

## **Future of Work Commission Report on Stakeholder Conversations with College Students**

In furtherance of the effort to ensure all voices are represented and heard, Commissioners Soraya Coley, President of Cal Poly Pomona, and Betty Yee, California State Controller, met with a diverse panel of students at Cal Poly Pomona and Mt. San Antonio College on **Tuesday, March 3, 2020**. Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC) is a community college serving more than 50,000 students and is a primary feeder of transfer students to Cal Poly Pomona, one of the nation's most diverse polytechnic institutions serving more than 26,000 students.

The sessions were designed to solicit a robust and candid discussion with students about their aspirations and concerns about entering the workforce, how their journey through higher education is preparing them for their chosen field of work, and to understand what factors equate to a "good job." We were pleased that the discussion with the students were open, extremely candid and robust covering a variety of topics that helped us better understand how they think of and relate to the future of work. Each discussion lasted 90 minutes. In addition, students were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire to learn more about their parent(s) level of educational attainment, employment status, income level and the reason they chose to pursue a college education.

Prior to the start of the discussion, Controller Yee shared several slides with the students (all of which had previously been shared with the Commission) to provide a brief overview of the purpose of the Future of Work Commission. Those slides included:

Slide 1: Wages decoupled from productivity: Illustrating increasing productivity and flat wage growth over the past 40 years.

Slide 2: Gap between productivity and a typical worker's wages: a more comprehensive illustration of Slide 1, including statistics for changes between 1948-1979 (equal) and 1979-2018 (extremely divergent).

Slide 3: 1/5 of low wage workers in CA have a college degree: A segmented illustration of educational attainment and earning above and below \$15 per hour.

### **Given the robust dialogue, we were only able to ask the following seven questions:**

1. How would you define a quality job?
2. What do you think the future of work will be? What are some of the changes you expect in the type of work and what you might be doing?
3. Reflecting on the obstacles or challenges your parents may have had in the workplace, how do their experiences shape your perspective about work and being employed in the workforce? Are there observations or lessons you learned from your parents or family that shape your perspective about work?
4. Looking back, is there any advice you wish you would have had prior to entering the workplace or choosing a career? What might that be and what might you have done differently?
5. How many jobs do you think you will have over your lifetime and what factors will contribute to your decision to change jobs?
6. What are some basic expectations you have of your employer?

7. What are your suggestions on how the connection between education and work might be improved?

Note: Question #8 for reference: Do you have concerns or anxieties about graduating and entering the workforce? If so, what are they?

**Cal Poly Pomona Focus Group**

Fourteen (14) participants, primarily seniors, reflected the diversity of the campus – in terms of gender, ethnicity and major. The group also included first-generation students, student veterans, former foster youth and transfer students. The results of the student questionnaire underscored how many students are first-generation, low-income and pursuing a college degree in the hopes of securing gainful employment and social mobility.

**Observations:**

1. While acknowledging pay and benefits are important, students clearly put a premium on non-monetary factors to define a quality job. Students appear to be very apprehensive about entering a workplace that does not meet their core values. Those values are much more personal and individualistic than the traditional hierarchical workplace typically affords.
2. Students would clearly define a quality job as one where they are valued, can work as a team, have their opinions heard and respected by others, and their work matters.
3. Unsurprisingly given the responses to question on job quality, students are very concerned about the impersonal nature of their future of work. Students are clearly concerned about robots, digitization and new technologies replacing their jobs. It may be the instability this transition is causing is creating anxiety amongst the students concerning their future in the workplace.
4. Many students are trying to get by and facing economic hardship and may not feel they have all the support they need just to secure a job in their field, let alone thinking about the future of work.
5. Many students were motivated to go to college because they witnessed their parent's struggle working long hours for low pay and little opportunity for advancement. Some students voiced their remorse for watching their parents feel "disposable" or not feel respected at work. Based on those experiences, some students felt that having a degree would increase their value in the workplace and shield them from some of those negative experiences. While students understood the value of a quality education, there was also a strong sense among some students to honor their parents sacrifice to help them go to college and have many of the opportunities in life their parents did not have. This was also mentioned as an additional stressor.
6. Potential employers might better help prospective employees better understand the day-to-day requirements of a job, as well as the job culture and environment. Again, referencing job quality, the new workforce desires not only meaningful work but also a sense that they have a degree of say in how their work gets accomplished.
7. Students have a broad range regarding how many jobs they may have in their career. While some students value job stability and advancement, others clearly are looking for that perfect job where they feel they are a good fit and feel valued.
8. Students also provided examples of how the connection between education and work might be improved, such as the various paths for students to achieve their academic goals, including more practical information to be interlaced with the current curriculum that will better inform them about their potential occupational field and more opportunities to learn about jobs available in their field and strategies to compete for and secure those jobs.

**Mt. San Antonio College (Mt. SAC)**

Fifteen (15) participants, reflected the diversity of the campus – in terms of gender, ethnicity and major. The group also included many first-generation students, immigrants, and three students who already have a bachelor's degree while in attending Mt. SAC. The results of the student questionnaire underscore that many students are first-generation, low-income and pursuing an education in the hopes of increasing employment opportunities and to help their families financially.

**Observations:**

1. For the Mt. SAC cohort, job security with good pay, benefits and stability seemed more important than at Cal Poly Pomona.
2. Mt. SAC students frequently identified a good job as working for an employer that respected racial, cultural and personal differences in the workplace and considered a quality job as working for an employer that would provide training or reskilling in lieu of letting go an employee. They suggested that employers could reimburse training costs of an employee who may be let go. Or perhaps provide the employee a financing option. Students expect that a company will value them enough to provide training and opportunity within the company rather than losing their job. This is a consistent theme that defines a good employer and a quality of a good job.
3. Opposed to the Cal Poly Pomona discussion, students at Mt. SAC almost exclusively focused on their difficulties with entering the workforce rather than responding to the question posed. The level of frustration with securing a good job seemed extremely high and sometimes desperate due to accumulating debt.
4. Students desire a clear path to earning their degree and finding a quality job. They are clearly looking for answers and doing the very best they can to secure the education/credential they believe they need to be successful.
5. Given the changing nature of work, perhaps higher education should be teaching more course work across all majors and disciplines about opportunities to leverage social media as a pathway to earn a good living. Need to ensure that the equipment being used to teach students real-world applications is still relevant. This may be an area where higher education needs to make an investment. These points were raised several times by Mt. SAC students.
6. The language barrier was a significant obstacle that was raised. Many students spoke to how the language barrier prevented their parents from getting a good job. Their view is that employers make it difficult for a person who speaks a language other than English to secure a good job, even if the individual has a degree and skills in a particular area from another country
7. Children of many first-generation immigrant families have watched their parents work long hours at low-wage jobs that have little opportunity for advancement. Those experiences have driven many students to the community college system to secure a higher education and learn a marketable trade. For some, the community college is a pathway to the CSU and UC.
8. They viewed that unions are important to ensure that workers are protected. There was an acknowledgement of the value of a union to protect the workers interest when dealing with layoffs.