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The promise of community colleges as pathways to high-quality jobs
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PITA: Hello and welcome to Intersections, the podcast where two experts explore and explain the important policy issues in the world today. We're part of the Brookings podcast network and I'm your host Adrianna Pita.

So if it's an important goal to decrease economic inequality and increase social mobility, policymakers can either take a macroeconomic approach maybe trying to improve the overall economy or try to encourage the growth of better paying industries that are in their particular regions or you could also approach the issue from a more personal angle, which is to say that as young people are finishing high school, what options are there that can help improve their outcomes so that they're more likely to complete college or some other sort of workforce training that will increase their access to stable good-paying jobs.

So to talk about this with us today are the authors of two new reports. We have Martha Ross, who's a Fellow with our Metropolitan Policy Program and she cowrote Pathways to High Quality Jobs for Young Adults with some researches at Child Trends.

And we also have Elizabeth Mann Levesque, who's a Fellow with our Brown Center on Education Policy, and she wrote Improving Community College completion rates by addressing structural and motivational barriers.

Martha and Elizabeth, thank you for being here.

LEVESQUE: Thanks for having us.

PITA: A tiny bit of environmental context for our listeners, what we're looking at here is that as we're looking at younger adults, call them the under 30s, the Great Recession not only disproportionately hurt those who didn't have any kind of post-secondary credentials, but the employment rates for this group without degrees has never recovered to pre-2008 levels.

For those who do have jobs, just having a job doesn't always equal economic security. So a nice bit of serendipity, you guys did not plan this, but, Martha, as you were looking at how to get young adults who experienced disadvantages into better jobs one of your recommendations was increasing the completion of post-secondary degrees.

So, Elizabeth, you basically went and did a deep dive on why this is a problem

and how to tackle it.

So, Martha, I'm going to ask you to start and start just by explaining for listeners why 29-year olds? You looked very specifically at this age cohort, why was that and how did you go about researching them?

ROSS: Right. So 29 is not a magical year when you automatically cross the threshold and become an adult. But when you are doing research, you have to get specific and have definitions.

So when we were thinking about measuring economic success as an adult, we wanted to allow young people to have enough time to enroll in some kind of college or post-secondary education after high school. A lot of people do it right away, not everyone does.

Not everyone finishes on time. Some people stop out. People a lot of times have detours along the way. They may have an unpaid internship or hopefully a paid internship. We wanted to build in enough time for people to go through these educational and life experiences and settle into a good job.

So if you are looking at job quality of age 24, we just thought that's too early in someone's career trajectory to look at that meaningfully.

PITA: Speaking of that, you had that criteria of a high-quality job, how did you quantify that for the purposes of this?

ROSS: It's a good question and it's a tough question. We wrestled a lot with how to do that. You have to both conceptually define it and then you have to figure out what data you have or can find to measure it. So we took two fairly obvious characteristics, we took wages and benefits, like retirement and health insurance and paid days off, and we said those are -- you know, those are obviously central.

And the data source that we used, the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 version, allowed us to look at those.

Then you get into squishier territory, because there are questions about scheduling, predictability, treatment on the job, your level of autonomy, do you have a career ladder, do people respect you, do people harass you. All of those matter a lot, not all of those can be measured easily.

So we looked again pretty carefully at what our data source had and it did have a measure of job satisfaction, just a simple question, how do you like your job and with a scale of like not at all to I love it basically.

So we used that as a measure and that -- it's kind of a blunt instrument, but it captures a lot of other characteristics. Your perception of your career opportunities upward at a given workplace, how people treat you, your sense that -- your satisfaction with the schedule that you have or the notice that you're given of scheduling changes, we thought that could all be reflected in job satisfaction.

The toughest one was ours, because that is really a matter of personal preference. Some people want to work part time, some people want to work full time, but can't find a job. They are involuntarily part time.

What we settled on was using the benchmark of the 40-hour workweek as our standard. The few are a little bit above or below that, we counted that as high quality. A few were working too few or too many hours, we coded that as less good.

The particular sticking point was we didn't want to have people get good wages by working more than 40 hours, so that was kind of a backstop against having a low paying job but you earn enough to support your family because you're working 80 hours a week, so we did not want that to happen.

PITA: It sounds like a really great balance. Like you say, a lot of those issues are squishy, so it's a great way of working that in.

So one of the aspects that you both had in common was this idea that education being a really powerful equalizing force and that college degrees are one of the strongest predictors of being able to get a good job.

