Transcription for

THE KEY: INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 57: CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION GOES HYBRID

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THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

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DOUG LEDERMAN: Hello, and welcome to The Key, Inside Higher Ed's news and analysis podcast. I'm Doug Lederman, editor and cofounder of Inside Higher Ed, and I hope you're all doing okay as the coronavirus continues to throw us curve balls and tests our hopes for a more normal fall.

Some aspects of higher education have been more visibly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than others. Inside Higher Ed, and just about every other publication on the planet, published countless articles about 18-year-old students being displaced from their dorms and listening to history lectures or watching videos in their childhood bedrooms during what would have been a biology lab.

Far less attention was played to a brand of postsecondary learning that may have been most altered by the pandemic--career and technical education, or CTE. Many forms of career and technical education involve hands-on learning. Think about teaching a prospective medical assistant to draw blood or a welding student to fuse pipes. But career and technical education often gets short shrift in out bachelor's degree-focused society, so windows into how the pandemic affected vocational programs are few and far between.

In this week's episode of The Key I'm joined by Shayne Spaulding, a senior fellow in the income and benefits policy center at the Urban Institute, a Washington DC-based nonprofit organization. She joins us to talk about research Urban released this spring about how the pandemic may have changed the role of online and blended learning in community college career and technical programs. Our conversation also explores the role of alternative providers in the CTE space and whether vocational

learning is undervalued in American society.

Before we begin today's episode, a word from the ECMC Foundation, the sponsor of this week's episode.

VOICE: This episode of The Key is sponsored by the ECMC Foundation, which supports building a postsecondary education system that works for all learners through its grant-making focus areas of college success and career-readiness.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Now on to today's conversation with Shayne Spaulding. Shayne, welcome to The Key and thanks for being here.

SHAYNE SPAULDING: I'm so glad to be here today.

DOUG LEDERMAN: You and some colleagues at Urban published a report in May that sought to gauge how the pandemic may have changed how colleges deliver career and technical education. Can you give us a sense of the high-level findings and what the implications are of those findings for both learners and for institutions?

SHAYNE SPAULDING: Sure. Yeah, we surveyed a subset of programs at community colleges back at the end of last year and what we found was really interesting. And not surprisingly, most were offering their programs online because of the shutdown. And this was true both for programs that had mostly been delivered in person and those that have been delivered in some kind of hybrid format before.

But the thing that was interesting that we found was that when we asked about what colleges were projecting for the future, they were talking about moving toward hybrid delivery. And this was really interesting. Programs that were maybe fully online were thinking about hybrid in the future. And programs that were mostly in person were thinking about hybrid for the future. And so this is just really interesting I think. You know, hybrid offers some advantages for many students, but also some challenges, and we could get into that. But for CTE programs, which are largely, a lot of them are, require a hands-on component, you can see how a hybrid format might make sense, giving the chance to both be in person for some of that hands-on learning, but also the advantages of the sort of online, sort of flexible components.

DOUG LEDERMAN: One of the tricky things in this sphere generally is to defining what hybrid and blended mean. And there are obviously, there have been hybrid courses for quite a long time in not necessarily just in CTE but broadly that, where students do some things in person and some things remotely, in the classroom, etc. What we say a lot of last year were attempts to try to do kind of a different kind of blended, which is having some people attend in person, and some people attend remotely. And that was really tricky for institutions. I'm sensing that the former is mostly what we're talking about here.

SHAYNE SPAULDING: I have found when talking about this with people when you say online, they mostly think of fully online. They don't think about all the gradations in between, right, they don't think about that. And so I think that's very interesting. I mean, even before the pandemic, we know that about a third of undergraduate students had taken at least online course, right? And so are they in online programs? Well, they are somewhat, right, and so I think it's interesting to think about like what it means. I do think there's a need for some better definitions of what we mean by online and hybrid, and also what are the supports, the needs of students in those different formats. Because I think there's a lot of differences, depending on what format you're talking about.

DOUG LEDERMAN: And just give us a couple of examples of the kinds of programs we're talking about and some sense, whether from the survey or the other work you've done, because I know Urban's doing a lot of work in this realm, about sort of what kinds of elements are places either shifting from a hands-on, in-person element to something that can be done remotely? Can you just us some examples of the sort of range of the programs that we're talking out here, and then maybe a handful of the kinds of things that we're seeing start to shift or shift more?

SHAYNE SPAULDING: Sure. I mean, CTE encompasses a lot of different kinds of programs. And generally these programs have an orientation toward the labor market and sort of immediate career outcomes. But there's really a range. So you have programs, like a business program can be considered a CTE program. In that there's very little hands-on instruction, right? And you can see how the business program, maybe they more fully lend themselves to a fully online approach, because it's very much a didactic curriculum. It's all about sort of listening to an instructor or interacting with their classmates as well, on project-based learning, but not something that like requires you to actually work with your hands, right?

