



Mary Rothchild, associate vice chancellor. Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System (MnSCU), and Brenda Dickinson, Normandale Community College

Interview with The Civic Caucus

8301 Creekside Circle #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

February 10, 2012

Notes of the Discussion

Present : Verne Johnson (chair), David Broden (phone), Janis Clay (phone), Pat Davies, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (phone), Curt Johnson, Sallie Kemper, Dan Loritz, Tim McDonald, Lynn Osterman, Jim Olson (phone), Clarence Shallbetter (phone)

Summary of discussion: Mary Rothchild, associate vice chancellor for academic affairs of Minnesota State Colleges and Universities System (MnSCU), and Brenda Dickinson, dean of continuing education and customized training at Normandale Community College, describe the prospect of a Minnesota workforce skills shortage and MnSCU's strategies to forestall the effects of that shortage and to respond to the opportunities it presents for training and retraining workers.

A. Introduction of speakers

Mary T. Rothchild is interim associate vice chancellor for academic affairs for MnSCU. Her office is responsible for system-wide technical education, Internet systems for career information, faculty professional development, academic technologies, high school and adult transitions, and industry-education partnerships. Prior to this position, Rothchild was MnSCU's director for strategic partnerships, coordinating programs designed to meet the state's workforce development needs through education-industry partnerships in the health care, manufacturing, energy and bioscience industries.

Before entering the field of higher education Rothchild was vice president for special loans and asset recovery at US Bank in Minneapolis. She has also held lending positions at international and commercial banks in New York City. Rothchild holds a bachelor's degree in political science from Barnard College, a master's degree in business administration from Pace University and a Ph.D. in educational policy and administration from the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.

Brenda Hanson Dickinson is dean of continuing education and customized training at Normandale Community College, a MnSCU school. Her office is responsible for delivering career, professional and technical training through open enrollment programming, customized training and workforce development grants. Since 2005, Normandale has been awarded one federal and 12 state workforce development grants.

Dickinson is a member of the Workforce Investment Board (WIB), representing the three MnSCU colleges located in Hennepin and Carver counties; the National Council for Continuing Education and Training; Minnesota Council for Continuing Education and Customized Training; and many other professional associations.

B. Background -With its 31 institutions, including 24 two-year colleges and seven state universities, the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system is the largest single provider of post-secondary education in the state of Minnesota. The colleges and universities operate 54 campuses in 47 Minnesota communities and serve about 250,000 students in credit-based courses and between 170,000 - 200,000 adults in continuing education. In addition to credit-based and continuing education courses, the system offers customized training programs that serve about 153,200 employees from 6,000 Minnesota businesses each year.

Normandale Community College, located in Bloomington, MN, is one of Minnesota's largest community colleges. It enrolls 15,000 credit students and 7,000 continuing education students annually.

C. Discussion -

THE PROBLEM: There is a projected skills gap in the Minnesota workforce.

The term "skills gap" refers to the misalignment of job skill requirements and the skills of available workers. The speakers said that MNSCU works to engage businesses to guide MnSCU in improving workforce development.

Rothchild identified four components to aligning jobs and skills:

1. Strive to understand future workforce needs. Are we communicating with employers sufficiently to know how the workforce must be trained for the jobs that are now unfilled or will exist in coming years?

2. Let supply and demand of jobs determine what programs are offered, not just enrollment , which would only result in a continual churning of course offerings. We must question: are we educating people to the level that's appropriate for them as individuals and that is also appropriate to

the job requirements of the future? Does everyone need a college degree? How do you define "college"?

3. Pay attention to skills and knowledge. Are students prepared both with technical skills and with the "soft" skills necessary for functioning successfully in a work environment?

4. Develop market and occupational awareness. Do people know where the new opportunities are today and where they will be in the near future? For example, "green" technology is starting to be very important in the construction industry and will likely be an important element of the best construction jobs in future. Are students aware of this type of emerging occupational opportunity and the new skills required to compete for those jobs?

In the history of the country, a participant observed, we've never had more than 25 percent of the population with bachelor's degrees. What has changed that makes us now believe more people need a college education? Rothchild responded that 47 percent of jobs today require some form of post secondary education, not necessarily a bachelor's degree, but at least some form of certification of additional education beyond high school.

THE GOAL: Anticipate workforce needs and adapt post-secondary education.

It is a continual process to identify what's needed, the speakers said, and it involves talking to businesses, understanding the available data of job supply and demand, and knowing what skills are specific to each industry. Then a continual process of redesigning educational offerings must also occur to assure that workforce needs are met.

