credentials of value and develop credit equivalencies that make it easier for job-focused learners to earn college degrees. There is more that can be done at the system level, including better tracking and incentives for instructors to prepare students for certification assessments. But without help from the state—identifying credentials of value and creating incentives for uptake by students and colleges—it's hard to see these experiments taking off, scaling statewide, or fulfilling their potential for learners.

Lesson 2: Make It Easier for Adult Learners to Return to College for Job Training

A second growing challenge for community colleges is helping students chart a course of life-long learning.

In decades past, for most learners, postsecondary education and training was a one-time occurrence. You learned a trade or earned a degree in late adolescence or early adulthood, and it generally served you for life, with little need for additional formal education. That model is increasingly obsolete and expected to grow more so in years ahead, as more and more workers need periodic reskilling to keep up with the changing labor market.

There are as many potential paths as there are students, but one widely anticipated scenario involves intermittent bursts of education and on-the-job experience that add up cumulatively over a lifetime of work and learning.

A typical job-focused student might start with a short, nondegree-granting program that culminates in an industry certification. Many learners will then head directly to the labor market, and some may never come back for more education. But after some time on the job, those who seek to advance may return to school—either for another short stint of job training or for a longer program leading to a degree. Then, five or 10 years later, as technological change upends their industry, they may come back to school yet again to reskill for a new job in a new, unfamiliar sector of the economy.

The challenge for educators: to create pathways that make these transitions as easy as possible for learners. Does one step lead to another? Do programs and experiences build on one another? Can students who return to college later in life leverage their prior learning—whether in another school or training program or on the job—to avoid retaking courses and relearning skills, often at considerable expense?

Colleges nationwide are struggling to develop pathways—particularly, as noncredit workforce education takes off, between credit and noncredit education. This is difficult even in the best of circumstances. Bureaucratic obstacles abound, old habits die hard, and academic faculty often resist initiatives that put what they do on a par with workforce training—especially noncredit workforce training.

Several initiatives are in the works in New York State to address this gaping divide between credit and noncredit learning, including an ambitious new CUNY policy to guarantee credit for prior learning for mid-career adults who enroll in a CUNY degree program with one or more industry certifications. But these experiments are largely the exceptions that prove the rule.

At most New York schools, the noncredit division remains a world apart, governed and funded separately from the rest of the college, with relatively few bridges for students seeking to make the transition from noncredit to credit education.

Tellingly, few CUNY campuses even monitor these transitions. Colleges use separate databases to store information about credit and noncredit learners, making it difficult to track crossover in either direction—noncredit learners enrolling in degree programs or credit-eligible students taking noncredit courses that culminate in industry credentials.

The upshot for learners, especially mid-career adults and other nontraditional students: it's much harder than it should be to chart a course through college, either to further education or a better job. Instead of gateways, students encounter barriers; and instead of opportunity, they meet bureaucratic obstacles.

The Opportunity America survey asked responding colleges how often noncredit workforce students could leverage most or all of their noncredit learning for college credit. Nationwide, just 20% of colleges said that this was possible “most of the time” or “always.” In New York State, the share was even smaller: just 7% of schools. And CUNY appeared to lag behind SUNY, with far fewer students crossing over between the two divisions.

A HOMEGROWN MODEL

New York educators seeking to facilitate lifelong learning need look no further than upstate, where Monroe Community College has pioneered a thoughtful, innovative approach.

In 2019, Monroe discovered that the local economy—the aging industrial city of Rochester and the scenic Finger Lakes Region that surrounds it—faced a shortage of HVAC technicians. Labor-market data and input from employers revealed a multifaceted need—for entry-level helpers, mid-level technicians, and supervisors who could be promoted to management.

For Monroe, this could mean only one thing: the college needed to develop a range of HVAC offerings—from short-cycle nondegree programs for students in a hurry to land entry-level jobs, all the way through an associate of applied science degree for learners who had their sights set on management.

