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# State group aims to increase affordable educational opportunities

Jan 31, 2019, 8:52pm EST

Gov. Charlie Baker's Commission on Digital Innovation and Lifelong Learning is working to create a program to increase affordable, employer-aligned educational opportunities for economically marginalized residents.

"It's about leveling the playing field," Rosalin Acosta, state secretary of Labor and Workforce Development, said during an interview Thursday at the 2019 LearnLaunch Conference in Hynes Convention Center.

Acosta, along with Secretary of Education Jim Peyser, addressed the next steps for the commission at a panel at the conference on Thursday. Moderated by Commonwealth Corporation President and CEO J.D. LaRock, the discussion focused on the group's foundational mission, issues in the Massachusetts educational system, and groundwork for long-term changes.

Baker established the 20-member commission last April in order to increase online learning opportunities in the state. It's now working with local education and technology clients to set up a program for students whose circumstances prevent them from pursuing a higher degree that would open new workforce opportunities.

Peyser said he's aiming at Massachusetts workers who dropped their pursuit of higher education and have been reluctant to return.



COURTESY PHOTO

Rosalin Acosta is state secretary of Labor and Workforce Development.

“We have a skills gap where we have employers with job vacancies they can’t fill because they can’t find employees who have these prerequisites ... we can’t afford to let anybody in the commonwealth sit on the sidelines,” Peyser said.

One of the commission’s priorities is to establish English language training programs.

“We know from folks who do not speak English fluently, it’s a really important step to getting a job or getting promoted,” Acosta said. “As we’re teaching English, we’re also integrating job skills so there’s a clear pathway. If we don’t create K-12 and post-secondary pathways, we lose something in the process.”

In addition, the commission has proposed competency-based learning and experiential learning programs for students who do not do as well in a standardized learning environment.

“Competency-based education is very successful if you do it right,” La Rock said. “Student and support coaching becomes an important element when we think about how to engage students, and a lot of the commission’s work has been based on a pilot program to help give a lift up to entry-level workers.”

Peyser stressed that the commission is working on creating an ecosystem of lifelong learning. A detailed report on an official program for interested students is set to come out in the following weeks with more information.

“We want to stimulate innovation and dynamic growth, rather than put it in a standardized package ... to create an ecosystem that can work for the employer and the learner at the same time.”