



The Our American States podcast—produced by the National Conference of State Legislatures—is where you hear compelling conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, and the policies, process and politics that shape them.

You can subscribe through iTunes, Google Play, Sticher or Spotify.

COVID-19 and the Challenges for Higher Education | Nov. 2, 2020 | OAS Episode 111

Ed: Hello and welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast from the National Conference of State Legislatures. This podcast is all about legislatures: the people in them, the policies, process and politics that shape them. I’m your host, Ed Smith.

“There’s no return to normal because we know that normal is just not what people need. They deserve a lot better than what we’ve seen in the current system.”

That was Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of the Lumina Foundation, a private foundation that is a major player in supporting efforts to expand higher education and post-secondary learning.

Merisotis is one of our guests today. He discusses how the pandemic has affected the world of higher education, how it has laid bare the need for more post-secondary training, and how legislators can play a role.

Our second guest is Scott Jaschik, editor of the news website Inside Higher Ed. Jaschik gives us an up-to-date assessment of reopening efforts at colleges and universities around the country and discusses the fiscal landscape state legislators will face in the wake of the pandemic.

Let’s start with Jamie Merisotis. Welcome to the podcast.

Jamie: Great to be with you.

Time Marker (TM): 01:24

Ed: Well, Jamie, thank you so much for taking the time to do this. Now, we’ve seen this pandemic amplify problems in many parts of society: healthcare, criminal justice, mental health, and a number of others. I’m wondering if you see that happening in post-secondary education. Are there bigger challenges now than we had before the pandemic?

Jamie: Oh, definitely. Just as we've seen with these other sectors that you've mentioned, there is really a rising issue here in terms of what we've seen happen with the pandemic and what's happening in post-secondary education.

In post-secondary education we see tremendous differences in terms of educational attainment for African Americans and Latinos, for example, the same groups that are being impacted as a result of the pandemic in terms of what we're seeing with healthcare, access to jobs, etc.

If you look at the recent data in terms of what's happened in higher education, you're seeing that there are major problems in terms of enrollment in higher education. There are declines that we've seen across the sector.

We also need to make sure that we've built a system that's going to prepare all Americans for the work of the future. And so, in that sense, I don't think that we need to be thinking about: How do we get back to normal? There's no return to normal because we know that normal is just not what people need; they deserve a lot better than what we've seen in the current system.

TM: 02:49

Ed: So, along with the pandemic, we've also seen widespread protests relating to racial justice over the last several months, particularly after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. How does that translate into higher education or other post-secondary education training?

Jamie: Well, exactly like we were talking about in terms of Covid being an accelerator, I think that the issues around racial justice and inequity have been amplified as a result of what we've seen in 2020, and structural racism is real in my view; it's been made more of a priority both because of the pandemic, but also because of what we've seen in the aftermath of George Floyd and some of the other things that we've seen this year.

We know from the data that Black and Hispanic Americans have higher rates of infection and deaths from Covid-19 and that, again, is amplified by the fact that they tend to be concentrated in areas where they're working that are what we've been calling now essential workers. And so, for example, for African Americans and Latinos, they are able to work from home at about half the rate that whites can.

Being home protects you from Covid; being in a place where you interact with other people puts you at more risk. So, therefore, we see greater risk for African Americans and Latinos as a really good example of what we're seeing from a workforce perspective.

For higher education, I think what we're seeing is that the crisis is wiping out so many of these jobs for people who have low levels of educational attainment, and we will have to do more to increase higher education again for people of color and women, who seem to have been disproportionately impacted by Covid in fields where the greatest job loss is likely to take place in retail and healthcare and education and other fields.

So, racial injustice inequity is an important issue for us to confront. It's been in front of us for a long time. But at the end of the day, higher education has to be part of the solution and we're going to have to change the system in order to produce better outcomes for all Americans.

TM: 05:02

Ed: So, to drill into that a little bit more, as you were saying, during the pandemic we've realized that most of the people who are able to work from home have college degrees and many of the essential workers who have to go to the workplace did not. What, as a society, should be taken away from that and what can we do about it?