Before the end of the year, Monroe was on the way to producing all three types of graduates—entry-level, mid-level, and supervisors—thanks to a new division of the college that aligned credit and noncredit workforce offerings under one roof to respond more quickly and nimbly to the region's changing workforce needs.

The beating heart of the new division is a state-of-the-art research team that combines statistical labor-market information with input from employers to keep tabs on local skills gaps. Among its first findings: HVAC is far from the only field where companies have trouble filling a range of jobs, and what students need is a continuum of education options, from short technical trainings to associate degrees and, in some industries, more advanced credentials.

The challenge for the college: to design training modules that correspond to hiring pinch points—instructional units geared to the target industry's promotion and pay scales. Combining credit and noncredit under one roof isn't the only way to do this, but that makes it considerably easier to develop a continuum of options—a flexible, multitiered response to local labor-market demand.

Credit and noncredit educators often inhabit different worlds—driven by different goals and cultures and timetables. It can be a challenge to bring them together even when they teach the same subject matter. Monroe academic faculty still answer to their own department chairs and must be persuaded to cooperate in building a combined credit–noncredit series of programs like the HVAC package.

But the noncredit side of the house brings a lot to the table: better relationships with employers, an independent revenue stream, and a proactive career-services arm that takes responsibility for placing graduates, credit and noncredit, in local jobs.

The payoff for students: much more easily navigable paths from entry-level noncredit learning to associate degrees and beyond.

Lesson 3: Eliminate the Funding Bias Against Noncredit Education

A third challenge for community colleges pivoting to emphasize workforce education: funding—both institutional funding for the college and financial aid for students.

Workforce education is expensive. Many technical programs must purchase costly equipment and consumables. Instructors with industry work experience expect private-sector-level salaries. And unlike, say, English or sociology, phlebotomy cannot be taught in a lecture hall—hands-on learning requires a significantly lower student–teacher ratio.

Yet in most states, credit-eligible workforce programs are funded on a par with other academic offerings, and noncredit workforce programs lag far behind. As a practical matter, noncredit workforce education is ineligible for federal financial aid, whether Pell Grants or student loans. Many states fund noncredit programs at a lower level than credit programs, if they fund them at all, leaving individuals and institutions scrambling to find ways to pay.

Most colleges combine funding from a variety of sources. Nationwide, state grants and formula funding cover 24% of the cost of noncredit workforce education. Employers cover 17%, and students pick up more than 35%, reaching into their own pockets to reskill between jobs.

Statewide, the New York funding mix aligns more or less with the national breakdown, but the statewide numbers disguise significant differences between CUNY and SUNY.

Employers contribute much less of the cost in NYC—about half the average national share. SUNY students rely more heavily on military stipends—the Post-9/11 GI Bill and others. CUNY students are more likely to leverage means-tested federal benefits.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and a handful of other, smaller federal programs provide modest funding for reskilling, and college administrators help struggling students stitch these strands together to cover tuition costs. This isn't unique to New York, but it's three times more likely at CUNY than nationwide: nearly 10% of the cost of CUNY noncredit job training is paid for with some kind of welfare benefit. Philanthropic funders also help pick up the slack in NYC.

The state provides institutional support for noncredit CUNY programs that prepare students to enroll in the credit side of the college—but no money at all for noncredit programs that prepare learners to succeed in the workplace.

Like community colleges nationwide, CUNY schools make do: educators find ways to repurpose existing funding and combine spending streams. But the lack of student aid remains a major obstacle, sharply limiting the amount and quality of noncredit job training on offer across the university.

FUNDING LESSONS FROM OTHER STATES

Although policymakers nationwide have been slow to recognize the value of noncredit workforce education, a handful of states are ahead of the national curve. Some heard first from employers about the need for short, streamlined job training aligned with the changing labor market. Others noticed the uptick in student interest even before the pandemic. And Covid has sharply accelerated the trend, sending many more states in search of funding to cover the cost of noncredit upskilling for workers who have lost or quit their jobs.

