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

Conference Report

New York City
January 17, 2019

Panel #1:

The Role of Research & Data in Guiding Policy Decisions for an Inclusive NYC Economy

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THE GRADUATE CENTER
CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

MODERATOR:

Jiin Wen
Senior Vice President, New York City Economic Development Corporation

PANELISTS:

- **Ana Berenguer** Vice President, Economic Research and Analysis Unit, New York City Economic Development Corporation
- **David Berman** Director of Programs and Evaluation, Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity (NYC Opportunity)
- **Jake Edwards** Director, Social Finance, Inc.
- **Jennifer Gravel** Director of Housing, Economic, and Infrastructure Planning, NYC Department of City Planning

This diverse panel of public and private sector leaders discussed the many ways in which data is critical in addressing the challenges of poverty, workforce development, and equity, as well as the importance of multi-sector partnerships in meeting these challenges. The initial focus established by the moderator, Jiin Wen, was on exploring examples of projects that use data to inform program development and evaluation.

David Berman began by emphasizing the importance of evaluation and data across all stages of programs: development, implementation, and outcomes. One specific example involves a workforce development program that the Mayor's Office for Economic Opportunity helped to develop. Mr. Berman's team supported the launch of a sector-focused workforce program, and closely monitored outcomes in its early stages, which helped to inform whether it was working and should be expanded, and whether it should be replicated. Data and evaluation were critical in this process. Mr. Berman did caution that sometimes evaluation results can be confusing, so translating the findings to policymakers and other stakeholders is critical for making these findings useful in designing initiatives, driving program improvement, and making funding decisions. He also noted that it is important to acknowledge that some well-intentioned programs do fail, and, although people do not like to talk about failures, data and evaluation are as important for understanding how and why programs fail as they are for understanding successes.

Ana Berenguer then discussed Cyber NYC, a $100 million initiative to establish New York City as a leader in the cybersecurity sector. The initiative includes an innovation hub for startups, initiatives to fuel commercialization and research, and establishes new talent pipelines to train the cyber workforce of the future. In developing this initiative, Economic Development Corporation (EDC) used data to determine whether the initiative was feasible, what skills would be needed, what kind of jobs would be created, and how to train the local workforce to access such jobs. As part of the project analysis, EDC is using data to evaluate the program on two fronts: the number of jobs and the inclusivity of the jobs. This initiative, with EDC collaborating with various external partners, offers a promising opportunity to demonstrate the value of partnerships and data-driven decisions to promote inclusive job growth.

Jennifer Gravel explained the Department of City Planning's (DCP) role in New York Works, which is an initiative to create 100,000 new, high quality jobs over 10 years. A focus of the department is on creating modern workspaces to facilitate the planned jobs and in locations that are more accessible to people in all five boroughs. A great deal of research and data analysis is focused on understanding the built environment and zoning/re-zoning needs, as well as where specific occupations are growing and where opportunities may exist. Ms. Gravel discussed how adaptive reuse of industrial loft buildings for office space has allowed the City's economy to grow and adapt. Further, she noted that zoning needs to be updated to allow more of these versatile, urban buildings to be developed. Regarding wages and jobs, DCP's data suggest that the majority of job opportunities with wages at or above $50,000 that are available to workers without a college degree tend to require some additional training (middle-skill) across a variety of sectors, including professional sectors. Ms. Gravel also emphasized that while data is important, it has its limitations, and that talking to and listening to people is just as important to provide context and understand impacts of policies on local populations.

Jake Edwards began by discussing a project in Massachusetts that focused on workforce development and adult basic education. The State had a waiting list of individuals requesting adult basic education, but also a lack of resources to increase capacity. The project moved forward by making use of key data to pinpoint providers of adult basic education that had the best outcomes and identified the population most in need of such services. The social finance sector then raised funds to launch a targeted adult basic education program to serve this population. The program will be measured on a variety of outcomes over four years, and if successful, the state of Massachusetts will reimburse the initial investors.

This is an example of using social finance, in cooperation with government, to develop and implement a program focused on economic mobility. While it focused on workforce development, the model can be replicated for programs focused on housing, criminal justice, health and welfare, etc.

The moderator, **Jiin Wen**, launched the question and answer component of the panel by asking for predictions for the future in terms of program planning and development. **Ms. Gravel** noted that predicting the future is hard, but that we have to make assumptions to plan for a growing city. **Mr. Berman** predicted that we will see substantial changes in how data is available, and how it will be much more integrated across government agencies in ways that can support improved services and analysis.

The first audience comment focused on the importance of broadband internet access and the lack thereof, particularly in upper Manhattan where an estimated 40% to 50% of households do not have broadband access.

Broadband access is critical in promoting an inclusive economy. It supports educational attainment, information and access to workforce development programs, and ensures that these populations are included, to the maximum extent possible, during data collection efforts.

A related audience question focused on the dangers of over-reliance on data and overlooking the value of communities. The panelists agreed on the importance of qualitative data as well as quantitative data, and that ideally there should be a marriage of the two. The data need to be contextualized to ensure that external factors can be considered. Data, both quantitative and qualitative, also need to be shared with the communities and people who are the focus of a particular economic or workforce development program. Since they are the ones affected most by its outcomes, their feedback is invaluable.

"[Based on today, I'm going to] research more about existing city programs to avoid duplicat[ing] efforts, but grow them instead."

— Participant post-conference survey feedback