Jamie: Another way to look at the data that I mentioned is to look at the ability to work remotely tied to education level. So, if you slice it that way, more than half of all the people with bachelor's degrees or higher can work from home compared to less than 20% of workers with less than a bachelor's degree.

I want to be clear here – there's not an exact occupational correspondence between remote work and the education level. Not all high-skilled workers can work remotely. Healthcare is a really interesting case in point. Many of the people in high-skilled occupations are on the front lines of the pandemic and, again, this thing about essential versus nonessential I think has focused a lot of long overdue attention on workers who are really truly indispensable to the economy and society.

We can't lose sight of the fact that most of these people are in low-skilled occupations: the warehouse workers, the cleaners, the long-distance truckers, the grocery store clerks, etc. My hope is that the pandemic can result in an increased appreciation for those workers, giving them opportunities for healthcare, more stable work conditions, better access to career pathways, higher compensation, and I think the pandemic has made it clear to all of us that workers with higher skill levels aren't better or more important than others, but they do have greater opportunities to succeed.

TM: 06:47

Ed: So, let's talk a little bit more about post-secondary education. The notion of degree inflation, that is jobs are requiring more and more education for positions that didn't require so many qualifications in the past – Is that really something we should be concerned about?

Jamie: This question comes up; it comes up a lot in the context of recessions. The evidence is overwhelmingly that it's not a legitimate issue. The reasons degrees or other types of post-high school credentials are required in jobs that didn't require them in the past is because the tasks associated with the jobs that people are doing have changed.

I've got this book out about human work and I talk about all of these different categories of human workers. One example is photographers – 80% of the tasks that make up the occupation of photographer are different than they were 20 years ago.

You can see this in other fields. Lots of people still work in manufacturing but, again, the tasks that they're performing aren't repetitive on an assembly line the way they may have been done

before. Those tasks can now be done by smart machines through technology. But people are still very much needed to guide the machines, set them up, figure out what to do when something goes wrong, perform the more complex or tricky parts of the job, etc.

What I think this means is that for a lot of people without education and training after high school, they're shut out of any realistic opportunity to get those good jobs and advance in their careers. So, they will need those degrees, they will need those credentials. Not everyone will need a bachelor's degree to be clear, but there's a lack of opportunity that I think translates to a loss of hope and even despair if we don't give people access to more and better learning that's signified through these post-secondary degrees and credentials.

TM: 08:43

Ed: Well, as you know, our audience is primarily legislators and other policymakers. My question is: As we know, the traditional college student in 2020 is as likely to be an adult working or going to school as it is a traditional 18- to 22-year-old living in a dorm. Are legislatures recognizing that fact? Are they shifting policy so it supports those older students as well as the more traditional students?

Jamie: I want to underscore what you said, which is that the face of today's student really is much different. I think at a policy level, our policies tend to still assume largely that students are traditional in some way: that they're just out of high school, that they're younger, that they're headed maybe to a four-year campus or a lifelong job.

But more than 40% of the students today are students of color, 40% work fulltime, and a third are over the age of 25. So, what we're seeing in terms of what legislatures are doing is encouraging in that they're helping to recognize and support these students; we call them today's students.

One way that we've seen that is that more than 40 states have set specific measurable goals for post-secondary attainment, and I think we're seeing more and more of those resources being shifted to these adult learners and getting them the credentials that they need.

Lots of states are doing this. We've tried to highlight them in our work at Lumina Foundation. In Tennessee, for example, Tennessee Reconnect: adults who don't have an associate's or bachelor's degree are eligible to attend community college or technical college without having to pay tuition. Lots of other states are trying to emulate that kind of an approach.

I think education and training have to be provided through different and broader sets of systems than what we've seen before. So, thinking about how legislative bodies can recognize these shifts in older students means that we need to give them a wider array of post-secondary credential opportunities than they had before.

I think these differences between education and training are largely irrelevant in the modern economy. What matters is that you have a credential that signifies you know and you can do something, and that credential can connect to the next credential that allows you to continue to be successful in work and in life, and I think that's how legislatures are starting to see the post-secondary learning space, particularly as it relates to these adult students.