How did this show up in some of your research, Martha?

ROSS: Well, we looked at what experiences people had between their teens and their mid to late 20s and how that predicted job quality at age 29 as measured by wages and hours and satisfaction and benefits.

Not surprisingly, the strongest predictor was having a college degree. Whether it was a two-year degree or four-year degree or graduate degree, that had the strongest impact.

PITA: Elizabeth, this is where you come in. Now, you looked specifically at community colleges, why are they so important as sort of an avenue for reducing inequality?

LEVESQUE: So community colleges are very important. They serve many students. They serve about 40 percent of all undergraduates in the United States, that's a huge number, that's a lot of students. Community colleges also serve a large share of minority students and a large share of low-income students, they're also more affordable than a lot of other options. Community colleges also can provide students with excellent pathways into the kind of high-quality jobs that Martha was just describing.

So I think that there's a bit of an assumption or maybe bias among upper middle class individuals who went to a four-year university that that's really the only pathway into a high quality job, that's not necessarily the case.

Students with two-year degrees -- and the average earnings varies by field, but you can graduate with a two-year degree and come out having a high quality, good paying job.

It's also possible -- and again there's variation depending on the field and the specialty and the location, but you can also complete a credential, so that would be something like a one-year certificate, so it's less than a two-year degree, and those can also set students up for success for high quality, good paying jobs.

In all cases, completing a two-year degree or credential on average provides much better earnings than if you only had a high school diploma or had only taken a couple of college classes.

So to me studying community colleges is real important because they're serving a lot of students, they're serving students who may come from more disadvantaged backgrounds, they're less expensive to attend, and students can, if they complete a degree or credential or if they complete a degree and go on to a four-year program, they can really have good outcomes on the other side.

So there's a lot of potential for community colleges to really be a pathway into a high quality job for millions of Americans.

PITA: So you looked specifically at the issue of the completion rate that you were just starting to get to and it's an issue that's been pretty sticky over the years. We've

gotten better at graduating more kids out of high school, we're getting more kids to go to college, but they're still having this issue that there are a lot of kids who go but then they drop out.

How big of a problem is this?

LEVESQUE: This is a big problem. So fewer than 40 percent of community college students complete any degree or credential within six years of enrollment, fewer than 40 percent. So that means that there are many students who are enrolling in a community college program and are leaving without a degree or a credential. And as Martha just explained, one of the predictors of having a high-quality job is not taking a couple classes, it's not did you enroll in higher education, it's did you complete a post-secondary degree or credential. And so to really see the value of enrolling in the first place, completion is absolutely key.

So thinking back about what I mentioned how many students community colleges serve, that they serve a large share of minority students and lower income students. So when we think about that combined with the low completion rates what we're really seeing is the risk of perpetuating a lot of inequality that we already have if students enrolling are not actually finishing those degrees and moving on through a pathway, if they're actually kind of getting stuck. They start and then don't quite finish.

PITA: Plus they're also now walking out with the extra debt of however much time they did put in towards it.

So you focused particularly about -- you called them the structural and the motivational barriers that are facing students.

Can you break that down a little bit for us?

LEVESQUE: Absolutely. Before I do that, let me just say upfront, and I say this in the report as well, it's also very important to note that financial barriers and academic preparation are large barriers for community college students.

So I don't want to downplay that by any means, those are just not the barriers that I focused on in this particular report, so I just want to put that out there.

So then the barriers that I did focus on as you mentioned, so I talk about

structural and motivational barriers. So this idea of structural barriers is something that I think has gained a lot of traction recently.

So the whole idea here is that the typical community college is set up in a way that makes it very difficult for students to navigate from enrollment to degree completion.

So one way to refer to these types of schools is a cafeteria style college. You enter, you take some classes, you sign up for them, you don't have a good sense of whether they form a coherent major, maybe there are many majors to choose from, and you don't even know how to begin choosing which one is right for you let alone how to satisfy the requirements that set you up to either finish a degree or transfer to a four-year university.

And so what can happen in this cafeteria style college, and there are a lot of factors that go into that, is this is kind of been diagnosed as part of the problem of this completion problem.

So without enough guidance or advisement, support, or without clear pathways, students enter, take some courses, but don't really see a connection to a career path or further education and don't really know how to assemble the right mix of courses and internships to actually complete their degree.

