**Commission on Digital Innovation &**

**Lifelong Learning**

**Meeting Notes | April 23, 2018**

**Opening remarks by JD LaRock, Chair of Commission**: The creation of this Commission is a follow-on to the Governor’s convening on digital learning in November 2017. In his comments at the November meeting, which he underscored at the swearing in ceremony, the governor noted three themes:

• Think big – about solutions, about the needs of learners, about new ideas that we have not even considered yet.

• The Commission conversation is NOT a zero-sum game. Our aim is to dramatically increase the number of people who are served in the educational system. Working on behalf of our learners, employers, and others does not come at the expense of others.

• Massachusetts is positioned to be in the forefront of these discussions . . . several other states (e.g., Tennessee, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Maine) TN, CA, CO, IN, ME) are considering changes in their own education and training systems. Our aspirations must be bold and go beyond what even those other states are considering.

**Remarks by Sec. Rosalin Acosta:** We have a great opportunity to connect our discussions about future directions for public higher education AND workforce development. Colorado is currently implementing a new program model for youth apprenticeship that will help them meet skills needs for their own economy. We need to look at these emerging program designs and take similar aggressive steps to support our own economy and the citizens of the state.

**Remarks by Sec. James Peyser:** One point that is necessary to make – as a state, we face unique demographic realities in Massachusetts (related to the aging and shrinking workforce) and we have to be much more efficient with developing a workforce that draws in disconnected/opportunity youth and adult learners. We need to ensure access to educational experiences these groups need to support and benefit their own lives as well as contribute to the economy.

**Meeting Notes:** Theme of this meeting is ‘The Voice of the Employer’. This is a beginning conversation that will continue throughout the term of the Commission. We will focus the next full Commission meeting on the Voice of the Learner.

Presentation -- Setting the Landscape:

• This is a critical time in the history of our national and state economy: over the past ten years wages have decoupled from productivity gains . . . which has led to declining wages and overall earnings inequalities across educational attainment level of the workforce.

• The combination of globalization and new production technologies have negatively affected U.S. middle-skill workers. Middle skills decline speaks to a growing Skills Gap.

• In our state economy, people with the greatest level of educational attainment are doing best – higher labor force participation rates, higher wages, and lower unemployment relative to other segments of the labor force. Cohorts of workers who only have attained only some college but no degree, or those with only a high school diploma or less, have greater difficulty finding and keeping work and earning a family-sustaining wage.

• Labor force participation rate among lower skilled residents has declined.

• Massachusetts is the most educated state in the U.S., but enrollments in community colleges and state universities have declined in recent years.

• Even some students who attend and complete college are facing career and earnings challenges. More and more students are experiencing negative ROI (the overall cost of higher education does not result in net wage earnings above the level of college expense). Today, about 6% of all colleges represent a negative ROI for learners.

• Two-year programs in Massachusetts are struggling to retain students. Among part-time learners at community colleges, only 16% have completed a degree in 6 years, and 73% are no longer enrolled at all. Being enrolled part-time reflects that a student faces more challenges than other, full-time learners (like working full-time or part-time, raising family, etc.) We need to address this issue.

• Evidence shows that the level of automation of work is accelerating; changing the nature of how work is performed is affecting many jobs and sectors. Projected impact of automation on sectors shows that some of the largest employment sectors will be affected by 2030. In these sectors, the net number of jobs is expected to decline, and the general skill levels within the remaining jobs is expected to increase.

• The velocity and magnitude of job change is accelerating.

• We have a good understanding of our own state’s labor market and have accurate predictions on which sectors will be the most affected by job change in the coming period. The sectors that are the most important to our state’s economy are clear, and we need to focus the work of the Commission on them (health care, financial services, manufacturing, IT, etc.).

• Core challenge is to amplify emerging strategies to both strengthen the health and future of workers as well as the economy.

Reactions from Commission members:

• Need to help learners from elementary to adult be able to see a clear pathway to a career, and make sure that the learning components that support that future are affordable.

▪ Even increasing the awareness of young people and adults about the variety of fields and jobs that are available is a major part of the challenge.

• We face a challenge convincing people who are not yet in the labor market of the expectations for learning, skills, and competence. This is especially hard among youth, who don’t have a clear vision on work expectations and therefore have a hard time making a choice from among educational degrees and workforce training options.

▪ Occupational titles change over time and can be confusing to the labor market (computer programmers vs. software application developers) – how do we help the public understand these changes?

• How will the Commission better understand the elements of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic diversity among our residents and the workforce? Need to ensure there is a high level of awareness and understanding in order to guarantee equity of access and outcome. How do we ensure this perspective makes it into public policy discussions and any resulting new initiatives?

• We need to recognize that it is a challenge to reach and educate parents, who don’t necessarily have an accurate picture of the state of work across the whole labor market. Parents play a significant role in helping inform the career choices of their own children, but the economy is so complex and workplaces so varied, it is hard for parents to help children envision options.

• Automation is only as good as the humans operating the machine. Automation does not necessarily replace workers but requires workers to have new skills in order to work productively.

• There is high potential for furthering a growing digital divide . . . those residents who are already slightly behind in technology and skills will keep falling farther behind. How do we create economies in parts of Massachusetts that are particularly vulnerable during recessions (*i.e.,* Western Massachusetts).

• Expectations of hiring managers have to shift – not to lower them, but to change in regards to schedule flexibility and other aspects to jobs that are important to workers. Engaging business in that discussion is critical. A lot of the work of the Commission will necessarily involve workforce development managers at firms and establishments, but the people on the front lines are really the hiring managers.

