

Transcription for

THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 42: MAKING ROOM FOR ADULT STUDENTS

SU JIN JEZ

LISA SORICONE

DOUG LEDERMAN

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THE KEY INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 42: MAKING ROOM FOR ADULT STUDENTS

SU JIN JEZ

LISA SORICONE

DOUG LEDERMAN

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DOUG LEDERMAN: The United States, and pretty much every state within it, has set ambitious goals for postsecondary attainment. Those targets will be impossible to meet unless American colleges, and quite likely other providers of education and training as well, do a much better job serving the tens of millions of adults who lack a credential after high school, who are disproportionately economically disadvantaged, and likelier than other Americans to members of underrepresented minority groups. In this episode of The Key we explore the landscape of current prospective adult learners. We talk first with Su Jin Jez, executive director of California Competes, whose subtitle, Higher Education for a Strong Economy, more or less explains the group's mission. Jez discusses a recent report from the group that explains why adults often struggle in higher education and what it is about colleges that may deter them.

SU JIN JEZ: Sadly, I feel like almost everything. Higher ed was really structured to serve students straight out of high school going to college, going full time, and like any good bureaucracy, it's slow to change.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We also interview Lisa Soricone, senior research director at Jobs for the Future, who offers a national perspective on the status of adult learners, what traditional institutions can do to make themselves more inviting to adults, and what role alternative providers might play. Before we begin, a reminder to subscribe to The Key on your favorite podcast platform.

Our first discussion is with Su Jin Jez of California Competes about untapped opportunity and understanding prospects for Californians without a college degree. The recent report analyses the status of 6.8 million adults in the state who lack a college credential. About half of these potential graduates, as the report calls them, have some college experience but no degree. And the other half haven't ever attempted college.

Can you give us a sense of what led California Competes to focus on this audience of 6.8 million adults at this particular time?

SU JIN JEZ: Yeah, well, when we talk about adults without college degrees in California alone, that number was just really striking when we saw that, nearly 7 million people, and this population is just critical to our economic health as a state. In California Competes, we really focus on that intersection between higher education, the economy, and equity. So when we began to dig into the data, we saw, not surprisingly, these adults tend to be underpaid compared to college graduates, and more likely to be unemployed. And in the midst of this crisis, being unemployed is much more challenging, as there just aren't the jobs awaiting them. So we really wanted to understand what opportunity is there in this moment, particularly related to higher ed, to get folks better skilled, get them back into college, or get them into college to help the economy.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What are the traits and characteristics and situations of this large and diverse group that make getting postsecondary education and training challenging for them?

SU JIN JEZ: This group are more likely to be Latinx, to be Black, to be Native American Californians. They're in lower-paying jobs that, you know, likely are less flexible and, you know, have fewer benefits that allow them to return or go to college. They're more likely to live in poverty than college graduates. They're more likely to receive food stamps. Over half have dependent children. And one in five had children under five, which is challenging period, but in the midst of the pandemic when childcare is limited, and especially in California, many schools are still doing distance learning, adds another layer of complexity. And they we also found that potential graduates have lower digital literacy rates, which is especially problematic in the pandemic. And one thing that we're increasingly realizing is that our shift to online under the pandemic, a lot of that is going to stick. So digital literacy was an issue before the pandemic and is clearly going to be an even bigger issue afterwards, as, you know, we're going to see more online hybrid courses in higher ed. We'll see, you know, telehealth, and just a lot more happening online.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What are the structures and systems and approaches of traditional colleges and universities that we think most impede these people from continuing their education, or in some cases, restarting their educations--in other words, rather than putting the onus on the students for having issues, what is it about higher education that's problematic for them?

SU JIN JEZ: Sadly, I feel like almost everything. Higher ed was really structured to serve students straight out of high school, going to college, going full time. And like any good bureaucracy, it's slow to change. From enrollment in the fall, from an application from the previous fall or spring, and that's just a structure that's not great for an older student. And I will say a lot of things are not great for today's students period, but really not for older students. Some institutions allow for spring enrollment. That's little bitter, but the institutions that have been more responsive to adults' needs allow enrollment twice a semester or, you know, every few weeks. That's one example.

Think about the core of institutions the way we think about teaching and learning. So in California there's been a growing awareness and interest around credit for prior learning, a recognition that people can do collegiate-level learning outside of an accredited postsecondary institution. And I think about my dad was in the Air Force for 20 years, and when he retired, he brought his many credits or certificates that he had earned through Air Force University and more of various Air Force trainings to his local community college, and they requested a number of things that he did not have access to get that credit decades later. But we still have a long ways to go, and the community colleges are just beginning to really focus on this.