THE STRATEGY : Continually evolve post-secondary offerings.

We need to rethink course offerings.

Partly enabled by technology, learning is now embedded in everything people do. Increasingly, Rothchild said, you about hear about "stackable" credentials and badges, the evidence of post-secondary skills mastery supplementing the work resume.

Dickinson described a frustration for many adult students who feel self-empowered in other areas of life. They come in to Normandale and ask, "What training should I take so that I can get a job?" This disconnect must be addressed through both adequate career counseling and appropriate course offerings.

Evolving two-year degrees may replace four-year diplomas.

There are different learner groups, Dickinson said, and colleges need to align programs and services to meet those needs. Traditional learners who have been successful in traditional environments often do pretty well finding their way. But while college degrees have been a necessary foundation for some people to enter into the workforce, that doesn't necessarily mean a conventional four-year college degree is ideal for all.

One effect of the merger of the technical colleges and four-year state college system, Rothchild added, was to rethink the nature of technical education. There are traditional job areas where our

higher education system has adjusted well, recognizing that some jobs require technical skills, interpersonal and management skills, and financial acumen - but not necessarily a four-year degree.

"We did a series of interviews with heads of companies, and came up with a list of business-critical soft skills that includes customer relations, innovation, and flexibility," she said.

Education can be designed to meet specific industry needs.

The MnSCU system office looks at patterns of industries to see if there are opportunities emerging to develop new programs.

Dickinson described a program developed to meet employers' needs called "MN HIT" - Minnesota Health Information Technology program. When they recruited for this program they used traditional recruiting methods but also relied on new tools like LinkedIn, the business-related social networking site, and found that some of the best-qualified people for such a program were dislocated workers.

Another training certification provided by Normandale that has become a popular resume-builder is ScrumMaster, which is a method of project management recognized by employers as a highly valuable and immediately applicable set of skills. It is widely applicable in many business settings and has proven to be a highly marketable job qualification.

Rothchild added "Since we can't know how much the universe will change, and since we can't know the interests of all students, we need to expose as many young people as we can to all the foreseeable opportunities for work and to expose them at the youngest possible age and at multiple levels of education."

The development of training programs is often done through grants and public subsidy. The Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) issues grants for workforce development. To qualify for these grants, first offered during the 1983 recession, applicants must be in a partnership between a business and college. With all such grants, Minnesota made a strategic decision to use the college partner as the financial vehicle, responsible for the use of grant funds, and the business partner as beneficiary of the resulting program. Other states give money directly to business, and it may or may not result in an ongoing skills development effort with industry-wide application.

Good value deserves more public funding.

Given changing demographics Minnesota is at risk of not being able to meet the needs of the workforce in coming years, the speakers confirmed. However, the state has many resources to turn to among its post-secondary institutions including the University of Minnesota and the state's private colleges, in addition to MnSCU. MnSCU is the largest post-secondary system and, according to Rothchild, the best value for producing the workforce we need.

"We see ourselves as a relatively affordable solution in the state," Rothchild said, "although our community college system is fourth highest in tuition in the country." It's expensive for students but students probably can't expect more aid from the state of Minnesota; people need to see this expense

as an investment in their future. The cost of running MnSCU in real terms today is 24 percent less than it was ten years ago, Rothchild added. What has changed to cause tuition increases is the amount of funding the state sends to the schools.

If private businesses benefit from these investments in specific training programs developed by state schools, why should the state bear the cost of developing and offering these programs, a participant asked. The balance of the public good and private good is always in tension in higher education. What is the appropriate balance? "I think what the Legislature has had to do is say it's all relative to the other needs in the state," Rothchild observed. There are both private and public benefits to post-secondary education, she added. It is certainly possible that the state may have gone too far over to the private benefit side of the equation. This is something, she noted, that requires on-going assessment.

D. Conclusion

Normandale will continue to look for cost-effective and innovative ways to meet the learning and skill development needs of students and business partners, Dickinson said. In-house and grant funded development of programs in tandem with the business community will continue. Rothchild added that while more people are seeking post-secondary learning, the higher education business model is strained. Twenty years ago when 25-35 percent of the population was getting a college degree it was assumed a certain type of middle-class person would be paying for that degree. Now that we're expecting a higher proportion of the population to have post-secondary training, not everyone has the necessary resources. This will continue to be a challenge in the foreseeable future.

The chair thanked the speakers for the informative visit today.