

Private donors can help put job training within reach for those who need it most

by Kenneth Adams

Labor scarcity is a problem affecting nearly every industry, from small businesses to the largest employer in town: the city of New York itself. Without more restaurant workers, electricians, cybersecurity experts, teachers, nurses and bus drivers, the city's economic recovery will be sluggish at best.

When we consider ways to ensure that local employers find the workers they need, we should recognize that it is not enough to simply help unemployed New Yorkers return to their former low-wage jobs.

The goal should be to help job-seekers—especially those low-income New Yorkers whose lives have been most upended by the Covid-19 pandemic—find a new job at a family-sustaining wage and with prospects for advancement.

The key is training. And the partners for a large-scale workforce training initiative are hiding in plain sight: the continuing education divisions of New York's community colleges and universities, which offer data analytics, medical billing, phlebotomy, plumbing and many other fields of study. These programs are located on campuses across the five boroughs. They provide adult education—such as English as a second language, high school equivalency and financial literacy—as well as technical skills training in collaboration with local employers and government agencies.

Thanks to grants from charitable foundations and the government, many of these programs have grown to become the most effective training provider in their area. What's more, they're economically efficient. By leveraging classrooms, office space, utilities, phones and other resources on their host campus, they lower overhead costs.

The obstacle to launching a citywide workforce-training initiative with continuing education divisions is finding a way to pay for it. Because federal and state financial aid programs for higher education, such as Pell grants and the state's Tuition Assistance Program, were designed for students seeking a college degree, they don't help job seekers hungry for skills training, industry credentials and near-term employment.

Community college aid

LaGuardia Community College in Long Island City, for instance, which I head, launched a scholarship program this year for its workforce-training students, funded by private donors. The college foundation provides an 80% tuition subsidy—up to an individual cap of \$7,200—to low-income tristate residents looking for training.

LaGuardia offers 10 programs backed by those adult and continuing education scholarships. By lowering the cost of the pharmacy technician course to \$280, for example, an industry credential and a good job at a Walgreens, CVS or a mom-and-pop pharmacy is within reach.

So far LaGuardia has awarded scholarships to almost 600 students. Thanks to a recent grant from the New York Community Trust, the program will be scaled up next year in collaboration with Hostos Community College in the Bronx.

We need to see more private donors step up to provide such scholarships to make continuing education feasible for the people who need it most.

Imagine the economic impact of a great upskilling of the city's workforce—not only employees enjoying higher wages but employers finding the skilled workers they need. New employers would move to New York, attracted by the education and competency of its workers. And new business investment would drive economic growth and tax revenue. Everyone could win.

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