Financial aid is another example. California is fantastic. It has a very robust financial aid system. But that financial aid system prioritizes students straight out of high school or within one year of high school, and otherwise you have to compete for a small pot of state financial aid. Recent changes to the Pell grants extending the number of years you can get the Pell grant clearly will likely benefit older students because younger ones will have maxed out their six-year limit, is just designed not for this population.

DOUG LEDERMAN: California is just considering some changes in the Cal Grant program that would head in the direction I think that you're talking about. Can you provide some examples of policy changes sort of at the state/federal level that better enable this group of prospective graduates to get where we want them to go?

SU JIN JEZ: So clearly the financial aid reform, also thinking about right now low income students depend on a number of government supports from, in California, CalFresh, our nutritional assistance program,

from perhaps support from Workforce Development System around job placement. Most students period are working. So if there was a way to better connect our fragmented structure of social service programs, that would be one thing. That's one thing that there's a lot of conversation around in California, and that we're hoping to move towards is that, if we identify you as low income in one system, is there a way to make you automatically eligible for other supports that are using the same criteria?

DOUG LEDERMAN: We're seeing a lot of traditional institutions, more than ever before, that are focusing on adult students. It's probably unsurprising that that's coming at time when populations of traditional age students in many parts of the country are already declining or facing a decline. It's not an easy transition for an institution that has historically focused on traditional age students or residential students to make that pivot. How optimistic are you that the typical traditional institution can make that transition authentically enough to serve adult learners well?

SU JIN JEZ: It's an open question if an institution can make that transition within itself. I'm hopeful that it's possible. We're partnering with a number of institutions within California to sort of help them think this through and what practices need to shift, and what policies need to shift to serve older students better. But I am also aware that a number of institutions have felt like it wasn't possible. So I was just on a webinar [LAUGH] and someone from a private nonprofit said they tried to make this shift and they couldn't, and they had to spin off a separate institution to do the work. And that really struck me, because that's tough.

DOUG LEDERMAN: In recent years, we've seen the emergence of a lot of alternative providers to traditional institutions, many of which are particularly focused on adult and working learners. We've seen online institutions offering online degrees and certificates, boot camps, employers themselves offering credentials, to name just a few. How do you in California Competes view this broader collection of institutions, not just accredited colleges, being part of the mix needed to meet the needs of this large group of potential graduates?

SU JIN JEZ: As an organization, California Competes is really focused on improving models within higher education to better serve the needs of students, including adult students. As an individual, I don't think having many options is a bad thing and I also feel like a great thing about markets is we get to sort of see what works. And, of course, you know, the market's not perfect. So I think there's just a lot of experimentation, and as a researcher, we'll see what serves whom. So I think there's excitement around that. I do think, though, traditional higher ed needs to serve this population, and probably also these other entities. But the bachelor's degree, the return to that, are growing, and our state's economy is

demanding more of them. So at the very least, we have to figure that out, because we can't just send everyone to boot camps and hope that that's going to work.

DOUG LEDERMAN: There's a lot conversation in Washington and elsewhere about encouraging the creation of more short-term, nondegree credentials, and changing federal policy to better enable students to use Pell grants, for instance, to pursue those kinds of credentials. Do you think that would help this population?

SU JIN JEZ: At California Competes, we also do care about sub-baccalaureate credentials, the associates degree and certificates. We have been thinking a lot about what's the role of short-term credentials and stackable credentials. We have shied away from recommending that as a path, largely because we have yet to see it work out equitably. And California, frankly, is struggling around transfer, like the pathway that has existed for decades.

And so a little part of me is like, oh, let's not create something even more complicated and intersegmental to tackle that previous research seems like when you stack them, Black and Latinx students do the short-term credential and white and Asian students do long-term credentials [LAUGH]. All that's to say, I think it's like in our like parking lot of possibilities, I should say. We're not opposed to, but we think that there are more promising ways to get there. And my gut is we still have shortages of jobs that need a bachelor's degree or more. And we still aren't doing a great job in making that access equitable. So a part of me feels like, let's have conversation when...

DOUG LEDERMAN: After you've fixed this other problem.

SU JIN JEZ: [LAUGH] Yeah...

DOUG LEDERMAN: Does the work you're doing in this space and the discussions you're seeing unfold in California and nationally about this adult learner population now, leave you more optimistic than you were before that colleges and employers, and governments can figure out better ways to serve them well?

SU JIN JEZ: Yes! It's like a lot more conversational around this population. When you say some college and degree, they know what you're talking about. Our governor in California has prioritized populations.

It also does really help that there are a number of private institutions, private nonprofit intuitions now, that are doing this work.

