

# How to Reorient the Skills Discussion



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Listen closely and you'll hear a common refrain echoing across the country. Below rosy top line economic headlines, people have an underlying worry about their economic future which is being transformed by automation and globalization.

Listen to a Portsmouth, NH teacher: "I worry about kids having better standards of living than parents."<sup>1</sup> Or a woman in Green Bay, WI: "I don't think everybody has the same opportunity. I don't think everyone starts from the same starting line."<sup>2</sup> Or a woman in Tampa, FL: "It's almost like we're putting a Band-Aid over everything. If we're not fixing the problem now, how is it going to get better?"<sup>3</sup> It's no wonder an Eau Claire, WI mother said: "The American Dream is lost."<sup>4</sup>

It doesn't have to be this way. To transform the lives of these Americans—and millions of others—we need to drastically increase the opportunity for workers to get 21st-century skills and quality credentials. As the Lumina Foundation and the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce note, a whopping two-thirds of all jobs created in this decade will require some form of postsecondary education. Yet, less than half of American adults have these skills.<sup>5</sup>

There are numerous policy proposals to change that reality, but smart policy proposals will not enact themselves. Policy leaders must first effectively reorient the skills discussion in a way that meets the moment and resonates with people in communities across the country.

Our advice: **we must reinvent postsecondary education and skills.** That means we must talk about how to create more high-quality opportunities across the postsecondary pipeline, outside of the traditional four-year college degree. And we must do it in a way that leaves jargon to the halls of Congress and truly speaks to workers. In this memo, we offer five recommendations for how policy leaders can better frame the debate around the need to reinvent postsecondary education and skills.

## **1. Leverage workers' positive views on lifelong career education.**

The concept of obtaining skills and credentials after high school is popular. Eighty-eight percent of Americans have a favorable view of apprenticeships.<sup>6</sup> There is also a consensus among workers that training is essential to advancement: 73% believe they need it to progress in their careers. And among workers who have lacked access to job training, 48% indicated they've missed out on career advancements because of this.<sup>7</sup>

Even though many workers think credentialing programs are beneficial, policymakers still divorce them from discussions of postsecondary education. This misses a huge opportunity. When discussing the need to reinvent postsecondary education, make sure to include pathways other than the four-year degree. A wide variety of high-quality credentialing programs are already popular and are part of how workers see the skills landscape.

## **2. Expand the definition of skills.**

While technology is automating a number of tasks, jobs will rely on different sets of skills. During in-depth interviews Third Way recently conducted with business leaders, participants noted that their workforces are in critical need of skills like written and interpersonal communications.<sup>8</sup> Pew Research Center has also noted that, as automation changes the workplace, soft skills like adaptability and critical thinking will become indispensable.<sup>9</sup>

There's a common perception that postsecondary education should focus on digital skills or job-specific criteria. Those skills are critically important, but there is also an opportunity to expand teaching into the area of soft skills. When talking about reinventing postsecondary education, make sure to highlight the wide range of skills that can be taught—including soft skills that will be invaluable in a modern economy.

### **3. Highlight the need to expand access to people of all backgrounds.**

Currently, people of color, as well as those with lower educational attainment, are less likely to utilize career education programs. In a recent Pew Research survey, 65% of white workers had participated in a professional training in the last year, while just 59% of African Americans and 52% of Hispanics had done so.<sup>10</sup> Also, just 49% of workers with a high school degree or less had participated in professional training in the last year, compared to 72% of college graduates. Pew's research also indicated this training divide is a product of at-home internet connectivity; people without broadband at home are half as likely as those who do have it to participate in a professional training.<sup>11</sup>

Everyone should have access to high-quality postsecondary opportunities no matter their race, gender, or socioeconomic status. When talking about reinventing skills, make sure to highlight that opportunities need to be broadened to far more people in far more communities across the country.

## **4. Underscore the need for lifelong learning.**

Jobs are changing more rapidly than in the past, and workers today will hold more and different jobs compared to workers a generation ago. Because of that, lifelong career education will be a critical part of workers' professional lives. According to Pew Research Center, "self-directed [skills training], some offered or required by employers, will be expected [of employees] to learn continuously."<sup>12</sup>

As noted above, obtaining skills after high school remains popular, but select groups of workers still do not grasp the critical need for learning new skills and acquiring credentials *throughout their career*. A recent survey from Udemy found that only 28% of middle-aged and older workers and 25% of non-management workers believe they're personally affected by a skills gap.<sup>13</sup> To address this, make sure to highlight the long-term benefits of lifelong learning when reinventing postsecondary education and skills. According to a recent linguistic analysis from Advance CTE, a national nonprofit that focuses on adult education, language that emphasizes terms and concepts like "career," "career-focused," "explore career options," and "what you are passionate about" breaks through with persuadable audiences.<sup>14</sup>

## **5. Focus on individuals' common aspirations.**

People pursue a range of postsecondary educational programs for similar reasons, and it is important to highlight the shared aspirations and goals among those who pursue all types of programs. Emphasizing these shared goals can build support for pathways other than the four-year college degree.

Lumina Foundation's work with New America has found that around 90% of individuals go to two- or four-year college because they are looking for relevant and practical outcomes that will help them earn a good life: get a good job, make

more money, and improve existing employment opportunities.<sup>15</sup> And similarly, working adults who seek out additional training say that their top reason is additional pay, as well as to improve their own lives or that of their families and to bolster their job prospects.<sup>16</sup> When talking about reinventing skills, focusing on the fact that people pursue postsecondary options to provide for a better life for themselves and their families elevates the discussion and will resonate.

## Conclusion

There is a tremendous opportunity for policy leaders to reorient the skills discussion and talk about the need for dynamic skills in the 21st-century economy. Our advice is for leaders in this area to focus on reinventing postsecondary education and skills in order to shake up this debate and resonate more with workers across the country.

Most workers are primed to listen to a message about lifelong learning and skills development. There is employer-side demand for developing soft skills like communications, and workers need to hear that they can learn these skills in all kinds of postsecondary programs—not just at four-year colleges. Prioritizing the full-range of postsecondary options is not just a workforce development imperative; it should also be framed as important for expanding access across socioeconomic groups and to workers of color. And highlighting that students from the full-range of postsecondary programs share similar aspirations emphasizes that all these programs are important.

Developing 21st-century skills through a wide and diverse menu of postsecondary options is essential in the modern economy. Now it's time to get better at communicating it.

### TOPICS

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## ENDNOTES

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