So that's kind of the structural problem in a nutshell. Fortunately there's a lot of really promising work on how to address this problem. And so one of these approaches is referred to as a guided pathway's approach.

The idea here is that you address the structural problem directly. You create clear pathways. You provide more advising services and support so that students have support in it figuring out what they want to do, how to achieve that at a community college, and specifically what it entails.

So there are a number of different ways to work toward that guided pathways, but that's kind of one solution, that's one approach to this issue.

The other issue that I focus on, the other barrier, is motivational barriers. To me the structural and motivational barriers are interconnected, they really dovetail.

So the motivational barrier that I discuss here is that student performance and interest in their coursework research shows us increases when students, particularly those who

enter a course with low expectations for themselves, their performance and interest can increase when they see the connection between the coursework and their real lives, so when they see the relevance of that coursework.

So think now about a student in this cafeteria style college, you took some classes, you randomly chose what seemed interesting, maybe you went to orientation but it wasn't mandatory, and even if you went maybe you had 15 minutes to briefly talk to an advisor and choose some courses. So now you're enrolled in these courses and it may be very difficult for you on your own to see how that actually connects to your end goals.

So these motivational interventions that I talk about in the report are kind of operating on micro level. So what they are is there are a number of different experiments that researchers have done in classroom settings where you provide students with a series of prompts asking them write an essay or write a letter to someone about what is the relevance of what you're learning in this course to your life.

Those interventions have been shown to really have a positive impact on student performance, in their interest in a course.

So what I say here in this report is these motivational interventions, these prompts in a course, we've seen them be really effective, but they're not a silver bullet, so it's not enough on their own to incorporate that in. To me the key really is addressing these structural barriers, helping students identify these pathways, and as you're doing it be aware of what we know about motivation and the role it will play in student performance and incorporate those interventions to help students not only identify a path but while they're on that path make the connections between the relevance for their coursework and their own lives.

PITA: They can kind of see where they're going a little bit better?

LEVESQUE: Exactly.

PITA: So this shows up again in both of the work that you do. This idea that if you're fortunate enough, you're born into a middle class or an upper class family, the people around you -- maybe your parents went to higher education or the people around you all of their families also went to higher education, that of all the pathways that we know that there

are to be successful if you're born in those circumstances, you kind of know what those pathways are, or at least you know who to go to for help along the way. But for a lot of students if you're the first in your family to go to school, that resource isn't there.

Martha, you had a lot of recommendations about -- you called them onramps for employment both for teens and then for these young adults who are in their 20s and particularly for those who didn't have those post-secondary credentials, you talked about the -- you called them work-base learning experiences and how effective they are.

Can you talk a little bit more about them, what are work-base learning experiences and why are they so effective?

ROSS: Work-base learning, I wish we had a better term for it because just inherently it sounds jargony, but examples of it are things like internships or job shadowing or career days or that sort of thing. It's a way to bridge the gap that in this country is pretty big between the schoolhouse and the workplace.

So what we looked at in our report was work-base learning in high school, but it doesn't have to only be in high school. It can be in -- it can be a college, it can be in training programs, there are examples of both of that.

What we looked at was in high school, and specifically as part of career and technical education programs, or CTE for short, and it used to be known as vocational education, but they are rebranding themselves, tweaking and improving their program models in general.

So within CTE, these work-base learning experiences included, as I said, internship, apprenticeship, something called cooperative education, which is pretty similar to an internship and mentoring at a workplace with an employee.

What we found was that participating in these in high school predicted higher job quality ten years later, which is a pretty big deal. A lot of times the effects of training programs fade out over time, but this stuck.

Our theory, which is, it's just a theory at this point, is that it was the relationships with adults in the workplace that made the difference, or at least made some of the difference.

The other types of CTE programs that we looked at were either more school

based, classroom based, or didn't have as long a duration or a -- the same kind of relationship with an employee.

In a good internship you would place a high school student in a workplace where there is a designated supervisor who is engaged with that role of supervising that intern and they just -- they didn't just get assigned this when they didn't want it and they're not -- they have poor social skills.

But in a well-designed internship, you have an engaged supervisor who's working with you on substantive tasks and they're giving you guidance, and we think that that kind of exposure to the workplace and that kind of experiential learning can have a big impact.

PITA: You mentioned that you looked specifically at these programs that were meant for high schools. Are there some other programs that are substitutes for people when they're out of high school but didn't get a chance to college or went and maybe dropped out?