Another thing, you know, that the state has done is, it has said you've got to have some good outcomes. And I think one thing that the state could also make clear is that those outcomes includes adults, because right now, there are questions that I have heard from leaders around does my self-support program, like my college of continuing ed or extension program or whatever, do those degrees count towards this degree-completion goal that I have? Or, you know, my noncredit students that are getting awards, do those students count? So if we can clarity around, like, those are your students.

[MUSIC]

DOUG LEDERMAN: You're listening to The Key at Inside Higher Ed. We sure to subscribe to this free podcast on your favorite platforms, including iTunes, Stitcher, and Google Podcasts.

Our next guest is Lisa Soricone, senior research director at Jobs for the Future, which focuses on reshaping the workforce in education systems to promote meaningful and equitable advancement. A lot of her work focuses on adult and low-income students. The California Competes report focuses on a group of nearly 7 million adults it calls potential graduates. Just about every state is focusing on its own such group, even if it isn't California-sized. What is it about the characteristics and situations of these students that make getting postsecondary education challenging for them?

LISA SORICONE: I think traditionally be think of the division of college. I have gets in college, getting ready to go to college, right? The focus of their lives is fairly simplified. It can be on school, right? And maybe they have to work part-time. But when you step out into the world of adults that are in their 20s and beyond, their scope, if you think the space of their brain that's occupied, has a lot going on, right? It might be work or a lack of work that's stressful. It can be family issues of all kinds, just personal issues. This group comes with a variety of past educational experiences, some favorable, some not. And so they can bringing that it this experience, which can post a host of challenges. The skill levels of this group is really heterogeneous. When you think of at one end, you might have folks who work their way through a GED program and are prepared to take the next step, all the way to veterans who may have some really high-level technical skills and just need to get kind of the credential that stamps it. And then I think a lot about immigrants and the varied backgrounds that they bring, right? Some come with professional credentials from their own country and others have learned to read in the US and worked up from there. So I think it's this idea that these folks have a lot going on, but what they share is a drive

to advance and get somewhere, and they see education as a means to do that. And they share that goal. The other piece that I think is important is the mindsets that they may bring, and the extent to which they have sense of self-efficacy in their ability to really achieve and do well in a college setting.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What are the structures and systems and other aspects of traditional colleges and universities that pose barriers or in some way impede this group from entering or succeeding in higher education?

LISA SORICONE: Some of it has to do with the complexity of systems, which can start with the website, when someone says, hey, I think I want to do to my community college, right? What is it like to navigate those systems? How clear and penetrable are they when someone has first contact or when someone's in the early stages of enrolling? I did some research a couple of years ago of adults in bridge programs and you see this funnel of people who show an interest, right? They go to orientation, they enroll, but how many actually make it that point of showing up in class? And this is where I think having those systems be very accessible and having resources readily available is really, really important.

I think other issues have to do with silos among the different departments of colleges, where they're not always speaking to each other. Sort of student services, and the admissions, and the registrar, are they really working together in a way that supports the student's progress through these steps from an idea of enrolling to actually making it to class? There are also issues, some campuses have really not arranged their programming and resources around the time schedule that adults how are balancing work and family life, right? If your registrar is only open 9-to-5 and someone's working a 9-to-5 job and taking evening classes, that's a problem. When is your library open? You know, is it open on a Saturday or Sunday, which is when someone has someone to watch the kids at home, and they can escape to really focus on their homework? Things like that that sound small, but they can really become the kinds of barriers that get in the way.

I think some other issues I think are really around the communication of supports and resources. How do the students hear about them? Do they hear about them? Are faculty aware of the resources that they can direct students to? Because faculty have, right, they've got the regular connection with students, so it's really important to bring them in to kind of the solution. And then, you know, getting to the mindsets that students bring and how we help to cultivate or not the mindsets that will help move them forward.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What are the sort of mindset things that can serve as impediments? And I don't know if they differ between those who have maybe tried it, and tried college and postsecondary education, and for one reason or another, not completed versus those who've never tried it before. Are there different mindsets that can impede them?

LISA SORICONE: I think there is probably some element which is similar across these two groups and some things that are different, right? I idea that you did it once. The question is, what was your experience like and has that left you with a bad taste that makes you say either I can't do it or that's not a place the welcome's me. So I think there's some of that. I think for folks who maybe haven't had the experience yet, or maybe just started a little bit of college and didn't get to fully develop into their self as a college student is that idea that I don't belong here. I can't be successful. Those things that get in the way that make you think, this is going to be hard. I'm different. Looking around, like, other people belong here but I don't, I think is an important piece. And do I have the skills? You know, if someone has weaknesses in reading or in math, how much is that going to affect their willingness to get over the bumps and try to be resilient and maintain a growth mindset?

