Why “Economic Mobility” as the focus of this year’s Careers Institute?

Economic mobility is defined as “how someone’s economic well-being changes over time,” with a particular focus on how income changes over one’s lifetime (1). The Department of Housing and Urban Development recently reported findings from top researchers, which indicated that chances for economic mobility are “relatively low in the U.S. when compared to other developed nations” – a sobering conclusion. Moreover, 58% of America’s low-income population are racial or ethnic minorities, and low-mobility areas in the southern regions of the U.S. tend to have a higher African-American population. Race is not the only determining factor, however, since researchers have found that low-income white children in southern communities are also more likely to become low-income adults (3). Education, transportation, and social capital are among the most important variables impacting economic mobility, which prompts policymakers to consider what can be done to effect positive change and position low-income students to embark on a pathway of upward social mobility. Therefore, this year’s theme of economic mobility for College Promise’s annual Careers Institute event was both timely and needed.
Notable Speakers and Sessions

Both days of the event commenced with remarks from the CEO of College Promise, Dr. Martha Kanter, who celebrated the growth and success of College Promise programs across the U.S., noting the substantial growth of Promise programs from 53 in the early days of the College Promise movement, to the present, where there are 393 Promise programs in 48 states and Washington, D.C. During the summer of 2022, College Promise unveiled the “My Promise Tool,” an instrument designed to assist students, families, researchers, and stakeholders in by serving as a comprehensive list of all Promise programs in the U.S. and providing program details necessary to understand the benefits and features of each program (4). Kanter stated that “connecting Promise programs to strong career outcomes is the natural step to reducing economic inequality for students and their families,” noting the clear connection between educational opportunities and upward economic mobility.

First Lady Dr. Jill Biden, who addressed the attendees at the Careers Institute, also emphasized the link between education and economic mobility. She provided an inspiring story of a recent visit she made to Rolling Meadows High School in a suburb of Chicago and celebrated the fact that students at the high school are eligible to take free community college classes in manufacturing and engineering classes - potentially providing the students a pathway to a career. Dr. Biden offered that “education has always been about jobs,” adding that “community colleges are one of our great engines of prosperity,” while her steadfast support of community colleges is widely known, the First Lady was also instrumental in starting the College Promise movement, having served as the Honorary Chair of the College Promise National Advisory Board during her service as Second Lady.
In addition, College Promise and its partners announced the Career Pathways Program, which “will offer unique opportunities for low-income, first-generation learners to secure meaningful jobs that provide good wages, professional development, and an upward trajectory towards their goals” (2). The goal is to provide an educational experience with a visible pathway toward gainful employment by bridging the gap between education and the workforce pipeline. The Lynchburg Beacon of Hope, a Promise program in Lynchburg, VA, has been selected as the first partner in the initiative. Executive Director of Lynchburg Beacon of Hope, Laura Hamilton, stated that “the career coaching and professional development they [the students] will receive – all supported by a new College Promise technology-forward system – will help them achieve their goals and adapt their educational pathways in real time” (2).

Two Lynchburg Beacon of Hope participants, D’Arrin Calloway and D.J. Johnston, shared their success stories at the Careers Institute. Both Johnston and Calloway were low-income, high-achieving students who benefited from the mentoring, leadership, and comprehensive supports offered by the Beacon of Hope staff. Calloway has completed internships at Tesla, Dell Technologies, and JP Morgan Chase & Co., and is currently a senior at Virginia Tech studying Business Information Technology with a concentration in Cybersecurity. Johnston is a recent graduate from Washington & Lee University, where he majored in Economics and Politics and minored in Middle East and South Asian studies. He is currently a graduate fellow at the American University in Cairo, studying the Arabic language and literature. Both Calloway and Johnston serve as an inspiration to policymakers, students, and families, as well as leaders in education, career, and workforce initiatives. The Career Pathways program’s purpose is to increase the number of these types of success stories, not only through scholarships afforded by Promise programs but by offering a support structure including robust mentoring and data-driven career counseling.
One Problem, Many Solutions: The Key Take-Away

All of the outstanding presenters at the Careers Institute made one thing abundantly clear – it will require many initiatives and efforts to position low-income students in the trajectory of upward economic mobility. Educational Testing Services (ETS), Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) & Washington Cradle to Career Advocacy Network, and Phi Theta Kappa are among the organizations that led sessions at this year’s Careers Institute, each with unique and creative solutions to provide students with viable career opportunities and increase the likelihood of upward economic mobility for low-income students. Participants also heard from distinguished researchers specializing in economic mobility, higher education, and career transitions, including Nicole Smith, PhD (Georgetown University), Amy Diehl, PhD (Wilson College), and John Barnshaw, PhD (Lightcast). The efforts of community leaders, elected officials, non-profit organizations, workforce development leaders, and postsecondary institutions can be coordinated to provide our students with the resources they need in order to provide a better life for themselves and their families. As stated by Dr. Biden in her remarks at the Careers Institute, “when we bring the full power of the administration together with non-profits, schools, employers, community colleges, ad families, we can give students the opportunities they deserve – and strengthen our economy along the way.”
Citations