• Existing well-educated workforce, which are ‘on top’ now, is facing huge pressure for continuous upskilling. Need to pay attention to this in order to stay a strong economy.

• One of the greatest benefits of experiential learning is that it teaches learners to take responsibility for their own learning.

• A recent poll suggests that a large percentage of the ‘some college no degree’ cohort has no desire to re-enter ANY formal schooling. What is the cause of this? How do we respond?

• There is an emerging challenge in the large number of colleges who are developing online competency-based education platforms but have no common standards and no common taxonomy, making it hard to compare both approaches and results across institutions. Same is true on the employer side – no standardization of skill descriptions or skill sets, and no common posting of available jobs so that applicants understand exactly what is expected. An education, workforce development, and industry ecosystem with a shared taxonomy/language would be great.

• A few commission members offered examples where employers have made new hires from the ‘some college no degree’ cohort and this group has been performing better and staying longer than hires who have a four-year college degree. May be maturity, may be the fact that these individuals have made commitments to grow a family and this has resulted in a stronger incentive to succeed in jobs.

• There is a population of learners that also needs support developing key foundational skills (e.g., literacy and numeracy).

**Deeper dive – Voice of Employer**

Questions we asked in first-level discussions with employers who are on the Commission:

1. What ways are you using digital innovations?

2. What is working in terms of yielding skills and workers to meet needs?

Successful partnerships that involve employers and training provider / educational institutions appear to include:

• broad-based employer involvement;

• commitment to experiential learning that is followed through by employers;

• shared language re: specific skill requirements;

• need to be nimble enough to meet the speed of training / changing skill needs – especially given the delay that seems inherent within higher education for curriculum development, approval, program design;

• customized approaches are vital to meet individual business needs.

Employer reactions to these themes:

• Online learning platforms do not always substitute for hands-on experience. In many cases, online learning is very solitary, designed to be self-paced in order to meet the needs of individual learners. In fact, employers appear to value an educational approach that emphasizes project-based learning and hands-on experiences in a group setting. How so we resolve this disconnect?

• Any training platform works best when it creates flexible workers.

• The level of adoption of online/digitally enabled learning varies a lot across industry sectors.

• Employers don’t always realize how long it takes to develop strategy and capacity and partnerships to address workforce issues. Especially among the smaller employers, it is hard to think long-term. Hard enough to have a workforce strategy even just on the business side; culture of employers makes it hard to partner with trainers/educators.

• Larger, more complex employers who have a lot of different occupations within the organization recognize the need to create common language to articulate appropriate job architecture.

• There is a lot of value in developing cooperative education approaches so that educational partners AND learners can ‘see it / touch it / feel it’ and gain a better and deeper understanding of work. Oz Mondejar explained how he worked to embed education and workforce development folks in his company so that he could help them understand more about the talent needs than a job description offers.

• Need to individualize learning and preparation, but it is hard to find the right level of resources necessary to customize the level of support among learners.

• There is a big challenge in the duration of time necessary to achieve the result that an employer seeks. We need to find a way to keep learners engaged and involved over a long period of time . . . to avoid them losing focus and losing participants in the training program.

• Big issue: This is a call to action / critical need that is both immediate and larger than it ever has been before.

• Is this a skills gap or a credential (degree) gap? Employers respond: this is a skills gap. When employers talk about credentialing, sometimes it is different than a degree for some industries and occupations.

• Employers report an element of credential inflation within the economy. Employers are hiring applicants based on their attainment of a higher education degree when they really only need a set of specific skills that may be ‘less than’ a full degree. In some cases, obtaining the degree doesn’t make sense for the learner, because it takes a longer time and costs more money and it really is not necessary to successfully meet the needs of a job.

• Trade associations are a helpful way to work with groups of firms.

• Need to think about shifting the vision for apprenticeship/experiential learning in a different way than has been done with traditional apprenticeship programs. Experiential learning is the right approach for BOTH hard skills and soft skills.

• Helpful to codify career pathways to communicate to incumbent workers what next steps exist for training, certification, and jobs.

• Several years ago, Mass Business Connect provided a structure for convening employers and higher education partners. This approach worked, but has been dismantled. Government can play an important role as a convener of the ecosystem.

• Need to present solutions to employers using language of business . . . e.g., higher ROI and workforce development that is more strategic than operational.

• Are we focusing on all parts of the labor force, or just entry level, or just middle skills? Can’t really do it all.

▪ Are we focusing on working learners or traditional learners – the challenges and complexities to completion are different for both.

**Final Thoughts:**

▪ The structure of the Commission anticipates the use of subcommittees to ‘go deep’ on topics of need. Perhaps we think about dividing by different population of learners (*e.g.,* entry level vs. incumbent workers vs. adult learners)

▪ Many emerging ideas have been developed and implemented, but there are few examples of systemic institutionalization at scale. How should the Commission consider this issue?

▪ Recent strategic planning effort at EOLWD identified health care, manufacturing and information technology as the core sectors that are common across all seven regions of the state where the state needs to (a) develop strategies and (b) solve problems over long term. What is the role of using these three sectors as one way to focus the efforts of this Commission?

▪ Need to frame the problem to a more manageable size. Needs to be the right combination of big ideas / systems thinking, etc. Are there low-hanging fruit that we should prioritize?

▪ Commission is BOTH digital innovation AND lifelong learning. We need to keep both in mind.

▪ Is there a role for micro credentials (bite-sized pieces) as some solution?

▪ Keep in mind a potential Call to Action that could help shape the long term conversation across state government, private sector, and higher education institutions.