Building an Inclusive Economy in New York City: Contributions from Higher Education and Research

Conference Report

Panel #2

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THE GRADUATE CENTER
CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

The Role of Higher Education in Building an Inclusive Economy for NYC through Instruction, Mentoring & Research

MODERATOR:

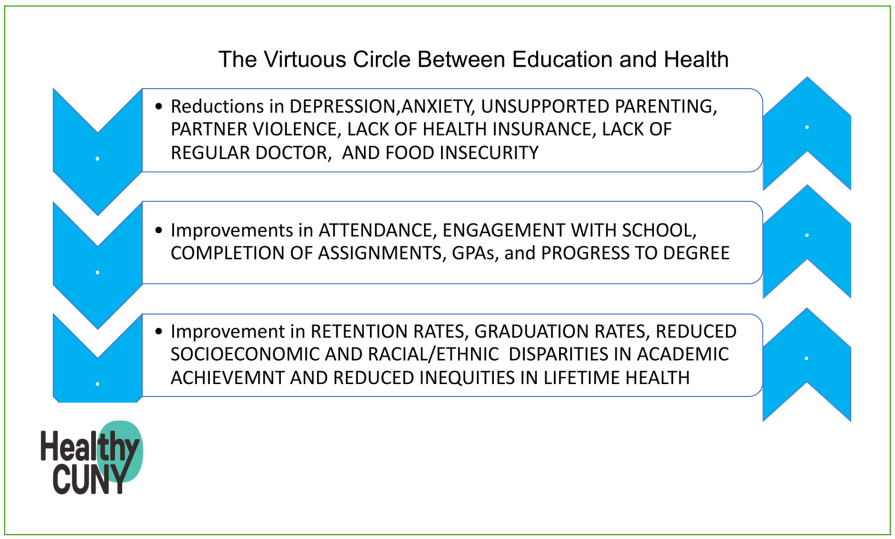
Kristin Morse
Executive Director, Center for New York City Affairs, the New School

PANELISTS:

- **Ingrid Gould Ellen, PhD**
  Paulette Goddard Professor of Urban Policy and Planning and Director at the Furman Center for Real Estate and Urban Policy, NYU Wagner
- **Erica Groshen, PhD**
  Visiting Senior Scholar, Cornell University ILR School and Research Fellow, Upjohn Institute for Employment Research
- **Nick Freudenberg, DrPH**
  Distinguished Professor of Public Health, City University of New York Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy Faculty Director, Healthy CUNY

This panel of academics explored the role of higher education in supporting an inclusive economy, including better preparing and supporting students in a holistic way, addressing those who are being left behind economically, and responding to the economic and societal changes that will influence the distribution of education in the workforce of the future.

Professor Freudenberg began the discussion by emphasizing that higher education needs to consider the totality of students' experiences, not just their classroom performance. He dubbed this approach as the "virtuous circle of improving health outcomes and academic outcomes." Indeed, his work at CUNY focuses on mitigating the health and social problems that interfere with academic success.



He highlighted data demonstrating that almost half of CUNY students face one or more of the following challenges: mental health problems, reproductive/sexual health problems, lack of access to health care, and food insecurity. In response, CUNY launched its CUNY Health for Academic Success and Engagement (CHASE) program, which focuses on creating a culture of caring and better coordinating

and integrating a wide range of services for students. By addressing these challenges, CUNY (and other institutions of higher education) can improve health, improve education outcomes, reduce socioeconomic disparities, and foster a more inclusive economy.

"[I learned we need to be] integrating public health practices into academic advisement [and] creating a culture of caring."

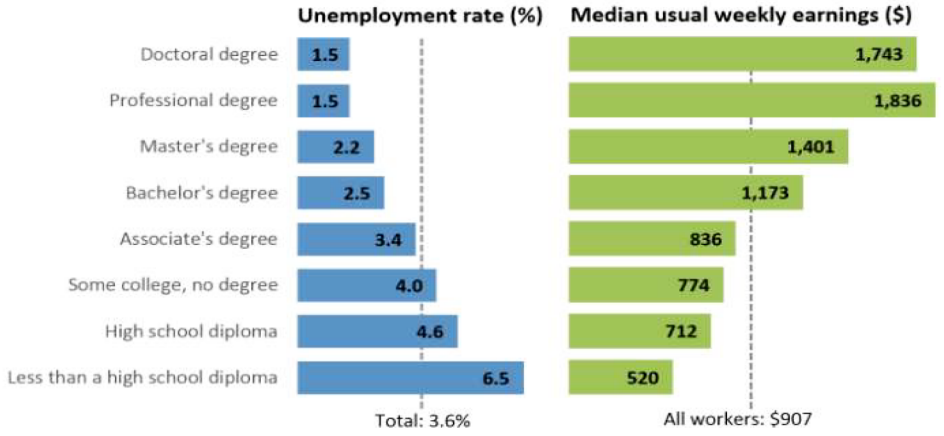
— Participant post-conference survey feedback

Professor Ellen discussed three ways in which higher education can foster a more inclusive economy: education, research, and convening power. On education: Academic institutions need to provide both the knowledge and skills to compete in the labor market, while also focusing more on issues like inclusion and diversity. Students should carefully weigh these considerations as they plan their careers. On research: The research that universities conduct is also essential to highlighting and addressing the underlying factors that impede inclusion. For example, her Center focuses on affordable housing and aims to help policymakers and developers understand affordability trends, gentrification, and related issues. On convening power: Higher education has the ability to convene people with diverse views on issues for reasoned debate. Such civil discourse can help move policy discussions about inclusion forward, and universities should play a key role in facilitating these discussions.

Professor Groshen provided a broad perspective on why access to higher education matters so much for an inclusive economy. She highlighted research (presented in the chart below) that shows that gains in education are tied to favorable outcomes like lower unemployment and higher earnings. She then dissected the types of jobs in the economy—low-skill, middle-skill, and high-skill. The number of low-skill jobs (laborers, security, transportation) is growing modestly. High-skill jobs (technical, management) are growing the fastest, and middle-skill jobs (production, administrative, sales) are actually declining. This is primarily an urban phenomenon, including in New York City. This

More educated workers have lower unemployment and earn more

Unemployment rates and earnings by educational attainment, 2017



Note: Data are for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

trend suggests that individuals, without a college degree, have fewer opportunities in middle-skill work than they had in the past and are now entering lesser-skilled jobs in the current market. This phenomenon exacerbates wage disparities and impedes an inclusive economy. There are, however, steps that can be taken through public policy and

employer action to address this trend, including ensuring access to 4-year or senior college, a workforce development system that responds to the rapidly changing economy, and employer-based research to understand employer activities and decisions and the impact on workers.

Ms. Morse, as moderator, led panelists in a discussion about what can be done to train the next generation of students and workers to better prepare them for the economy of the future. **Professor Freudenberg** noted that economic and social changes do not happen in a vacuum and that we need to ask what kind of an economy we need in order to reduce poverty and inequality. CUNY has been at the forefront of social justice issues, and continually needs to consider the changes required to foster an economy in which everyone can prosper. **Professor Ellen** noted the stark inequalities and segregation in the primary and secondary educational system, which play a large role in both college access and college success. **Professor Groshen** expressed that every occupation is essentially a combination of tasks and that dissecting these tasks can make a wider range of jobs more accessible.

Employers should be challenged to consider a skills-based approach to hiring—to rethink certain job requirements to allow individuals, who may not have a college degree but are trained in relevant tasks, to have access to these traditionally higher-skilled positions.