Virginia saw the need—and opportunity—significantly earlier than many other states. Already in the early 2000s, policymakers noticed growing demand for workforce education. They determined early on that funding should be reserved for programs aligned with changing labor-market needs, and they identified industry certifications as a critical tool—a relatively streamlined, shorthand way to judge the labor-market relevance of any training program.

The new policy, first called the New Economy Workforce Credential Grant program and later shortened, for marketing purposes, to Virginia FastForward, debuted in 2016—a modest pilot backed by just \$4.5 million.

The program's two key innovations: a rigorous method for sorting high-value certifications from those with little payoff in the workplace; and a pay-for-performance funding model.

Funding is reserved for noncredit training that leads to industry credentials in high-demand fields, and identifying which certifications is an elaborate two-step process that involves state economic data, input from state economic planners, and bottom-up feedback from employers.¹⁸

First, the state workforce board uses labor-market information and statewide employer input to identify high-growth industries likely to face skilled worker shortages in coming years. Second, colleges work with regional employers to develop programs and select credentials they believe will have enduring labor-market value. By state mandate, both steps in the process are repeated every few years.

The policymakers who designed FastForward were also determined that schools and students make the best use of limited funding, and unlike much higher-education spending, credit and noncredit, Virginia workforce credential grants are contingent on successful outcomes for learners and the state economy.

How it works: tuition for eligible programs, most of them shorter than a semester, is capped at \$4,500. The learner pays the first third out of pocket, although financial aid is available. If the student finishes the course, the state steps in to pick up the second third of the tuition. If the learner fails to finish, he or she is responsible for that second payment as well, creating a strong incentive to complete the program.

The third step—the third payment—is contingent on the learner taking and passing a certification assessment. If students pass, the state picks up the final payment. If they fail, the college is responsible, incentivizing the institution to ensure that learners cross the finish line.

Six years later, FastForward is a resounding success. Colleges across the state have built out their catalogs of noncredit workforce programs, training for a broad spectrum of in-demand Virginia jobs—everything from heavy-equipment operator and power-line worker to IT technician and white-collar project manager. A recent analysis of the program by the state's higher-education agency found that a typical learner who earned a credential saw a wage gain of 31%.¹⁹

Educators across the state report that the type of students enrolling in short skills training has changed dramatically, with more students of color and less-prepared learners now willing to take a chance on reskilling for a new field. And after proof of concept had been established, policymakers proved more than willing to expand the program, gradually increasing the annual allocation from \$4.5 million to \$13.5 million.²⁰

FastForward remains unique to Virginia; no other state has picked up on the model. But the Covid crisis appears to have spurred widespread rethinking about the value of short, skills-focused programs, and a growing number of states are allocating discretionary coronavirus aid to support noncredit job training.

Together, the Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) grants mandated by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the supplemental stimulus legislation passed a few months later set aside some \$4.25 billion for governors to use as they saw fit in supporting education. State executives could choose between K–12 and postsecondary programs, and they used their GEER grants in a wide variety of ways. New York spent its allocation entirely on K–12 education; other states focused on online learning.

But a handful of states devoted a significant portion of their grants to noncredit workforce and training. Texas earmarked \$46.5 million in targeted financial aid for displaced workers reskilling at community colleges. Florida set aside \$35 million to help learners pay for short community college programs that lead to credentials with value in the local labor market. Virginia dedicated \$30 million to subsidize noncredit programs retraining workers for high-growth, high-demand industries. Louisiana, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, and South Dakota also used federal stimulus dollars for adult reskilling.²¹

The challenge now, as governors look ahead: what to do when GEER funding is exhausted. Many states that used federal stimulus money to cover the cost of short, job-focused upskilling are more convinced than ever of the value of noncredit workforce education. It's not clear that Washington will help—most federal higher-education spending remains earmarked for credit-eligible programs. But many state legislatures are looking for ways to continue and expand support for job-centered noncredit education.

III. Recommendations for Policy

What should New York State do? Policy models abound: initiatives that proved worthy in Florida, Texas, Virginia, and a half-dozen other states that were ahead of the curve in recognizing the value of workforce education and short, skills-focused college programs. Not every idea debuted in Florida or Virginia is right for New York; and the models described in this paper hardly exhaust the possibilities. But together, they suggest a few critical areas where innovation—in Albany, at city hall, or at the campus level—could pay off handsomely for job-focused learners, employers, and, ultimately, the New York economy.