TM: 11:24

Ed: Now, Jamie, I don't want to let you go without talking a little bit about your new book, "Human Work in the Age of Smart Machines." Very interesting what I've read about it and I'd like you to expand a little bit more, particularly on what technology will do to work in the future.

Jamie: A lot of people have asked me this question: Why did someone who runs a national foundation on higher education and post-secondary learning write a book about human work? The answer is simply that many people, including state legislators, are asking a question about the learning system that I think they should ask, which is: What is education for? And my answer is that it's simply to prepare people for human work, the work that only humans can do.

We've all read about the fact that work is changing in so many unprecedented ways. Technology, artificial intelligence, automation is taking over many of the tasks that people used to do. Some people are sort of fixated on this idea of a robot zombie apocalypse – the robots are going to come and take all of our jobs. But I'm more interested in the work that only humans can do in this era of smart machines.

I do not believe that human work is what humans do after the machines perform the tasks. I think we are unique. To be clear, machines are better at certain things: speed, repetition, being able to reduce things to an algorithm. But they can't understand subtlety and nuance. They don't understand human interaction and how people interact with each other in unpredictable ways.

So, basically the more interaction that you have with humans, the less likely it can be done by a machine. So, human work, the work that only humans can do, is work that emphasizes our human traits: our compassion, our empathy, our ethics, our ability to collaborate and be creative.

At the end of the day I think the chief way we're different from machines that matters most is that for us as humans, work matters. People work not only because it helps them economically; clearly, they want to make money and do well in life; but also, because it offers them an array of other benefits.

It gives them social mobility and personal satisfaction and dignity. And at the end of the day for humans, we want meaning and purpose in what we do in work. That's what human work is. It is the work that only humans can do and the work that I think we need to be preparing people for in the 21st century through our post-secondary learning system.

Ed: Jamie, thanks for sharing your time and expertise with the listeners today. Stay safe. I'll be right back with Scott Jaschik.

MUSIC

VO: The 2020 edition of the Mason's Manual of Legislative Procedure, the only parliamentary manual designed specifically for state legislatures, is now available in both print and digital versions. Order yours today at ncsl.org/masonsmanual.

Ed: I'm back with Scott Jaschik. Welcome to the podcast.

Scott: Thank you. Great to be here.

TM: 14:36

Ed: Well, Scott, let's start with the big picture. Based on the reporting by your organization, can you give listeners an overall look at the state of college reopening – here we are in mid-October – such as how many infections have been reported, schools that have opened and closed again – that sort of thing?

Scott: Sure. It's been chaotic to say the least. Some schools decided at the beginning not to reopen, and I shouldn't say reopen; they decided to reopen virtually. And these schools have been fine. But the question is enrollment. We have data showing that enrollment is down at these schools. Many students will go to a school that's online if it is very prestigious or has a lot to offer very specific to their needs. Many have doubts and are taking a year off or a semester off.

Now, the schools that reopened, it's been all over the place. Smaller colleges generally are doing better than larger universities. Florida State has had constant fights over students not following the rules; lots of universities have. Basically, the question is: Can you force your students... and I say force because it's really got to be rigorous... Can you force students not to socialize in the ways that they're used to? And that's a big question that's holding a lot of colleges back.

TM: 16:14

Ed: So, what do the experts you talk to think things look like for the rest of the school year with the rest of this semester and then into the spring semester?

Scott: This semester the colleges that are back adjusted their schedules slightly. Many are going to be online only after Thanksgiving. That's because they fear that people will go home at Thanksgiving, get exposed, and then travel back. There is usually just a week or so of classes after Thanksgiving, so that's not a big loss.

And then, similarly, most of those that are open are going to be open in the spring semester. Many of them are starting later, starting as late as February, and cancelling spring break. The colleges generally... I don't want to say they don't believe what's being said about how there will be a vaccine that's going to magically appear in November or December, but they're not counting on it.

