

Jason Altmire (00:04):

Hello again and welcome to another edition of Career Education Report. I'm Dr. Jason Altmire and we have Dr. Michelle Van Noy with us today. She is the director of the Education and Employment Research Center at the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers.

Jason Altmire (00:22):

And we spend a lot of time on this program talking about career education and the pathway for students to fill high demand and very important professions in the workforce. And Michelle has a long career with experience conducting research on education and the workforce. And her research runs the gamut. It includes studies of technician education, community college education, student decision making about majors and careers, non-degree credentials. She really has touched on all the issues that are important to our listeners.

Jason Altmire (00:57):

So, I wanted to welcome Michelle to the program and we're gonna talk about what some of her research has shown. Michelle, thank you for being with us.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (01:04):

Thank you Jason. I'm delighted to be here.

Jason Altmire (01:06):

We're going to talk a lot about your specific thoughts on the workforce. But I'm just interested, you've established such a reputation of career education, expertise and the workforce issues. What spurred your interest in that? What made you want to make that part of your career and the focus of your research?

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (01:25):

My broad interest really has been in this kind of connection between education and work. I've been looking at that for a long time. I think I've always been interested in education and one of the things that always struck me about education is how much people gravitate to education to find opportunity in society. And people are looking for social mobility, looking for a better life, looking to find meaning. And I think a lot of that comes out in people's search to find good careers via education. And so, I've always been interested in how education is part of that process of helping people prepare for careers.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (02:03):

So, I started my work out actually looking at the School to Work Opportunities Act in the late '90s. And that was the first taste I had at looking at these questions and issues. And it's just evolved from there to community colleges and many other issues over time.

Jason Altmire (02:15):

There was a debate in Congress over the summer and carried over into the fall related to a short-term Pell proposal. That there should be a way for students to qualify for these short-term programs. And there was a lengthy debate about should online schools be included? We represent primarily

proprietary institutions. We were involved in the debate about should our schools be involved? Of course, we believe they should.

Jason Altmire (02:41):

And you took a different tact and you wrote an opinion piece and were quoted in some other articles about, let's take a step back in thinking about that issue. And think about the workforce trends that are actually leading to the problem that the Congress is trying to solve. And I don't think anyone else had actually looked at that problem because you really do have to understand the workforce dynamics before you move forward with a public policy prescription for a problem that you might not really be understanding what's going on there.

Jason Altmire (03:11):

Can you talk a little bit more about your thought process related to that workforce issue?

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (03:16):

I've been thinking for a number of years on this question of non-credit programs, non-degree credentials, all the programs that are potentially... Many of the programs that are potentially included in the short term PE legislation. And I think one of the big questions that we don't really know about and as a researcher I'm very interested in is actually understanding what the outcomes are of these programs and where they help people go in their careers.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (03:40):

And I know that a big issue in the debate around short-term Pell has been around quality and determining whether programs are high quality or not. And I've been involved in some related research and trying to understand what quality means and better define what that means. And I think once you start thinking about quality and unpacking what that means, you are faced with a lot of questions about outcomes and earnings that programs lead people to.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (04:04):

And, of course, we wish we had more data to better answer those questions and more thoroughly understand where these kinds of programs lead people. But I think one of the things we do know is that just from looking at the occupations that are served by these programs, many of the occupations that these programs lead people to are low wage occupations and low wage jobs. And I think one of the issues that I have really wanted to just make clear in the debate is that there's education, and then there's the labor market. And we're looking at the intersection between the two. But we have to be careful not to conflate the two.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (04:36):

And one of the concerns that I've had about some of the discussions around quality is just to make sure that we don't deem programs to be low quality because they are associated with low quality or low paying jobs. And I wouldn't want to say low quality jobs, but low paying jobs. And that, certainly, pay is

an important element of quality of a job. But what I was definitely concerned about is making sure that we don't call programs low quality because they lead to low quality jobs.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (05:02):

For an example, right? A home healthcare aid may go through a training program. And hopefully, that program is teaching them the skills they need and it is quality. In many cases though, that is going to lead to a very low paying job. But that is not a reflection necessarily of having had a poor education within that particular training program. It has to do more with issues in the labor market.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (05:24):

And I could go on, but I think that, for me, that's really the most fundamental distinction is making the distinction between the education and training and the labor market and not conflating the two when we're talking about quality.