Personnel Is Policy

The state economy is changing—and will continue to change, perhaps dramatically, in the years ahead. Millions of New Yorkers—both traditional college-age learners and mid-career adults—will need help keeping up, learning new skills for new jobs and new, unfamiliar industries.

Few institutions are better positioned to meet their needs than the state's three dozen community colleges. But this won't happen by itself. There is much rethinking and revamping ahead, and it will require bold leadership—chancellors committed to job-focused instruction, credit and noncredit learning, mid-career adult students, and expanding the mission of higher education to put a premium on employment outcomes and career success.

CUNY Chancellor Felix Matos Rodriguez rarely misses a chance to reaffirm his commitment to improving career outcomes for two- and four-year CUNY students. He had been in office less than a year when the pandemic struck and, even so, has made important strides—engaging employers, advancing credit for prior learning, and launching new credit-eligible programs for job-focused learners. It isn't easy to change course at a vast, sprawling institution like CUNY—25 colleges serving 500,000 students spread out across New York's five boroughs. But Rodriguez and his team have laid out a plan and are working on many fronts to implement it.

The SUNY board of trustees will have an opportunity to appoint someone who will move in this direction when it fills the seat left empty late last year by former chancellor Jim Malatras.

Industry Certifications

A second critical step for New York would be recognizing the power of industry certifications—one of the best tools we have to improve learners' employment outcomes, by ensuring that job training is aligned with shifting labor-market needs.

An effective statewide certification policy would have three components.

The first, and arguably most important, is developing a statewide process for identifying which credentials have the most currency among employers and are most likely to pay off in improved employment outcomes for learners.

The best approach is regional—credentials valued by employers in Manhattan may or may not be the same as those in demand in remote, rural areas. And any list must be dynamic—reviewed annually, if not more often, to keep up with changing labor-market trends. Virginia, Florida, Iowa, and Louisiana are just a few of the states that have pioneered effective sorting mechanisms, almost always combining labor-market data, state economic planning, and bottom-up input provided by local employers.

The second key component is keeping count: tracking certification attainment and employment outcomes. What gets measured gets improved—and educators will need evidence to make the case for certifications, driving awareness among students, parents, employers, and academic colleagues. CUNY and SUNY can make a difference, tracking and rewarding attainment of high-value credentials. But ultimately, this is a job for Albany.

The third component: incentives—financial and other kinds. Virginia rewards colleges with tuition dollars—that third installment of funding for every FastForward credential earned. Florida incentivizes colleges with increased institutional aid, and it encourages students by guaranteeing college credit for in-demand industry credentials. Earning a certification is a ticket to a better job but also, in Florida, for those who seek to continue their education, a faster track to an academic degree.

Blurring the Line Between Credit and Noncredit

Few innovations would pay off more richly at the campus level than the approach pioneered at Monroe Community College in Rochester: bringing credit and noncredit workforce education under one roof.

Learners arriving on campus for the first time shouldn't have to choose between two advising offices, one for credit students and the other for noncredit students. One counselor or team of counselors should consider their circumstances and help them choose the path that makes the most sense for them. Administrators should put students first, not their own bureaucratic interest in recruiting students, whether for the credit or noncredit division. And credit and noncredit programs in the same field of study should be designed to build on each other, each step leading to higher pay and better job opportunities.

Blurring the line between credit and noncredit learning could be a two-step process: first consolidating duplicative student services and then combining credit and noncredit courses in high-demand industries—health care, IT, and the skilled trades, among others—under a single administrator for each field of study.

The goal is not to merge the two divisions, obliterating the benefits of the two approaches, but rather to marry them in a way that draws on their comparative advantages. A well-designed hybrid entity would enjoy the best of both worlds, combining the agility of the noncredit division and its relationships with employers with the better services and degree pathways available to students on the credit side of the college.

