

Advancing Learning Pathways and Economic Opportunity in the Era of COVID-19

By: Malik Brown, Executive Director of Graduate! Philadelphia

Background

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has fundamentally changed our lives and existence. In a matter of a few months, the global health crisis has restructured our society and altered pre-existing patterns of human behavior, engagement, and connection. The mantra “we are all in this together” has taken on new meaning and added responsibility. Our emotional and mental health has been pushed to the limits as we grapple with an invisible killer that is frightening and indiscriminate.

While our spirits and wits have been tested, this crisis has also provided an opportunity to transform ourselves and our spaces of leadership. We have had to transform how we love, how we communicate, how we console, how we work, how we play, and how we ultimately exist. Leadership transformation is demonstrated most powerfully in our hospitals and in our homes where parents are simultaneously juggling the demands of work with the responsibilities of daycare for toddlers and online learning for young school-age children.

For policymakers, business leaders, and philanthropy, there are a number of emerging themes and studies that are worth mentioning. Management consulting firms, chambers of commerce, and academic institutions have published insights and original content about what the future might look like and the shape of the “next normal.” Thought leaders have opined over the digital customer experience and technology in the age of COVID-19 as households, businesses, and entire economies have migrated online. Innovators have lectured on the next iteration of remote learning and the forced alignment of higher education and workforce development. And change agents have pushed the philanthropic community to transform itself during this time of crisis and examine the social determinants of health and financial instability.

As a nonprofit executive, I am required to think about and act upon many of the items listed above. McKinsey Executives, as one source of thought leadership, have provided a blueprint for organizations of different shapes and sizes. They state: (1) stop assuming that the old ways will come back, (2) start thinking through how to organize work for a distributed workforce, (3) accelerate best practices around collaboration, flexibility, inclusion, and accountability, and (4) start locking in practices that speed up decision making and execution during the crisis. While these items are important to expand upon for various communities of practice, for the central purpose of this article, I thought it was important to provide a cursory examination of potential stakeholders and benefactors of our business and social reinvention. No matter the industry or workforce context, dislocated workers and adult learners can and will play a crucial role in our economic recovery.

Learning Pathways and Economic Opportunity

The current public health and economic crisis is a resounding call-to-action on behalf of vulnerable communities. Many individuals and families in our region have been particularly hard hit and struggle with potentially crippling long-term implications. Collaboration and integration across industry value chains are needed to mitigate the rising tide of unemployment and its disparate impact on lower-skilled and lower-income households. In this unprecedented new reality of social distancing and virtual connectivity, dislocated workers will need to re-skill and up-skill to participate more fully in a hyper-accelerated digital economy. If past recessions provide any insight and guidance, those who secure meaningful post-secondary credentials will have lower unemployment and more rapid reemployment.

In times of crisis and economic disruption, both incumbent workers and job seekers have routinely looked to higher education and workforce providers for guidance to address specific learning needs and skill deficiencies. In far too many instances, these very same adults who have some post-secondary attainment, but no credential are untapped pockets of talent hiding in plain sight. Greater social and economic investment in adult learner populations would generate positive returns for businesses, at-risk communities, and the region at large. Perhaps now, more than ever, this is a transformative moment where colleges and universities can reinvent themselves, explore new possibilities, and discover greater purpose within our society and workplaces.

Reopening Higher Education

As higher education considers reopening and wrestles with legitimate tensions between public health and economic viability, one industry expert suggests that “the only certainty is uncertainty.” Less sophisticated but valuable forms of economic game theory and scenario modeling are being tested by higher education leaders to determine the best path forward. With any decision made, there are implications for instruction and learning, enrollment and student experience, faculty and administration, and finances and community impact. While the decision matrices for institutions large and small are vastly different, there are a set of common questions being weighed and debated.

First, the country is undoubtedly looking to higher education to help get people back to work. According to a recent Forbes article, “with a staggering 38 million Americans unemployed, higher education will need to be laser focused on pathways to work that are affordable, shorter term than two or four-year degrees, and in demand.” These learning pathways will need to be affordable and distinctly different from traditional measures of seat time and classroom instruction. Competency-based education, credit for specific work experience, project-based learning, and volunteer learning are breaking new ground and gaining influential voices of support.

Second, greater investment in technology and infrastructure to facilitate remote learning is a must. In order to realize a competitive advantage, some colleges and universities will have to go beyond simply offering courses on digital platforms. Students are looking for an immersive digital learning experience, one that allows for relationship building with peers, direct engagement with faculty, and interaction with industry practitioners and employers.

And third, higher education must address issues of affordability and equity. Far too many adult learners have to indefinitely postpone or reconsider their pursuit of a workforce credential or degree because life gets in the way. Lack of digital infrastructure at home as well as the costs associated with childcare, transportation, food, housing, and health care are determinants of persistence and completion. Higher education must have an equity center of gravity when designing processes, programs, and policies—from recruitment, marketing, and enrollment to advising, retention, and career management.

As a higher education ecosystem, we must work to blunt the near-term implications of job displacement and income loss on food, housing, and health care affordability. Second, beyond their essential needs, we must empower all individuals with the necessary resources for successful completion of their academic and career goals in this challenging environment. And third, we must better position individuals to benefit from the eventual economic recovery by equipping them with the requisite tools, knowledge, and skills needed for greater upward mobility and financial stability.

Graduate! Philadelphia Mission

Graduate! Philadelphia is in on the front lines of both the relief efforts and subsequent economic recovery. We are a nonprofit organization committed to increasing financial security for disconnected populations. As a core tenet of our mission, we help lower-income adults earn a postsecondary credential.

In 2005, we were founded to support the 100,000+ adult residents in Philadelphia who started but never finished a two or four-year degree. Today, having served more than 15,000 adults and families, we provide a diverse set of education and workforce development services. We partner with colleges and universities, chambers of commerce, labor, social service providers, and economic development institutions to achieve our mission. For more information on Graduate! Philadelphia contact Executive Director Malik Brown at (215) 280-3225 or malik.brown@graduate-network.org.

Works Cited

McKinsey & Company: [From thinking about the next normal to making it work: What to stop, start, and accelerate.](#) Kevin Sneader & Shubham Singhal.

Forbes.com: [Can Higher Education Get America Back to Work?](#)

Author bio

Malik Brown is a seasoned leader with a unique portfolio of cross-sector experiences. His work and impact span multiple industry sectors including business, philanthropy, and higher education. In his current role as executive director of Graduate! Philadelphia, Malik is responsible for advancing the mission of adult degree completion, workforce readiness, and inclusive economic development.

Malik is a passionate advocate and champion of social and economic mobility for non-traditional learners. To make a difference and give voice to important regional issues, Malik also serves on several nonprofit boards, including the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia, Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC), ACHIEVEability, and the Merakey Foundation. Malik has also served on the Education and Talent Steering

Committees for both the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce and the Main Line Chamber of Commerce.

Malik attended Clark University in Worcester, MA where he earned his BA and MBA. Malik has been married to his wife Ayana for 14 years and they have two little girls, Aleena and Myka. He resides in the West Oak Lane section of the City. Above all else, Malik is most proud of his relationship with his two daughters.