So, the thing to remember is let's say even if a vaccine exists, it has to be distributed to everyone. And so, most are expecting it to be for a full year.

TM: 17:23

Ed: So, you mentioned... you made reference to this earlier, but a lot of people thought it was unrealistic to expect students not to go to parties and other gatherings if they returned to

campus. But schools reopened, nonetheless. Can you talk about why they did that? I assume a lot of it was financial, but maybe there are other factors as well.

Scott: Finances were a big impact. I mean, look, colleges get no room and board money and less tuition revenue if they're online only. There is no doubt that finances are important.

The reason those reopened, I think part of the reason is politics. Generally, there is more reopening in states that are led by Republican governors. That's a huge factor, and for a public university – you can't be a public university and not care about what your governor thinks.

Now, that's obviously not to say that they're opening and think that it's going to be bad, but there's very strong pressure on them to do that politically.

TM: 18:25

Ed: You also mentioned this earlier, about how some smaller institutions were more successful in reopening than the larger universities. Was that simply because of the number of students involved, or did they have a better plan?

Scott: Well, I think it relates to other things. Smaller universities, everyone knows everyone, both staff and students, and there is more of a spirit I think of we're all in this together. And so, they have been more able to control their students.

I wrote a story about Anderson University in South Carolina. They're a religious institution, which helps, because there is no drinking there, there are no frats there; and so, they could do certain things at a smaller setting that the University of South Carolina couldn't do.

It's very hard if you have big-time athletics, big-time Greek systems, to keep everything under control.

Ed: Well, yeah, that makes a lot of sense. It's hard to imagine, from my experience, a college campus with no alcohol consumption, but I imagine that would make it a little bit easier to keep students in line.

TM: 19:36

Ed: So, the pandemic is just, as you know all too well, just the latest challenge for higher education. We've got an audience of legislators and staff and other policymakers and they are very familiar with the shrinking appropriations for state colleges and universities.

Do you think we might see a change in the federal/state relationship around higher education funding as a way to address affordability kind of as we go into this election, and I suppose depending on how it turns out?

Scott: Yeah, it very much depends how it turns out. I think Joe Biden has talked about higher education a lot and has pledged much more in terms of support if that happens. Now let's be frank – a lot of the action here is in the states and the next round of legislative sessions is going to be ugly for higher education.

State economies have tumbled and every state I think has much less money than it did before. That's just a fact. Even if they raise taxes, they've got less money than they did before. So, it's going to be very difficult for higher education in the next budget year just because every single state is down.

In that environment, the states can do things to help colleges. They can provide more financial aid. They can, if they have a pre-college program, support it. But it's going to be tough for students and for institutions.

TM: 21:10

Ed: Well, we certainly saw that the funding situation for higher ed now is almost a continuation of what happened in 2008/2009 during the Great Recession when there was such a cutback, and I guess so many states also have statutory or constitutional obligations to their K-12 that they don't have to higher education.

Scott: I would say it's going to be worse because the recession of 2008/09 went in slightly different ways in different states. The need for appropriations is huge for higher education. They want more money for all the right reasons. But they're going to be seriously handicapped in their ability to get money.

TM: 21:57

Ed: Well, Scott, thank you so much for sharing your expertise on this, and let me ask you: Is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners before we wrap up as they think about what the state of higher education will be in this post-pandemic period... we hope post-pandemic sometime soon?

Scott: Yeah. I think the thing particularly for legislators to think about is: What do they want their colleges to look like when this is all over? In addition to the pandemic, there are lots of other issues. You have states with shrinking populations versus growing populations. You have states that want to take a new look at community colleges or four-year institutions.

The question is: What are the things that you can do that actually make sense financially and substantively?

Ed: Well, Scott, thanks again so much for your time and stay safe.

MUSIC

Ed: And that concludes this edition of our podcast. We encourage you to review and rate our episodes on iTunes, Google Play or Spotify. You may also go to Google Play, iTunes or Spotify to have these episodes downloaded directly to your mobile device when a new episode is ready. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, this is Ed Smith. Thanks for listening and being part of "Our American States."