DOUG LEDERMAN: We're talking with Lisa Soricone, senior research director at Jobs for the Future. Lisa, we're seeing lots of institutions pay more attention than they historically have to adult learners, which makes sense, given the nationwide declines, both current and projected in the number of Americans of traditional college age over the next decade to 15 years. What changes or policies might institutions adopt that would make them more effective at serving these students, particularly traditional institutions that haven't historically focused on this population?

LISA SORICONE: I think it starts with things like orientation. How welcome do students feel as adults who may have all these other responsibilities and are balancing things? Are they made to feel like a true part of the community or are the messages directed to the 189 to 22 year olds...

DOUG LEDERMAN: And they're an afterthought...

LISA SORICONE: Yes, exactly. You're here too. We like to see things at JFF, you know, we feel orientations an important moment, what if you integrate the families? What if you invite families to help them understand this is what the experience is going to be like to live with a student. How can you be supportive? Think of those things. So I think it kind of starts there.

A really critical piece that we think a lot about is the nature of supports. And we really advocate a comprehensive set of supports. So that would include academic advising to help folks make the right choices, right? It's nonacademic advising, and this is where you can into the things like developing a growth mindset, time management, stress management. Stress is a big issue of these folks, as you can imagine. And so you want advising that's going to take those things head on and really help to develop them. And those things can be done in groups so that they're not heavily resource intensive. I think there's also certainly a financial piece that's important, financial planning, financial literacy when they're dealing with financial aid or loans, it's really important to help set them up to make good decisions and set them up for long-term success.

And the career planning piece really has to start very early on, like career exploration can be part of the orientation, understanding what's involved. And it's really important... I think one of the things that's really critical with this group is, they don't have time and money to waste on dabbling here and tasting that, you know. I mean, they need to make effective, efficient use of their time and resources. So it's important that they get early career planning that helps them understand the realities of their career choices. They may come in with an idea of a career goal, but they've got to be guided toward understanding what's involved, the cost, the time, and what the labor market looks like, so that they can make really well informed choices. I think that's really important.

And then the last piece of the that comprehensive support constellation, if you will, is the social services and the counseling, and really helping folks access what they need. You know, are they getting public benefits that they need, are they getting mental health services that are available?

Acceleration is really important, so that's where things like competency based education that allows folks to show what they can do and get credit for it, credit for prior learning that validates and gives credit for the skills and experiences that folks have had. We've done a lot of work in the space of integrated education and training, and this is especially helpful for folks who don't have a high school degree but have managed to get to the college so that they can, say, be engaged in a career in technical program and be gaining and building their basic skills at the same time so they don't have to go through those levels of literacy or ESL before they can jump into the career training. So those kinds of things are really important to keep people moving quickly.

And then we're really big advocates of ear-and-learn models, things like apprenticeships, paid internships. Because even if someone has had a work life, if they come to college, they're trying to make a career transition. And how do they get that experience and opportunities to really understand the realities of the workplace and make sure that things [UNCLEAR] a right foot. For this kind of population,

the opportunity cost of not working to pursue some of these activities is too high, so we need to have paid experiences.

Other things that folks can do is explore opportunities for collocation. What if the career center is on the campus? Or if you can have childcare centers that are accessible there? Benefits offices... All of those kinds of things that support the student, if they can be in close proximity, the increases the likelihood of students accessing them, and those things really being a support driving their participation.

We sometimes overlook that important of relationships and the personal connection. One of the projects that we've been involved in has been related to text-based nudging with Persistence Plus as an example. And there's so much to be gained in that kind of process, where students appreciate that sense that someone's actually paying attention to whether or not I succeed. And they care and they want me to be successful. And that really goes a long way. I mean, we've seen examples of evaluations of success coaches, for example, in North Carolina where that's really shown to make a difference. So I think that is one of those areas that we need to invest in. It's not an add-on, it's really important.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What's our sense of how much the COVID-driven physical dispersal of students from campuses has further disrupted and interfered with the educational goals of this particular group of students?

LISA SORICONE: I think it's probably been really disruptive. The uncertainty, when you think of the uncertainty in so many ways, right, in terms of health issues, because lot of these students are in the population groups that have been very affected by the virus and their communities. I think COVID has really pulled back the curtain on the real digital capacity that folks have at home in terms of access and the ability to participate, so I think that's been a huge challenge. I think there are economic uncertainties. Do they still have their job? Do they dare spend money on tuition, because they're not sure they're going to be able to pay their rent and stay in their homes. I think this group has definitely taken a large hit in that respect.