Jason Altmire (05:35):

And I think that's a point that a lot of people miss is because of the way the market dynamics have evolved, many of the professions that we as just members of society consider to be really important and we rely on, they're not high wage professions. So, when you look at somebody who goes through the educational process and you're considering the return on investment, you might find that they are not making a lot of money and a policymaker could conclude, well, that's a low value education that that person has received because they're in a profession that doesn't pay a lot of money. And we'll talk a little bit more, you have some thoughts on why that might be, why those professions aren't paying a lot of money.

Jason Altmire (06:17):

But I think the point we focus on is there's a disconnect that exists in people thinking about those issues. And we do have schools that put forth allied healthcare professionals, dental and medical assistants, phlebotomists, people like that. We also have the blue collar trades. We put forward truck drivers, and welders, and underwater construction divers. And many of those professions do make a good wage and move forward from the beginning. Some do not. But all of them are professions that we rely on as people and members of society.

Jason Altmire (06:52):

And you want a couple of things when you're thinking about, you mentioned home health workers and you talk about allied health, those are people that you want two things. You want there to be a lot of them, and you want them to be really well trained. You want them to be well educated and have gone through a quality program. But yes, they may not be making a lot of money.

Jason Altmire (07:13):

So, these are things that you've written about and you've written about the market dynamic in particular, how a flood of people with these credentials can lead to lower wages because the employer views, unfortunately, those workers as disposable and they'll underpay them. And then they know they

can just replace them 'cause there's going to be somebody right behind them. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (07:38):

I think that's a concern. I mean, and it's tricky in terms of how you would regulate that, but it is something to think about that I've heard anecdotally that educational institutions are mindful of that they keep churning out low wage workers for employers that are undervaluing that work. And people get burned out in those jobs. It ends up feeding a dynamic of jobs that are not well constructed and well compensated. There is that danger if you just look at sort of supply and demand, if you keep having a very high supply of low age workers, you never constrain the labor market in a way that employers will raise wages.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (08:10):

But I will say that I think the bigger issue here is to think about when we're thinking about the labor market and how to improve jobs it's important to think about other dynamics that are at play that can improve some of these jobs. I mean, we've seen a tremendous increase in interest in unions recently. And so, I think that's certainly a trend that can help. And, of course, some of this goes beyond the mission of educational institutions, and I think that's okay. I think that what we need to do is just maintain that awareness that this is a bigger issue. Some of it can be solved by legislation when it comes to reimbursement rates for certain kinds of jobs. I mean, I think there are other issues at play here, other bigger issues in addition to the market dynamic that you mentioned that I wrote about in the op-ed piece.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (08:54):

So, I think we have to just keep that in mind, again, that's a lot of issues at play that relate to the wages that people encounter. And I think, as you said, that many of these jobs are very crucial jobs to the functioning of our society. And that's something else that needs to be part of the public dialogue is to... Again, I think everybody probably who works in education directly training people for these jobs is well aware of how crucial and how important these jobs are. But I think we have to continue to promote in the public awareness how important it is to have people who are well trained and well compensated, who are doing a lot of that care work. That's a lot of where the undervalued jobs are, I would say is in care work, in early childhood, or in some of the allied health professions that we've been discussing, and other fields as well. And to recognize, as a society, we need to do a better job of making sure that the people who are doing this really important work are valued and properly compensated for that.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (09:43):

