

**“Who is Getting Lapped and What Can be Done?
Strategies to Address the Employability Gap.”
December 4, 2017
New England Board of Higher Education**

INTRODUCING THE TOPIC

The title of this session is “Who is Getting Lapped and What Can be Done? Strategies to Address the Employability Gap.” If you read the session’s description in your program, it talks about how socioeconomic factors influence the development of children, leading to disparities that impact a person’s career success as an adult. There are a great deal of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress to show that children from poor families face challenges in learning foundational skills in reading, writing, mathematics and science, even as preschoolers. No wonder these conditions serve as indicators of career preparation when students grow up to enter the workforce.

At the same time, our higher education community, our region’s employer base, and government officials have recognized trends in the workplace in New England and a need to adapt colleges’ curriculum and policies to those emerging trends.

To support the employability potential of students from underrepresented populations and to ensure a sustainable economy in New England, the Commission on Higher Education and Employability began meeting this past April. We held a follow up meeting in June, another one this September, and are now convening again for this summit. The commission is composed of members of the higher education and business communities as well as government officials, and seeks to address a number of key issues facing the regional and national economies. Those issues include the following.

- 1. The emerging labor force of New England is dramatically changing.**
 - In New England, the number of high school graduates will continue to decline for another 15 years, by about 14 percent.
 - Minority populations continue to grow, especially our Latino population, while the number of white high school graduates will decline 25%. (Latino high school graduates will increase 50%, and African American graduates by 75%.)
- 2. There continues to be a disconnect between the skills possessed by the labor market and the skills needed in the 21st century economy.**
 - It is predicted, for instance, that 90 million Americans over the next few years will face a gap between the skills they have in hand and the skills needed in the workplace.
 - From 2010-2018, we need an additional 22 million college graduates, yet we are experiencing a 300,000 annual shortfall.
 - Data shows that in New England, 70 percent of the jobs in the next 10 years will need at least a two-year degree.
 - In southern New England, it is predicted that half the workers will be minorities within three years.
 - However, only 37% of African Americans and 33% of Latinos have a postsecondary credential.

- College campuses continue to emphasize four-year and advanced degrees, even though employers are telling us that they need students with a variety of credentials, including specialized certificates and associate’s degrees.

3. Students of color, low-income students, first-generation students, and other underrepresented populations are at a disadvantage when it comes to the employability needs of the new workplace.

- The Joyce and ACT Foundations describe a number of skills required of today’s workers, including People Skills (social and emotional intelligence); Applied Knowledge (adaptability, multi-media literacy; teamwork); and Workplace Skills (computational skills, critical thinking)
- One of the skills most needed in the workplace is the ability to write professionally. We know on our campuses that low-income and minority students—especially Latinos—struggle with the nuances of college-level writing. It may be the biggest skills gap they face.
- Underrepresented populations have structural barriers to acquiring these skills and we need innovative approaches on our campuses, in partnership with the business community, to break those barriers. (During my remarks, I will describe such a partnership on my own campus.)

Simply put, we need to dramatically increase the high school and college completion rates of minority students, while also doing a better job of aligning the skills we teach with the skills needed by the region’s employers, if we want to sustain New England’s economy and ensure a standard of living for all our residents.

Initiatives and objectives of the Commission to respond to the trends I have just cited include:

- Promote diversity and equity in hiring and employment
- Develop sustainable partnerships between higher education and the business community (providing advice on needed skill sets, offering internships, mentoring and other job preparation support to the entering workforce, especially underrepresented student populations)
- Use labor market data to inform career development services on regional college campuses
 - What are the emerging occupations and high demand jobs?
 - What are the skills needed?
 - What academic programs/majors must be implemented on our campuses to respond to those needs?
- Match credentials to skill sets needed by employers
 - What are the middle skill requirements of New England’s employers?
 - What are the high end skills needed?
 - How can we sequence skills development across higher education so that students have career paths from community colleges to senior institutions? (We are doing this in the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities System!)
- Support soft skills development across student populations (resilience/lifelong learning, cultural awareness, social intelligence and collaborative skills, and computer literacy)

PANEL INTRODUCTIONS:

(Elsa to introduce herself and then her colleagues on the panel.)