DOUG LEDERMAN: What are some of the systemic policy approaches that governments and other influencers might adopt that would either prod or make it easier for colleges and universities to serve the population of current and prospective adult learners?

LISA SORICONE: I think it's really important to acknowledge their experience and build in that credit for prior learning kind of approach so that that becomes really standard. And it think it's really important that state systems be able to create some standardization and consistency across their own institutions. You know, I think one of the interesting and sometimes really challenging things about a community college, that level of higher education, is you have states where they move in sync. You have states where they're all really doing their own thing. And that really hurts students. I think they can still make themselves unique as institutions, but if they can develop some consistent policies... What counts? How do credits transfer? It should not be dramatically different from community college to community college within a state. So I think developing some of those kind of policies is really helpful.

We need to look at financial aid with the frame of reference of these students. What kind of barriers exist in the accessibility? It's built with a full-time student or maybe a part-time student in mind, not these folks that are maybe taking shorter credentials or are coming in and out differently. What kind of barriers exist for folks trying to access financial aid when they've already come and spent some time in college? What happens when they come back after a time of stopping out? I think those things are really important.

There's one particular area I think needs more attention and that is ability to benefit, which allows adults who don't have a high school degree, but who are coming to community college, and are ready for that work, to be able to access the Pell funds through that. What we've seen is that institutions don't have clear guidance and they tend to be risk averse in terms of assigning someone to that, directing them to that. What counts as a career pathway program, makes someone eligible? I think if states can get aligned about those things, they can just maximize the opportunity. It's sort of like we have these resources. Are we making sure that people are aware and that all those who might eligible have an opportunity to take that next step and see if they're eligible and can access it?

DOUG LEDERMAN: I'm curious what you and Jobs for the Future make of the steadily expanding array of alternative providers to traditional institutions, many of which focus specifically on adult and working learners. So these alternative need to be part of the picture for these students along with traditional institutions and credentials?

LISA SORICONE: I look at it in the sense that this is not a singular group of students. They're coming at this at different points in their work lives, in their personal lives, and they have different kinds of career goals. And so I feel like it's a bonus in this country that we have these opportunities and these different ways of going about advancing. And we need to figure out how to give adults really good information about these options. And where should the happen? Is that something that should be through the

workforce system? Should it be integrated into social services? Where do we convey these messages and help folks understand the difference in these different pathways?

I try to think of like, what's the long view? And the long view for a 45-year-old is different from a 25-year-old, right? And so my concerns with some of these short-term things is it may be giving them technical skills, but to what degree is it helping them develop the life-long learning skills that they're going to need to keep moving? And some folks may be at a point where like they just want their next rung, they're good, give them some stability, and they're fine. But there may be other folks who really want to keep moving and have dreams for themselves, which they should be able to pursue.

DOUG LEDERMAN: You talked about giving adults good information about the many options they have, so they can make good choices. We have kind of a messy ecosystem of entities, from government agencies that are at least partially responsible for making sure this group has access to education and training, plus the institutions and other providers, and employers. Is there anybody set up to try and bring order to this and provide that kind of high quality and helpful information?

LISA SORICONE: It's a good question, and maybe it really needs to be a shared responsibility, right? So that we're using different potential entry points into this big ecosystem and trying to have a common message. And that probably gets into some uncomfortable space, right, if colleges are fighting for students, you know, they have an incentive to advocate for their own experiences. I understand that, so...

But I think we need to make this process student-centered, right? And focus it on where are folks going to belong, because I don't think it advantage anyone to have students come in and not be successful. That undermines their sense of their abilities to succeed. If institutions are failing in serving them, it doesn't make them look good. They're not going to get the outcomes that they really care about, right? If folks drop out, they're not going to be paying the tuition. So, you know, maybe we need to take that kind of stance and say, this is a large group of people that has the potential to contribute so much more that they're able to do right now with their current level of skills and training, how do we help them make the right choices for them that will, I think, still in turn benefit the provider's side, and ultimately the labor market.

[MUSIC]

DOUG LEDERMAN: Thanks to Su Jin Jez of California Competes and Lisa Soricone of Jobs for the Future for their insights and analysis about the status of adult students. Higher education has to figure out better ways to educate this population for all sorts of reasons. The economy needs it. It's the right thing to do for educational equity, and many colleges and universities will struggle to enroll enough students of traditional age given the demographic cliff that awaits. Let's hope those are reasons enough for institutions to take this challenge seriously. That's it for this episode. Please join us next week for a conversation about a new effort to help colleges collaborate, up to and including formally merging. I'm Doug Lederman, and this is The Key. Have a great week and stay safe.