And properly trained too. I mean, I think that one of the things we do want to make sure is that the programs that they encounter are high quality and do help them prepare for those jobs and also help them prepare to pursue other educational opportunities. We need to make sure that people in these lower wage jobs have an opportunity to continue on for further education. So they do have the opportunity to advance occupationally into other better paying jobs. So it's a danger if we exclude them from opportunities for education and training.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (10:11):

But it is a tricky area, so I recognize that this is not an easy place to make legislation that's gonna fix all these problems. It's a complicated problem. And that is the bottom line here, it's a complicated labor market, it's a complicated problem. But I'm just trying to inject another perspective into this dialogue. So if we can think more clearly about the problem, I think we'll have a better chance of coming up with better policy solutions to solve it.

Jason Altmire (10:36):

Given that that problem exists, the labor market and workforce problem that you identified of people who hold really important jobs, but they don't make a lot of money because of market factors that, perhaps, policymakers could help correct with long-term legislation that would make a difference. But we are where we are right now. We have the market, and the workforce, and the labor trends that we live with, and they're out there and they exist. So, given the current situation and where we are, what are your views about that short-term Pell program, about the need for students to have access to programs that are short in duration but lead to viable careers?

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (11:20):

I do think that the idea of ensuring that whatever's funded by short-term Pell, whatever programs are funded lead to additional education and training is an important mechanism. It both allows people to pursue training. And then, to think about further career advancement. And I think as part of that, a really important part of that is making sure that those initial short-term training programs do have some basic skills, broader skill development as part of them.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (11:49):

The I-BEST model is one that often is talked about. And I think that's certainly one very good approach to making sure that both of those goals are achieved, sort of helping people get the skills for immediate entry into a job and also have the ability to continue on into further education. So I think that that additional proposal is an important one. And then, I do think that having some mechanism to align with labor market need in a reasonable way is also an important mechanism to make sure that we're not flooding the market, and make sure that we're meeting the needs of the market in a way that is beneficial to employers, and also beneficial to workers.

Jason Altmire (12:22):

You mentioned that I-BEST model and I was gonna ask you about that. And you've said that that presents a strategy for developing programs that ensure learners develop broader basic skills alongside immediately relevant skills, which I think anyone would agree is necessary. Can you talk a little bit more about I-BEST and what that model looks like?

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (12:42):

I-BEST is a program that was developed in the state of Washington years ago, and within the community college system. It broke up programs into shorter term training that are part of longer term pathways to gain further education. So somebody might come in and take a program for a short-term certificate while also developing some basic skills that would allow them to go on and pursue a longer term certificate, or a degree, but would also allow them to get a job immediately after completing the shorter term certificate.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (13:11):

So it was intended to both help people get an immediate job, but also to have a clearly articulated pathway to further education. And, at the same time, also includes supports for students while they're within the program, both curricular and co-curricular, as well as sort of additional personal supports, financial and other kinds of supports to help students, if the car breaks down to have a little fund to go to or additional help with childcare, as well as advising and of academic support. So it was a whole host of other kind of supportive programs that are involved in building up that kind of pathway for students to advance.

Jason Altmire (13:46):

You've written a book on a lot of these topics recently, I think, within the last year co-authored a book with Paul Gaston called Credentials, Understand the Problems, Identify the Opportunities, Create the Solutions. And I think that book has been considered to be a thought leader on a lot of these topics. Do you want to tell the audience a little bit more about what you found and what your interests were in writing that book?

