Preparing Tomorrow's Workforce Today: Twin Proposals for the Future of Learning, Opportunity, and Work

A Hamilton Project proposal by Richard Arum, Dean of the University of California, Irvine School of Education and Mitchell Stevens, Professor of Education at Stanford University, offers several reforms to the U.S. higher education system, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, to encourage schools to be more cost-efficient and build towards the future needs of the U.S. workforce. Specifically, Arum and Stevens' proposal would:

- Incentivize innovation in instructional delivery throughout the national higher education system;

- Issue Learning Opportunity Credits (LOCs) to promote worker training, bridging the divide between academia and the labor force; and

- Establish a network of government agencies and universities to coordinate best practices on adult learning in high-quality hybrid environments.

Issue Overview

- **Adaptive instructional delivery in higher education helps support the long-term needs of the U.S. workforce.** While colleges train workers for a variety of professions, not all meet the current or future needs of the U.S. workforce, nor have they responded to the learning needs brought by the pandemic. Higher education provides the best avenue to bridge these needs.

- **The U.S. higher education system falls short in several ways:**

  - Current federal government funded colleges are not encouraged to be cost-efficient;

  - Some programs are not suited to, or fail to, build toward the future needs of the U.S. workforce; and

  - Instructional delivery—dependent on the institution—has been slow to adapt to the new online learning needs born by the pandemic.

The Challenge

Bridging the needs of the U.S. workforce and postsecondary education is essential to creating adaptive workers. Unfortunately, these needs come at a time of grave uncertainty; the federal response to the pandemic should be a joint effort with universities including educational opportunities that meet the immediate needs of displaced workers as well as the financial needs of postsecondary institutions.

Acknowledging the unique challenges—political, organizational, scientific, pedagogical, technical, and cultural—in proposing new policies to change the structure of the higher education system, Arum and Stevens offer two timely initiatives. The joint proposal addresses the educational needs of the U.S. labor force by offering LOCs to promote worker training, marshalling best practices for adult learning, and incentivizing innovation in instructional delivery.

The Path Forward

Arum and Stevens propose the following policy initiatives to improve the higher education system:

1. **Implement Learning Opportunity Credits.** The federal government would issue *Learning Opportunity Credits* (LOCs) to all U.S. adults who are either unemployed, displaced, or recipients of the Earned Income Tax Credit. LOCs will streamline the learning process by setting clear learning standards following current policies in higher education. With these requirements, LOCs will promote ongoing workforce training and the expansion of high-quality hybrid learning opportunities.

2. **Commission a national initiative on the Future of Learning, Opportunity, and Work.** The federal government would establish a national project on the *Future of Learning, Opportunity, and Work* (FLOW), a distributed collaboration between existing federal agencies and a network of competitively selected U.S. universities and their partners. The FLOW initiative would accumulate knowledge and inform policy on adult learning to serve the national interest in higher education moving forward.

Packaged as dual initiatives and linked through data sharing and interoperability protocols, Arum and Stevens offer LOCs and FLOW as a joint venture.

About the Authors

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