DOUG LEDERMAN: Touch something...

SHAYNE SPAULDING: Touch something... And then you have like a lot of things in between. You have things where, it's a more service-oriented job, like education or childcare, right, that could be a CTE program. But those kind of require maybe not hands-on, but interaction with people, right? And then you have things that are really hands on--welding, advanced manufacturing, those kind of things where you really do need to be in the lab. And healthcare as well, you know, where you need to able to practice taking someone's blood or their temperature. And so those kinds of things are all the sort of spectrum of CTE.

I think when we're talking about moving to hybrid, you can think about the sort of regular classroom kind of lecture component might more easily translate to the online virtual space. And those components that require you to do something with your hands or to interact with a person might be more difficult to translate. Although I think there were also during the pandemic some pretty interesting things that people were experimenting with, like how could you do this virtually? And so I heard interesting anecdotes about different kinds of things, you know, like innovations in getting people to like practice certain skills with a computer. And so that's, I think there's probably more development to happen there, but my view is that often there is an advantage to having some in-person components, especially when the job is eventually going to have in-person components, right, like there's a value of practicing those skills.

DOUG LEDERMAN: We're obviously in a moment in the pandemic's arc right now in mid-August where many institutions are again having to rethink how they're going to deliver instruction this fall. Your team at Urban asked community colleges to report how much of their career and technical curriculum they delivered in person before the pandemic and during the core of the pandemic, and to project how much they envision being in person going forward when they weren't necessarily required to be remote. Most of them landed squarely in the middle, saying they would deliver more virtually than they did prepandemic, but somewhat less than they did when COVID-19 demanded it. How much of that shift is being driven by necessity or by technological advances in what's possible to do virtually, or by a more fundamental recognition of the potential advantages of online or virtual learning in making education and training accessible to people within the other constraints of their lives?

SHAYNE SPAULDING: Well, I think it's all of them. And we asked the respondents in the survey sort of what was driving their decision to sort of shift to remote in the future. And this was at a point, I think, where we didn't know that we would be moving back to the same situation this fall, right? So it was like we thought maybe things would get better. So I think, you know, in my overall interpretation of this is sort of like a trend that was already underway and this pandemic kind of helped to push some institutions further in that direction faster, right, than maybe would have happened otherwise.

But when we asked what the different, the respondents indicated they were driven by student demand, the new availability of technology and tools, as you mentioned, and then the instructor's willingness to teach in the online and virtual environment. So that I think might be the, maybe some instructors were kind of pushed like they'd been resistant, but the pandemic kind of pushed them in that direction.

And then we do know there's a lot of benefits, right, to online for students who, especially in community colleges, you know, students work. Many have children or they have familial responsibilities. And so to be able to participate in learning on your own schedule makes a lot of sense. I reduces cost. You don't have to get to school. So there are a lot of benefits. But we also know there are lot of risks. And so for certain students, students who are low income, students of color, already there are sort of worse outcomes for those groups that have to do with a lot of structural factors. And then in the online environment, it can be magnified, right? We all... I mean, the basics, right... There's access to technology and broadband, can determine whether you can be successful, so that for sure is an issue. But there are other things too, which is that, you know, those programs need to designed with the needs of students in mind. And like what are the needs for support for those students to be able to be successful in the online and virtual environment, just like there's a need for support in the in-person environment.

DOUG LEDERMAN: So, to the extent, you're right, the survey was done back when we thought institutions might have more of a choice, a pure choice about how to they delivered things, and, again, right now we're probably seeing them potentially having less choice because of the dictates of the health and pandemic situation, but I think the survey gives us a good sense of kind of where things may be heading when circumstances are good and when there's real options. And I do think, like with so many things, it's threading that needle between how do we offer the things that are good and potentially good about digital offerings while limiting the negative consequences and ensuring that students who are generally less successful in virtual settings, try to mitigate that.

I want to pull back the frame a bit and talk more about the overall state of career and technical education and training. I wanted to get your take on the overall effectiveness of what some might call the postsecondary education and training system, though I hesitate to call it a system, because I don't think it functions well enough or cohesively enough to earn that term. I'm talking about the overall set of programs and mechanisms we have in the US to provide education and training to make sure employers have workers with the skills and knowledge they need, and learners are able to get what they need to have thriving work lives, and just lives. How well to you think we're doing on that front?

SHAYNE SPAULDING: Yeah, so I'd agree it's not really a system, and I think that's true in most states of

the US, right? We have, so much is determined at the state level, especially when you talk about higher education, and even at the local level. And in some ways, I think that's good when you're thinking about a system that's designed to prepare people for jobs and careers, because labor markets are local, economies are local, and so there is some sense to having those systems like be more responsive to those local needs.