I am honored to share the dais today with two outstanding educators. **Dr. Estela Mara Bensimon** is a professor at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education and Director of the Center for Urban Education, which she founded in 1999.

Dr. Bensimon's focus at the center has been to increase racial equity in higher education for students of color, and she and her colleagues have worked with thousands of college professionals—from presidents to faculty to academic counselors—to reverse the impact of the historical and structural disadvantages that students of color have faced in pursuing a college degree.

Her research has been supported by grants from the Ford Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Teagle Foundation, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and The James Irvine Foundation.

Dr. Bensimon's articles have appeared in journals such as the Review of Higher Education, the Journal of Higher Education, Liberal Education, and Harvard Educational Review. Her most recent books include "Critical Approaches to the Study of Higher Education" (co-edited with Ana Martinez-Aleman and Brian Pusser); "Engaging the Race Question: Accountability and Equity in US Higher Education," (with Alicia C. Dowd), and Confronting Equity Issues on Campus: Implementing the Equity Scorecard in Theory and Practice (co-edited with Lindsey Malcom-Piqueux).

Dr. Bensimon has held leadership positions in the Association for the Study of Higher Education and the American Education Research Association's Division on Postsecondary Education and has served on the boards of the American Association for Higher Education and the Association of American Colleges and Universities. In 2017, she was elected to the National Academy of Education and was presented with the 2017 Social Justice in Education Award by the American Education Research Association.

Dr. Bensimon earned her doctorate in higher education from Teachers College at Columbia University.

My other colleague on the panel today is John B. King Jr. Dr. King is the president and CEO of The Education Trust, a national nonprofit organization that seeks to identify and close opportunity and achievement gaps, from preschool through college.

He is the former U.S. Secretary of Education, serving from 2016 to 2017 as a member of President Barack Obama's administration. Prior to his position as education secretary, Dr. King was the U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education, overseeing all policies and programs related to P-12 education, English learners, special education, and innovation. He joined the department following his tenure as the first African American and Puerto Rican to serve as New York State Education Commissioner, a post he held from 2011 to 2015. Dr. King began his career in education as a high school social studies teacher in Puerto Rico and Boston, Mass., and later as a middle school principal.

Dr. King's life story is a reminder of the power of education to transform lives. Both his parents were career New York City public school educators, each passing away from illness by the time he was 12 years old.

He credits his teachers in the New York City public school system, particularly those at P.S. 276 in Canarsie and Mark Twain Junior High School in Coney Island, for saving his life by

providing him with rich and engaging educational experiences and by giving him hope for the future.

Dr. King holds a Bachelor of Arts in government from Harvard University, a J.D. from Yale Law School, and a Master of Arts in teaching of social studies as well as his a doctorate in education from Teachers College at Columbia University.

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Dr. Nunez’s Remarks (What is Eastern doing to support underrepresented students as it relates to business partnerships and preparing students for employment)

I want to describe an important initiative on our campus to support the employability of underrepresented student populations. It is a unique, on-campus internship program.

Minority students, first-generation students, and low-income students have significant disadvantages when trying to get a foothold in the employment market. Increasingly we talk on our campuses and with our business partners about providing students with integrated learning experiences, such as internships, and just like most campuses, Eastern has hundreds of relationships with companies to provide off-campus internship opportunities. Some are with small, local nonprofits and businesses.

Others are with international giants like United Technologies, Pfizer, ESPN, Aetna, and other Connecticut-based corporations. And that’s a problem for low-income, minority students. Let me tell you why.

