

Our Most Valuable Population

The case for disconnected young adults

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In May, President Obama stated the need for every American to have at least one year of postsecondary education. That sentiment echoes the Nellie Mae Education Foundation's 2008 report, "What It Takes to Succeed in the 21st Century—and How New Englanders Are Faring." The report cites a growing consensus that reveals the minimum indicator of the skills and knowledge necessary for success as a two-year postsecondary credential of some kind. Working toward this goal becomes even more challenging when you consider the large number of young adults, ages 16 to 24, across the region who are unemployed and not enrolled in school. If we are to maintain—or hopefully improve upon—our current level of collective prosperity, we must begin to better engage this growing demographic with the goal of attaining some postsecondary credential. And we must begin to expand our current notions of what that credential could look like and which institutions facilitate its attainment.

The need to propel large numbers of citizens toward postsecondary degrees contrasts with New England's changing demographics. Actually, we say "changing demographics" but we've said "changing" for years now. It's time to admit that our region has *changed*. We have been fortunate to see an influx of immigrants and young people of color arrive and mature here. They have played a vital role in the workforce, as our overall population growth has stagnated. (From 1990 to 2000, the population of the U.S. increased by 11.5%, but grew by only 2.5% in New England). However, the growth of these populations has added emphasis to the fact that all our citizens are not educated equally or sufficiently.

Students of color and those from low-income families graduate high school at unacceptably low rates. A recent study by Northeastern University's Center

for Labor Market Studies and the Alternative Schools Network of Chicago looked at the 12 largest states, and discovered that one of five African-Americans and three of 10 Hispanics between the ages of 16 and 24 have left school.

For the young people from these populations who do graduate high school, the current economic downturn has spurred a trickle-down effect that further reduces the limited postsecondary options available to them. Two-year colleges are seeing an influx of students who previously would have attended four-year public colleges (which themselves are seeing an influx of student who in a better economy might have enrolled at more expensive private institutions) leaving fewer spots at two-year colleges for many students already at risk of becoming disconnected. Turned away from college, disconnected young adults enter the workforce where they must now compete for employment with those possessing four-year or even graduate degrees.

As a result, we now have far too many disconnected young adults across the region and nationally. While more likely to be from underserved populations, disconnected young adults are still a diverse group: teen parents; adolescents in the foster system; youth involved with the juvenile justice system; recent immigrants struggling to learn English; high school students who are one or more years behind their graduating class; and youth who have already dropped out. These are our sons, our daughters, our relatives and friends and neighbors who have been inadequately prepared academically and cast out into an unstable economy that increasingly demands the higher skills provided by a postsecondary credential.

The longer young adults are disconnected, the less likely they will ever

engage with the postsecondary opportunities that could turn their lives around. Currently, 22% of 25- to 29-year-olds are unemployed and out of the labor force nationwide. Today's disconnected young adults are at high risk of spending the rest of their lives as members of the working poor. To reverse this trend, we must work harder to engage this population with postsecondary opportunities.

President Obama himself recognized the importance of education for disconnected populations this past spring, saying: "Our unemployment insurance system should no longer be a safety net, but a stepping stone to a new future" as he ordered his labor and education departments to help make Pell Grants more readily available to those out of work.

Still, the landscape awaiting those young adults trying to re-enter the education system is treacherous. The good news is there is a growing regional history of shared accountability around successful transitions to postsecondary opportunities. One example is the Nellie Mae Education Foundation-supported Adult Basic Education (ABE)-to-College Transition Project. The project has successfully prepared thousands of New England adults who have earned a GED or external diploma program certificate for postsecondary education by helping them bridge the chasm between high school equivalency and college. These kinds of efforts must continue. But we must do more.

A growing group of organizations is attempting to engage New England's disconnected young adults with postsecondary opportunities. In New England, the Hyams Foundation recently launched its *Teen Futures* initiative, which aims to help unemployed high school dropouts, ages 16 to 22, "gain their high school credential and commence a path toward higher

education or a career-focused training program.” The initiative works to achieve this through direct, three-year grants to organizations that use a three-point model of education, skill development and employment in their programs serving this important population. Hyams also supports the organizations’ evaluation capacity to prove and improve the efficacy of the programs, and makes it a goal to share information back with other organizations and policymakers through convenings and briefings.

The combination of education and employment is not new to organizations serving disconnected young adults. However, the emphasis on postsecondary credential attainment has increased. The National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) is a national contributor to this trend through its Postsecondary Plus pilot program. This program, supported by the Gates Foundation and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, works to create or enhance existing partnerships between community-based youth/young adult intervention organizations and community colleges to improve access and persistence for disconnected young adults. The program aims to lay the groundwork to establish shared accountability among community-based organizations, community colleges and other partners via memoranda of understanding and other detailed agreements that will formalize the responsibility all parties have for the success of the young people involved.

While we must ramp up the intensity of programs that focus on disconnected adults, we must also ensure that high schools and postsecondary educators work together to help prevent their ranks from growing. In Rhode Island, the Providence Plan aims to keep underserved urban students in school by developing pathways that will enable them to successfully graduate from a high-quality career or technical school and seamlessly enter postsecondary education or registered trade apprenticeships.

More recently, efforts are underway to test the notion that it is actually possible to corral a “system” of workforce development opportunities within a locale. Led by Bob Schwartz, academic dean at Harvard Graduate School of Education, and Kennedy School of Government economist Ron Ferguson, the effort suggests doing something about the “Forgotten Half” who do not fit into the traditional “dreams” of a four-year degree that so many of us who focus obsessively on a very narrow definition “college-ready” hold dear. Instead, the effort asks the question: What if the various training, certificates and other work-related opportunities were better understood and better coordinated? It is a simple notion that depends on a broader view of postsecondary success. Many graduates of four-year institutions are in good jobs that may not have required a four-year degree. Yet, we continue to put most of our emphasis on four-year completion

as the only goal, despite the prohibitive barriers that exist for much of the population. As a result, and while our region ranks high in bachelor’s degree attainment, we see weak associate degree attainment and continued low college participation among low-income and minority students.

The “Forgotten Half” work, the Providence Plan and the Hyams *Teen Futures* initiative—which all include secondary, postsecondary and workforce training—are the types of inclusive interventions that may one day serve as models for stemming the tide of high school dropouts that populate our disconnected young adult population.

New England should relish the riches bestowed upon us by our increasing diversity. We must now, however, address how to engage a growing number of disconnected young adults who the education system has failed and offer them postsecondary options without repeating the mistakes of “tracking” and the low expectations that come with it. If we are vigilant and rigorous, we can and should explore and promote the greater variety of high-quality postsecondary opportunities to ensure strong futures for these learners in question and the region as a whole.

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