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (14:09):

Yeah, I'd love to.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (14:10):

I mean, the issue of credentials is one that I've been studying for a long time, and I think it's very relevant to the discussion we were just talking about around short-term Pell because a lot of what we're finding with credentials and credentialing is just that there's been such an enormous proliferation of credentials, and a lot of confusion about what's good, and what's most helpful and how to improve credentials. And so, our book is really kind of a scan of all kinds of credentials, associate degree, bachelor's degree, master's, doctorate, as well as a pretty comprehensive look at what's kind of becoming known to be referred to as non-degree credentials. So, industry certifications, short-term certificates, apprenticeship, licensure, other things that people are increasingly interested in terms of career opportunities.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (14:53):

A lot of the topics we get into are how do we know where these are strong and how can these be connected to needs in the labor market and the needs of students? How we think about how to convey what these credentials mean in a increasingly crowded marketplace where there's just a lot going on? And to try and clear up some of the questions around the roles of each of these credentials. And how some of them can even work together? I think that's a very interesting point of intersection now too, is to think about where some of the shorter term non-degree credentials fit into the landscape of the more traditional higher education degrees, because it's not that they're mutually exclusive. Oftentimes, the research finds that they work well together actually when you get those multiple credentials in tandem.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (15:35):

And so, that's just a taste of some of the things that are in the book. But the book is really intended for policymakers and practitioners, people who are in education, teachers, administrators, leaders, policymakers, who are trying to grapple with these issues in their day-to-day work to give them context,

and give ideas, and generate ideas that may help in terms of creating innovation and creating some clarity in the credentialing marketplace.

Jason Altmire (15:57):

I wanted to bring the conversation, as we close, back to where we started. And we started by talking about the disconnect that exists between policymakers who are trying to solve a real problem of the workforce, the high demand professions, creating the pipeline, incentivizing students to go into these high demand professions, although many of them, they're not paid very well because of the market factors that you've outlined. And ensuring the quality of the educational program in particular.

Jason Altmire (16:32):

I don't mean this in a pejorative way to members of Congress, and I think I can say this because I've been a member of Congress, because you're forced to be more of a generalist when you're in Congress. You're dealing with so many different issues. And you have constituents that approach you and you want to solve a problem, but maybe you don't have a full grasp of what the source of the problem is and you don't exactly know what it is you're trying to solve while you're trying to address an issue that's been brought before you. And I think that may be the case with what we're talking about with these workforce shortages and job training programs and the pipeline that we've discussed.

Jason Altmire (17:12):

So, if you were a member of Congress, if you were a policymaker and you could move forward with a plan that would address these issues in a reasonable, common sense way, what kind of solutions would you put forward?

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (17:25):

I think there's definitely been a lot of research that's been struggling to kind of answer these questions and look at them over time. And I hate to give you the sort of, it depends answer, but I do think that, to some extent, one of the most important things is thinking about the goals of each program, and the goals of students, and the goals of employers and keeping those in mind. I don't think that there's ever sort of a one size fits all, one solution for everybody in this area.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (17:54):

So, I can think about some of the work we've done on thinking about how higher ed can align with the labor market, and there's a couple of things. One is that it depends on the goal of whose goal we're thinking about. And the strategy that we're thinking about for a four year liberal arts college may not be the exact same strategy that we're gonna think about for a six month short-term training program for a particular occupation.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (18:14):

And the other thing is that we're also engaged in this balancing of stakeholder needs. And so, sometimes hopefully the needs of students and employers are exactly aligned and sometimes they're not. If we go back to some of the conversations we were talking about, about some of the low wage jobs, sometimes those interests may be in conflict. And so, I think keeping those ideas in mind as we're thinking about

policy are very important to think about the goals, and then think about the balancing of some of the stakeholder needs at play.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (18:41):

There's a variety of high impact practices that we've seen that are effective in helping students prepare for work, whether it be work-based learning, or hands-on learning. There's a lot of things. I couldn't even begin to kind of list out all the things that are promising or effective at this point. But I do think that keeping some of those big picture ideas in mind about the goals and the stakeholders are important.

Jason Altmire (19:02):

This has been Michelle Vannoy. She's the director of Education Employment Research Center at the School of Management and Labor Relations at Rutgers. Thank you Dr. Vannoy for being with us.

Dr. Michelle Van Noy (19:14):

Thanks so much for having me today, Jason. I appreciate it.

Jason Altmire (19:18):

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Jason Altmire (19:29):

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