- 1. Lack of transportation.** Affluent students are more likely to have vehicles. Eastern has internships across the state of Connecticut. Being tucked in a rural part of the state disconnected by public transportation from population centers means that without a car, off-campus internships outside our small community of Willimantic are just about impossible. Travel time is another consideration for students with jobs on campus and other responsibilities. Strike one for underrepresented students.
- 2. Lack of spending money.** Here is another example of a structural disadvantage we don’t think about. Our low-income students live on campus and use our meal plan to eat. Even if they have a car, traveling off campus all day and managing to pay for meals during that time becomes a big issue. It is something you and I wouldn’t even think about. For them, it’s a big deal.
- 3. Lack of computer skills.** Another structural disadvantage. While many low-income students may have a cell phone, they are unlikely to have five different devices as many of today’s millennials do. And they are therefore less likely to have the type of computer skills needed in today’s workforce.
- 4. People Skills.** I mentioned earlier the soft people skills needed in today’s workplace. Collaboration. Cultural awareness. Resilience. It turns out that our urban students have less experience with diverse populations and different cultures than affluent students. For instance, 99 percent of the students at Hartford Public High School are Latino or African American.
It takes coming to a college campus for these students to begin to learn about other cultures and how to get along, not only on campus, but in the workplace.

How has Eastern addressed these issues? I want tell you about a special program on our campus that we began six years ago with Cigna, the global health care company. We call it the

“Work Hub.” In 2011, we were seeking a business partner to help us create on-campus internship opportunities for students, especially those who could not manage an off-campus internship. Cigna stepped up to the plate. They launched the Technology Early Career Development Program on our campus. Not only were they able to provide staffing to supervise an on-campus cadre of student interns, they pay the interns for their work, making the internship program both convenient and economically rewarding.

We have had almost 100 students go through the program, and many of them are minority students and other students from poor backgrounds. Let’s break this model down a bit.

1. **On-campus.** The students don’t need transportation to get to the Work Hub. It’s a few minutes’ walk from their dormitories or other classes.
2. **Paid internships.** Cigna pays our interns very well—twice what they would get for another on-campus work-study job. This is a huge benefit to students who are strapped financially, as many of our internships are for credit and not pay.
3. **Computer skills.** Students in the Work Hub tend to come from our Computer Science and Business Information Systems programs, so they are already on the computer skills path. Add to that the significant investment Cigna has made in a dedicated, secure Local Area Network for our students to work on, and the close relationship between our faculty and Cigna employees. It is a situation where students can learn the skills Cigna needs in its workforce on state-of-the-art equipment, supervised and supported by professionals.
4. **Skills they can’t get elsewhere.** The skills students in our Work Hub are getting cannot be replicated. They are getting technical skills that are 100% relevant to the workplace they are preparing for. They are learning web applications. How to manage databases. Writing documentation manuals. They are also learning to work collaboratively and independently. They are gaining the professional skills needed to sustain their career in a corporate setting. And they get a clear idea of what career paths are available to them at Cigna.
5. **Professional Supervision.** Cigna has made another significant investment by having a full-time onsite supervisor for our interns. That means they are receiving the same instruction and counsel received by Cigna employees at their own offices.
6. **A commitment to hire.** Many internships offer students unpaid opportunities to learn skills they can apply in the workforce, but without a commitment to hire the students by the company they have their internship at. Cigna’s Work Hub on our campus was designed from the outset as a feeder to the company’s workforce. Upwards of 100 students (the vast majority of the interns) have been hired by Cigna as networking specialists, portfolio managers, data analysts, security specialists, and in other high-tech, high-end jobs. And by the way, a number of those hires have been women, as we continue to work on attracting young women into STEM careers. When Mark Boxer, Cigna’s global Chief Information Officer, came to our campus to help me announce this program, we knew they meant business. At that time, he noted that, *“Eastern is our first partner in this domain, and we are confident this facility will continue to attract some of the best talent to campus.”*

This is a model that works. In fact, we have a smaller, similar operation on campus now with the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection. We cannot serve every student on our campus who cannot find an off-campus internship, but those who are being served could not be receiving a better education.

Let me close by making an important point as we continue to address the issue of the employability of a growing population of people previously not part of our economy. If we are going to be successful in this effort, we need to recognize the difference between “equality” and “equity.” Students of color, low-income students, and first-generation students—cohorts with significant overlap—have structural barriers to achieving success on our campuses and in the workplace. We cannot simply provide “equal” opportunities. We need approaches that bring “equity” to the table, innovative strategies that help overcome those structural barriers. That is what the Work Hub on my campus is doing, supported by all the other services we can provide. That is the kind of approach needed if we are to launch economic revitalization in New England and ensure a quality of life for our emerging workforce.