Combining job-focused instruction under one roof would create efficiencies for the college, reducing redundant spending on services for credit and noncredit learners. It would open the way to more well-rounded curricula—more courses that combine academic instruction with technical skills. It's a potential windfall for the credit side of the college, generating increased enrollments at a time when the headcount at many schools is shrinking precipitously.

Most important for students, blurring the line between the two divisions would create a continuum of credit and noncredit job-focused programs: a seamless path for learners moving up a career ladder—from relatively easily accessible entry-level jobs to more advanced positions requiring one or more college degrees.

Monroe Community College in Rochester has pioneered the way. Next step: an enterprising CUNY community college president should adapt the model in NYC.

Funding

In New York, as elsewhere across the U.S., job-focused education and training—especially non-credit job-focused programs—are chronically underfunded.

Congress could remedy the shortfall with the stroke of a pen. Bipartisan legislation making Pell Grants available to learners in short, job-focused programs has been circulating on Capitol Hill for several years. In an important breakthrough early this year, the House voted to approve the measure.²² But by all accounts, it faces an uphill fight in the Senate.

Closer to home, Albany could make a difference by expanding the state's generous Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) to cover noncredit education, as Governor Kathy Hochul proposed in her FY2023 executive budget.²³ But that, too, remains an uncertain prospect. And even if both these provisions were to pass, they are not likely to cover the full cost of noncredit workforce education.

As NYC claws its way back from the Covid crisis, with nearly a half-million unemployed residents still looking for work, few steps by the new mayor could make as much difference for workers or the city economy. Why not create a fund to cover stipends for noncredit learners enrolled in programs leading to high-paying jobs in high-growth New York industries?

Stipends should come with strict conditions. Programs should prepare students for well-paying jobs in in-demand fields—industries identified by the city's workforce development board and jobs that pay at least a family-sustaining wage. Only programs developed with input from employers should be eligible. Courses should prepare students for industry certification assessments, and employer partners should be required to promise to interview all qualified graduates.

This needn't be exorbitantly expensive. If Congress passes a provision to expand Pell Grant funding, city hall could earmark its spending for costs not covered by the legislation—courses too short to qualify for grants or those offered at colleges unable to meet the measure's stringent reporting requirements.

If Albany extends TAP scholarships to pay for workforce programs in high-demand fields, the mayor could supplement that funding to cover the true cost of the instruction, including costs like curriculum development and employer outreach not included in CUNY tuition prices.

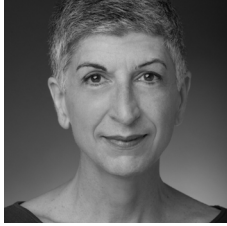
If neither Albany nor Washington comes through, city hall should step up to cover at least base-line tuition costs for job-focused noncredit CUNY programs. No scholarship should pay 100%—colleges should be responsible for the quality of the training they offer, and students should be required to invest something in their own learning. Few noncredit workforce courses at CUNY community colleges cost more than \$1,400, so a reasonable stipend might be \$1,000 per student.

How many stipends would be in order? CUNY calculates that some 110,000 learners were enrolled in community college noncredit programs before the pandemic.²⁴ But according to the Opportunity America community college survey, just 40% of them were in job-related courses. Bottom line: pre-pandemic, a noncredit scholarship program might have cost the city roughly \$44 million.

Many more New Yorkers are looking for work in the wake of the pandemic, so the numbers may have changed. But \$44 million is considerably less than the \$77 million that former mayor Bill de Blasio cut from the CUNY budget at the bottom of the Covid recession—and it's not much more than a rounding error on the \$1.4 billion the city set aside for CUNY community colleges in its 2021–22 budget.²⁵

Workers who lost their jobs to the pandemic, those who want to upskill for better opportunities, and those whose jobs are likely to change with automation and business restructuring: they all need help—not a handout, but a chance to learn new job-related skills. A noncredit workforce education scholarship program would be a small price to pay for a big boost in economic mobility and, ultimately, a more competitive city.

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