ROSS: Yeah, the classic one is an apprenticeship program, that's a very strong forum of work-base learning. The employers are really bought into that, because they are paying the student while they are working and learning.

Other examples are programs -- any job program that incorporates an internship. One of the best-known ones for young adults is called Year Up and they work with young people 18 to 24, they give them an intensive six months of technology training, and familiarize them with white collar workplace norms, and then put them in a paid six-month internship at a corporation, and that has been evaluated and their students have really good outcomes.

PITA: How does this connect with some of the Positive Youth Development programs that more about sort of the noncognitive or soft skills, there's a bunch of different names for these, can you talk a little bit about that?

ROSS: Yeah, Positive Youth Development is another jargony term that at its core means I would say treat young people with respect and focus on their assets and competencies.

A lot of programs serving young people think about the problems that those young people have that need to be fixed, and you do not want to ignore someone's life circumstances and you don't want to ignore problems that they have, but what Positive Youth

Development argues the focus should be on what they want to achieve and how you help them get there and how you help them develop the agency and the expectation for themselves tied to what Elizabeth was saying, the expectation for themselves that they can succeed.

A lot of youth serving organizations incorporate Positive Youth Development now, but a core piece of it is a relationship with a caring adult, because you need the adult who is going to work with the young person and help them set their goals and identify a pathway to get there. The way a lot of programs are funded, it is not always possible to ensure that there are adults that a young person can build that kind of relationship with.

PITA: So, Elizabeth, when we were talking about these sort of guided pathway schools, the City University of New York has a really great program, it's the ASAP program I think that you mentioned, this particular model.

Can you tell us a little bit more about that and why it's such a great example?

LEVESQUE: Yes, exactly. Thank you for that question. So CUNY's program is like you mentioned, the ASAP program, which stands for Accelerated Study and Associate Programs, and so essentially this is a good model of a guided pathways approach and the goal of this program was to increase graduation rates for their students and to also help them graduate faster.

So MDRC conducted an independent evaluation of this program and found that it was exceptionally effective at increasing graduation rates for its students.

So let me give you just a sense of kind of some of the program characteristics, because there were a lot of different aspects to this programming, so I'll mention just a few.

So one is that students in this program attend classes full time, they're also encouraged to take developmental courses earlier, and they're encouraged to graduate within three years.

And when I say "encourage" what I mean is the program also provides supplemental tutoring and career services support. The academic advisors have smaller caseloads, and so the program not only helps students set the goals but also provides resources to help students figure out how to reach those goals and how to stay on track towards those goals.

The program also includes a couple of other resources, for example, participants have a tuition waiver, so that covers their tuition and fees, they have access to free textbooks, and program also provides students with free public transportation. This is in New York City, so that makes a big difference, particularly for students who are spending a lot of time traveling and that free public transportation also requires that students have to participate in certain programs, so it's also kind of a way of making sure that students are participating in the programming that's designed to help them. And so those are just a couple of the attributes of the program that has been super effective.

So what this evaluation found is that graduation rates almost doubled among the ASAP students and also transfer rates to four-year universities were higher than for students who did not participate in this program.

So it's a really thoughtful, holistic approach to addressing some of those structural issues and it's had really positive impacts for students.

ROSS: It also shows that importance of resources, because as Elizabeth notes there are actually two ways to look at the cost of ASAP. It did cost more than community colleges typically spend per student. However, their students since they were more likely to graduate, the cost per degree was less, so the spending was more efficient and the outcomes were better, but the higher ed landscape is incredibly stratified by race and class and along with that it is stratified by resources per student.

So the community colleges that have a mandate to serve anyone, they are open access. Not all programs within community colleges are open access, but the schools are, that's their mission to have an open door to the community.

They have much lower funding levels than other public and private colleges and universities, and resources matter to completion. I mean, student characteristics and readiness matters a lot, but so do instructional resources per student.

And the other schools, more selective schools, have resources two to five times instructional resources per student and that makes a difference.

It would be nice if we measured quality not by selectivity, how many people did you turn away, but by how many people did you graduate.

To really have a fair shot at graduating people, especially those who come with lower levels of preparation, you have to put the resources in to doing it.

LEVESQUE: I agree with everything Martha just said and I think that in that context, the ASAP program is a really good example of if you invest in students and provide these kinds of support, it is worth it. It is worth that investment in terms of student outcomes.