I would say that the key is being sort of well linked to what the needs of businesses are. And I think we've seen some progress on that front in terms of higher ed being more responsive to business, not being just about a degree and just about, you know, whether we say [UNCLEAR] eats right, it's not just about those things. But really thinking more the links to industry and also thinking, you know, there's been a lot of work to be able to better measure those employment outcomes. We still have a lot of way to go, but there's been progress. And many states have improved their data systems to be able to track employment outcomes form college and higher education, and from career and technical education programs.

I think the need to design programs we these employers is really important, just like it's important to design the programs with the needs of the students, right? Like those are two important customers. And I think the TAACCCT grant programs went a long way on that front. But certainly there's more work to do. And it's just hard sometimes for the institutions, they serve, they have to meet a lot of different needs. And that can be challenging. So, but employers are definitely one stakeholder that's important to keep in mind.

DOUG LEDERMAN: A lot of your work has focusing on, and maybe you can talk a little bit about the work you're doing with community colleges right now... But a lot of your work has focused on the role of institutions and sort of formal postsecondary institutions. There is, again, a lot of talk, a lot of activity around broadly what I would call alternative providers. And there's lots of different kinds, but it's employers providing, sort of creating and driving usage of their own credentials. It's all sorts of last mile providers that are trying to help people get sort of from where they are to a job, to a, particularly in technical and other sort of, other fields where there's clear goals and clear skills.

I don't know if Urban does or if you have a sort of point of view on the sort of relative roles and the appropriate roles of alternative providers, I don't want to say versus traditional institutions, because a lot of the activity is between them in ways that I think is potentially promising. But I'm just curious, sort of how you view that sort of overarching landscape and where you think the movement is that's positive and where it is that's maybe concerning.

SHAYNE SPAULDING: Yeah, so I think there's definitely a role for alternative providers. I mean, they can play a role in sort of sparking innovation and competition, and I think the shift toward online and hybrid is probably partly a result of, you know, public institutions having to compete for students, right, with some of those alternative providers. And so I think that's a good thing.

I think there's always an issue with quality, so you have, you know, just better regulations, and like attention to quality and standards, generally. And when you're talking about like traditional institutions, and I think that's really important. I think there's a real risk of students being sort of pushed toward programs that are aren't, you know, that have no oversight. And that's concerning, especially where you're talking about students who are low income or using scarce resources for those opportunities.

At the same time, I also think employers really need to have more stake in the game. So it doesn't concern me that they're offering training. That's a good think, especially when we have a history of employers not actually offering training to the entry level workforce. And so if that's happening, I don't think that's a bad thing.

But on the other hand, I think portability is a big issue. The thing that the sort of traditional institutions often offer is the sort of portable degree, right, that's like something that is sort of generally recognized. The down side might me that it's too generic, it's not specific enough. But at the same time, it's portable. And when you're talking about a labor market that's so much in flux, especially right now, right? No one can find workers. People are... And part of the, some people believe, people are sort of reevaluating, like what kinds of jobs do I want to have? And in a rapidly changing labor market and economy, we want people to be able to move from place to place. And so if someone gets their training and credentialing from a single employer, is that going to be recognized everywhere? Does it get recognized for further education? So like that's a big question.

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DOUG LEDERMAN: I'm speaking with Shayne Spaulding, a senior fellow in the income and benefits policy center at the Urban Institute. Shayne, another philosophical question, if you don't mind, do you believe

that the US as a country still undervalues career and technical education and training? If the answer is yes, which way do you see the trend line moving, toward more or less valuing of that approach? And lastly, to the extent you think it's an issue, what do you think might move the needle in a more positive direction?

SHAYNE SPAULDING: Yeah, so I think there is an issue, and it's a complicated one, right, because it's cultural in a way, like it sort of has to do with our cultural values, and valuing certain kinds of education. I think it also has to do with employer demand. Like still, employers look for a bachelor's degree. Is that really required? So it's not surprising that, you know, so many students, there's been a huge increase in the number of students going to get a four-year degree. Yeah, they read those signals, so why wouldn't you do it? So it's very hard to say, oh no, you should do something else, when they see those job descriptions, right? And their families see it, and their families are ones shelling out the money, right? So I think it is very hard, and I think it is cultural. I think there's, so there's work to be done on all fronts to like change the employer behavior. And there's work being done on this, right, have employers think more about skills and competencies required for jobs instead of degrees. Like, what is really is required for the jobs?

I think, you know, institutions are thinking more about competency-based education. So is it about the degree or is it about learning certain skills required for those jobs? And it's about starting at a very young level. What do guidance counselor, how are they guiding students?

And we know there's a very, a very racist history of Black and brown students being funneled into those jobs, not being pushed to go to four-year degrees. And so I think there's some good reason to be skeptical, right? But at the same time, you see these job openings, right? There are a lot of job openings, and you see like, I can't find skilled people.