PITA: I'm glad you followed up on that question of cost, because one of the things I wanted to ask about was this idea that -- of course if every school could hire a dozen or dozens of more advisors that would great. States are strapped for money, individual schools' strapped for money, certainly public schools.

So what are some of the maybe they're higher cost but they're definitely worth it sort of interventions versus all right, if you don't have money, what are some of your lower costs but still really effective interventions either on the broader job side or on the education front?

LEVESQUE: I would actually turn that around and say to me more investment in our community colleges should be a top priority.

So I recognize that's kind of skirting the question, but I think it's worth saying that it's not that we have no idea what might work to support completion rates and that we have no idea what the benefit might be. We are getting a very good idea of what might work to support it and we have a very good idea of what the benefit is to students and to our labor market and economy as a whole, so I would argue that that should be on the agenda, that increasing resources should be on the agenda.

Obviously that's not going to happen overnight, so to your question: So one thing to know about the ASAP program, and the evaluation is very clear to make this clear, that they don't evaluate how individual components of the program affected student outcome.

So, for example, they don't say, well, the smaller caseloads of the advisors had this much responsibility for the outcome and the enhanced career services has this much responsibility. They say overall as a program this is what it cost.

What that means is that we would need to be very careful about saying, okay, well, the ASAP program worked, it had these ten services, we really can only afford this one, so

we'll implement that and see what happens. That may not be the most strategic approach.

As I said, the evaluation is very clear that we're not saying what the individual effectiveness of these components are but I think one pathway forward there.

And there have already been -- they're underway. I know additional pilot programs and other contacts is to say so if we know that this guided pathways approach generally and this package of factors and programs worked really well, if we had fewer resources, which of those would we prioritize or where would we invest and let's pilot that on a small scale and just be really thoughtful about we have limited resources, kind of what aspects should we use and move forward.

And I think -- Martha, I think I heard you say this at the panel when you guys rolled out your report and I'm going to say the same thing, I wouldn't be a researcher if I didn't say one way to solving this -- we don't have enough resources but we need a big change problem, you do more research on small pilot programs of promising strategies based on evidence and you see what might work in different kinds of contexts.

PITA: There was an interesting technological angle. Now I don't remember whose paper it was in, but one of the universities in Georgia I believe had their Pounce tool. It was just a messaging automated text, it was like that was a sort of a neat thing.

Are there other technological -- again it doesn't approach the whole problem, but it's all right, here's one of the things we could try.

LEVESQUE: So this is a program I believe to help reduce summer melt, so where students are accepted to I think in this case a four-year university.

ROSS: It was Georgia State.

LEVESQUE: Georgia State.

ROSS: Georgia State has just done phenomenal work to invest and redesign its services to support students better to graduation. What you're talking about is an example of it.

LEVESQUE: So that Pounce Program what that did is it is one excellent example of how you can leverage artificial intelligence in emerging technologies to provide personalized outreach to students that prompts them to complete certain tasks that they need to before

they matriculate at a university.

So you create that personalized outreach without having to hire a hundred extra advisors, because you have a program that's doing that and that's reaching out via text to students.

So I'm glad you brought that up and I think that's one good example of when there are fewer resources and you can't necessarily hire as many more people that thinking creatively and rigorously about how to use tools like that to reach more students can be really helpful.

I talk about these motivation interventions in the report and these are interventions where there's been a lot of research and development and investment that's already gone into them, and so a lot of that work and that investment, that groundwork, has already been laid.

When you look at the interventions themselves, they're not high cost necessarily in terms of what they actually look like.

So one intervention, for example, may be a faculty member in a semester-long course includes two extra small writing assignments that -- like I mentioned earlier, they're essay assignments and they prompt students to draw connections between what they're learning in the course and their lives. You do that twice in a semester at certain times, and that's the kind of intervention that has been shown to have positive effects on student performance and on student interest, so that is certainly lower cost compared to something like a full-scale ASAP program.

But I think it's also important to note it's not cost less. For these kinds of interventions to work well, I could imagine that you would want some professional development to support faculty members who want to use them. It would be great if there was an evaluation component as well, and I think providing some kind of ongoing support for faculty who are interested in doing that would be important to make sure that the interventions are actually occurring with the high fidelity that's necessary to see those positive outcomes, so that's one example of a lower cost solution.

Like I said earlier, though, I think that it would be a mistake to say, okay, we'll

just focus on that, we know we're in a cafeteria style environment, but we're going to hope that these other interventions kind of take care of it, that's not the whole ballgame. It's an important piece of the puzzle, but it's not everything.

ROSS: Yeah, if you think about the processes that a student encounters when they are going through the application process and enrollment and there's a lot of ways to simplify it, and many of those are not complicated on their face or expensive. I mean, one example is better alignment between local high schools and the schools near them where a lot of those students go.

It's not a big outlay of cash, but depending on the relationships, the strength of the relationships that exist between the school superintendent and faculty and community or university staff, that could take some time to build the relationship.

Where the high school could start saying in junior year or earlier like, look, if you go to this school down the road, you're going to take a placement test when you get there. They're not going to tell you this, but how you do on that test matters. Because if you don't do well, you're going to get placed in what is called either developmental education or remedial education, and that means you're paying money and you're not really moving towards your goal of a credential or a degree, you're doing makeup work.

It's very important to be ready for college-level academics, so I'm not arguing against that, but a lot of students have no idea of the importance of this test that they take during what is often kind of a busy time of going to the registrar and filling out forms.

If there was just more information about this test, preferably aligned with the high schools, that could do a lot. So that in itself is not a really complicated or expensive thing, but it involves some bigger picture system thinking about how complicated institutions organize themselves and interact with each other.

LEVESQUE: I think the point that Martha's making it reminds me of -- so in other work I've done, I've looked at relationships or partnerships between local employers and community colleges, so workforce development partnerships.

In some of the research on those partnerships, one of the barriers or one of the important factors that comes up is it takes time and resources to develop and manage those

partnerships.

So like Martha's saying it's not necessarily the investment is you're building in a new piece of equipment to train students for an advanced manufacturing job. It's not necessarily that kind of investment, but it's not free in terms of time and resources for the local superintendent, for example, to coordinate with the local community college in the same way that it's not free for a local community college to coordinate with a local employer to develop a workforce training pathway.

So I think Martha is right that these are relatively straightforward solutions that don't necessarily require a lot of money to fund, but I also think that it's important that policymakers and the public recognizes that it's not one phone call and then all of a sudden you have this alignment. It takes time from people who are already very overloaded in many other ways.

PITA: So one point that you both touched on, a good deal and you paid a lot of attention to, was that a common flaw in a lot of existing or proposed policies or different programs that try to tackle these issues is that they mistake access for quality.

How do you fix that issue of it's not just putting the opportunity in front of the kid, but getting them ready for it.

LEVESQUE: So I think that to me kind of how I approached it, this work, was thinking about access is -- we shouldn't think about that exactly as you said, that's not the endpoint, that's kind of the starting point.

So enrolling -- and there are barriers to enrollment, but let's say a student enrolls I think one thing that I anchor on is, and it's something that Martha finds in her report too, is that the benefit in terms of average earnings and outcomes for students, the benefit is not associated with enrollment and completion of a couple classes, it's associated with completion of a degree or a credential that can then put you on a pathway to these kind of high quality jobs that Martha was talking about.

So to me when we're talking about delivering high quality public education, when students get there we have to think about how to get them through that process. And if we're not doing that, then we're not really delivering on the potential of these institutions.

ROSS: I think what we need are a set of standards about what quality is. In some cases, that is straightforward and in some cases it's a really thorny complicated question.

Like what is a quality two-year educational experience leading to a degree, like that's a complicated question and I don't want to be glib about it.

On the other hand we can agree, I throw this out as a strawman, quality may mean that students meet with their advisor at least three times a year. A school could say that is nonnegotiable, that has to happen.

And there's so much knowledge in the field among teachers and administrators about this, but there is not that many organized forums where people have the time and space to hash out quality standards that would apply across the field.

LEVESQUE: One thing I'll add here, and hopefully this is implicit, but just to make it explicit. When we're talking about quality and when I'm talking about the barriers in community colleges, certainly none of this is meant to imply that the problem lies with the advisors or the staff or the faculty at community colleges, that's not the problem here. These are all individuals who are very committed to students and doing everything they can.

So I just want to be clear that when we talk about quality as a problem, it is certainly not the individuals at these institutions who are devoting their careers to these students.

And then following up on this point that Martha brought up about how do we measure quality, I think to illustrate how difficult of a question this can be, you don't need to look any further than the debate over the gainful employment regulations in the for-profit sector.

So this was an effort by the Obama administration to define what is an acceptable quality for for-profit institutions in order to keep receiving federal funding.