And I see there is progress happening, and I'll just share, like this has been in my own community, they've just added what they're calling an innovation pathway, which I know is an advanced manufacturing pathway. And it's not something I would have expected in my suburban community, but it definitely shows me that there's this recognition of the importance of offering those pathways to students.

DOUG LEDERMAN: The issues you raise around, I don't know if they'd still even call it tracking, but of certain people or groups being nudged into the college track, and versus not. The challenge, as it's always seemed to me, is about trying to create equality of opportunity so that you, nobody... It is

ultimately the person him or herself making the judgment, while striving for a less thumb-on-the-scale in favor of the bachelor's degree or in favor of the non-career technical pathway. And so figuring out how to elevate the sort of appeal of it and the valuing of it without saying, you know, you go here and you go here. I don't know who does that. That goes back to the lack of a system thing I think to some extent...

SHAYNE SPAULDING: I think one thing is we don't understand that much about how young people or college students, or young people and their families make decisions. And we kind of have put in place this sort of, this idea that, there's a theory that if we just lay out what the pathway is from point... Along the whole career, people will make the decision that they need to make, and I just don't think that's how people navigate a career, that's not how I navigated my career. And so I think there's a disconnect there between this sort of a career pathways approach and mindset, and sort of the way people make decisions. And so I think if we could dig into that a little bit more, I think that would be really useful.

I also just think... I think it's about supporting kids and their families at those early, early stages about what the opportunities are. And I think one thing that's really of great benefit to bring back to the conversation about online and hybrid, one of the things we saw, we worked on a study during the pandemic that was about serving out of school youth and like disconnected youth during the pandemic, and we interviewed a bunch of organizations. One of the opportunities that we found during the pandemic is that they got to connect young people with professionals from across the country in the virtual environment. And that's such a great way for young people to like see themselves, see what the opportunities are, especially if they can connect with someone who looks like them, who's gone through, walked in their shoes. They can see that that's an opportunity that's real, that offers value. And so I think there's tremendous, again, opportunities that were presented during the pandemic on that front.

DOUG LEDERMAN: Because, as you say, laying out on a piece of paper or a website, you know, this is the typical path. These are the courses you would take. These are the skills you would need. That is not how most of us get where we got. We got where we did by interactions with people who told us about something cool in what they did, and that is the stuff that tends to separate the fortunate from the nonfortunate, is exposure to a lot of those interactions. So I think what you just described as sort of finding ways to sort of bring those interactions and to more people, and more easily, would be pretty key.

Are you feeling, there are a lot things in the world right now to be worried about, but when you think about this landscape, are you feeling pretty hopeful about some of the different things we've talked about and the effects of technology, and sort of the focus on sort of the need to focus on

underrepresented populations? There's a lot of tumult, but are you feeling pretty optimistic about this space that you watch, and thinking that there's room for opportunity for movement because of all that tumult?

SHAYNE SPAULDING: Yeah. I am feeling hopeful. I mean, I'm helping to lead an initiative that's focused on closing equity gaps in online CTE programs, called the CTE CoLab. And, you know, we have a bunch of college CTE programs that have come together and they really want to better meet the needs of students of color, especially Black and Latinx students in their programs. And it's just amazing what efforts they have underway, how they're thinking about how to bridge those gaps. The resources, it's a community of practice, so the resources they offer to each other, how their institutions are thinking about closing racial equity gaps...

So I am hopeful, because it feels like last year, with all of its challenges did bring a moment of like sort of, yeah, thinking about how to expand access and improve outcomes for those groups in a new and different way. So I'm hopeful for that. And then I think at the same time, I think there are opportunities with online and hybrid learning for those particular groups. And if we have improvements in infrastructure that go along with that, that include digital access, then I think we could see, you know, improvements and we could see expanded opportunities. So I'm hopeful.

DOUG LEDERMAN: That was Urban Institute's Shayne Spaulding discussing the state of postsecondary career and technical education before, during, and after the pandemic, whenever that might be. Thanks to Shayne for insights and to the ECMC Foundation for its support for these last few podcasts.

The Key will take a short break over the next week or two so that its host can. I'm definitely feeling the strain of the pretty nonstop sprint that most of us have been doing for the last 18 months or so, and given that the fall is now looking like it will remain intense and uncertain, I'm going to take a brief respite from this part of my job so that I can return refreshed in September. I urge you to make sure you do that same, in whatever ways your work and your lives allow. I think we fail to appreciate sometimes the toll that all that intensity and uncertainty takes on us, and we need to take care of ourselves if we're going to take care of our colleagues and students, friends and family members, who depend on us. So, as always, stay well and stay safe. I'm Doug Lederman and this is The Key.

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