If those institutions did not meet a threshold of student debt to student earnings upon leaving the institution, they wouldn't be eligible for federal funding.

So that's a bright line in terms of a quality test and the Obama administration justified that standard and that approach extensively. Secretary DeVos and the Trump administration have proposed repealing that regulation, so their belief is that's not an

important or valuable measure of quality. And the fate of that regulation isn't really known yet, but currently that's the proposal on the table by the Trump administration is to repeal it.

So this a really pitched battle right now over how do we measure quality, and that's not talking about higher education generally, that's talking about specifically the for-profit sector.

So I think that's just to illustrate another side of how defining quality is difficult, because there are stakeholders on different sides who have vested interest. So reaching a point where we can all agree on a measure of quality, enforce it, and keep it on the books long enough is no easy task.

PITA: I'm glad you brought in the federal government question, because I think for my last question it was going to be about where the solutions lie in terms of -- a lot of recommendations that you both make could be to schools, an individual high school can choose to adopt certain programs or certain -- community colleges can adopt certain programs.

So is it a school district question, is it a state level question, are there federal elements, sort of breaking down where some of the solutions could best be placed in.

LEVESQUE: So I will respond with a frustrating answer of I think it is all of those things, but I think that each level of government from federal down to local school districts has a different type of role to play here.

So do I think the federal government should be mandating for community colleges the appropriate caseload for advisors, no, that's ridiculous. It's a very diverse setting. There are a lot of different resources and considerations and environments and all that kind of thing.

I think one role for the federal government, though, could be, and this kind of comes back to the investment question, is prioritizing higher completion rates, providing resources to implement programs that research tells us work, to invest in ongoing research and new pilots of promising strategies, and to really build up an evidence base and provide the resources to help act on effective programs and discover new effective programs, and that's a role -- that investment in R&D, that's a role the federal government has played in many policy areas, education is one of them.

I think at the state and local level, I think part of it again is a resource story, but I also do think that part of the effort there -- and I think to me really one of the promising aspects of something like the ASAP program is that we're not in the dark, we have a sense of what the problems are and what models of effective change can look like.

So I think at that point it's a matter of collaboration between the relevant actors at the state and local levels and community colleges diagnosing what aspects of our system looks like a cafeteria model, what do we know about what are some strategies for addressing those, and then what's our action plan going forward.

ROSS: In terms of higher ed I think a lot -- the state role is big, because public higher education at least is mostly a creature of states, state policy and state funding. So they can set a lot of policies and they also have to be careful about the danger of unintended consequences.

One state policy that is gaining favor is called performance-based funding and its goal is to hold institutions accountable for the graduation rates, which is a good goal. If you don't design it carefully, though, you're just going to penalize schools who are serving students who upon entry are less likely to graduate. You may set up incentives for them to only enroll students more likely to succeed or to dilute their curriculum.

So I would say funding is important and you have to be careful how you wield that tool, but there is a lot that states and the federal government can do to support their schools in thinking about their program design and are their systems designed to get to the outcomes that they want, which is graduation.

One way to think about that is to start mapping the process. A lot of these schools that have done these guided pathways approaches -- there are learning communities of schools who are doing this and they're sharing their lessons with each other.

You start looking at what it takes to for students A, B, C, and D to get through your process. You think, okay, here's a barrier, do we need to do it that way, maybe not. But if schools don't have that much money and they are worried about data being used against punitively, like your graduation rates are low, you're doing something wrong, it is hard for them to have this space to think creatively, think differently about how to operate.

LEVESQUE: I think that this is say a hard question that's at the center of a lot of discussions about education reform and accountability.

So you see this at the K12 level too where how do we set standards and accountability system that doesn't motivate compliance with a lot of difficult requirements rather than motivating thoughtful change in practice, so how do you give practitioners enough autonomy within that accountability system to really be able to make meaningful change.

PITA: Well, it's mini-layered problem, so thank you for explaining it to our listeners. As always our show notes will include the links of your reports and the great event, Martha, that you held with your fellow researchers, so there will be more there for people to go to.

Thank again for being here.

LEVESQUE: Thank you for having us. Thanks.

PITA: Thanks for listening. You can find more episodes of Intersections and the rest of the Brookings podcast network on Apple or Google podcast, on Spotify, Castbox, Stitcher, or your other favorite podcast app. Don't forget to follow us on Twitter at policy podcast for news and updates.

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