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# Industry ROUNDTABLE

PRESENTED BY:


**Hodgson Russ**  
ATTORNEYS LLP

# WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Do schools need to change their curriculum to address workforce development issues? What impact will Gov. Cuomo's plan for free tuition have? What can businesses do to help high schools and colleges prepare students for good paying jobs? Law firm Hodgson Russ and *Albany Business Review* recently convened a panel of six industry leaders to answer these questions and more. Cindy Applebaum, market president and publisher of *Albany Business Review*, moderated the discussion.

ment centered economy to more of a privately driven economy, hopefully those numbers change. The second phase of that is the aging out of the population. And I think the other reason is that a lot of our under-resourced population is simply not in these types of programs.

**DRAGONE:** I don't know if anybody saw this, but WalletHub ranked the Albany metro area as number 15 out of 100 for STEM opportunities, which includes jobs, quality of those opportunities, and those kinds of things. But in terms of are we teaching the wrong things or what curriculum per se has an impact, a lot of our work over the past five, six years especially has been with alignment. The flip side of that is I think there's a capacity issue. It's not necessarily what we're teaching, but even if we have opportunity for 300 kids to go into one field, there isn't a capacity in higher education that offers something that can fill all the workforce needs.

**?** A local patent attorney says Governor Cuomo's plan to waive tuition for SUNY and CUNY students would make it harder for graduates of those schools to find jobs. What impact do you think free tuition would have on workforce development?

**DUSHANE:** I read that article, and I was a little disappointed with it. Because if you look at it from a recruiting standpoint, so now are you going to judge every single person that has that on their resume as someone who took advantage of free tuition? Especially since the caveat on that is family's income. And so now you're getting into a very gray area in terms of almost discriminating against students based on that, which I think is a very slippery slope.

**DRAGONE:** There's a question of free. Everything has a cost. We know that. The more we're learning about it, you know, 35-plus states in the country have some sort of support program, tuition or otherwise. When you're talking about free tuition, you're talking about access issues. Where is tuition a barrier for access? I think we need to step back. The successful programs we see nationally where something like that happens, it goes back to the ninth grade, it goes back to middle school. So I think it's less a question of an access point, but a question of continued investment in preparation.

**ZIESKE:** So access I think is a big issue, and I agree

## ▶ MEET THE PANEL



### JOE DRAGONE

**Title:** Superintendent  
**Company:** Ballston Spa Central School District



### MIRIAM DUSHANE

**Title:** Managing director  
**Company:** Liniun Recruiting



### MATTHEW GRATTAN

**Title:** Director of community & economic development  
**Company:** University at Albany



### DAVE LARKIN

**Title:** Professor, advanced manufacturing technology  
**Company:** Hudson Valley Community College



### MARTY VANAGS

**Title:** President  
**Company:** Saratoga County Prosperity Partnership



### DENISE ZIESKE

**Title:** Vice president, workforce development and community education  
**Company:** Schenectady County Community College



**?** We hear a lot about how this region is unique because it is home to two dozen colleges. With that many schools, why is workforce development such a big issue, and do schools need to change their curriculum?

**LARKIN:** There is a gigantic demand for technically oriented graduates. But when I looked at all the colleges and what they offered, 90-plus percent of all the degrees and courses taken at these colleges are non-tech. We have 24 students in advanced manufacturing in the senior daytime lab. In September, all but one was hired full-time. For every one four-year degree technical person, you need anywhere from five to seven technicians. I think on the whole, the United States and the state does fairly well with graduating the four-year degree people, the technical people. They do a horrible job with graduating two-year degree people. The analogy is, think of an airline that hires all pilots and no mechanics. How many planes actually fly? None. And that's a big problem.

**ZIESKE:** One thing that schools need to look at is their process and how long it takes to get programs up and operational. So we are looking for a lot of feedback from businesses as to what programs need to be put in place, what needs to be changed in programs, and then obviously there is the internal process with how do you get them ready to deliver to students. We are partnering in a program with Liniun and with the coding industry, as they identified a huge need in a technical area that you were just talking about.

**GRATTAN:** We lose a lot of students. We have that heavy concentration of higher ed, but a lot of those students are going back to either their hometowns or going south to find jobs. As we shift from a govern-

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with preparation. I think there's a lot of questions around the proposal and what it's going to actually mean. But I think from a community college perspective, we have students that are struggling all the time to just pay that tuition. There's certainly that pipeline issue of the few folks that do need those degrees, you know, the two- or four-year degrees, and they just can't afford to pay for it. This could be maybe a solution for that.

**GRATTAN:** The SUNY institutions, we're the ones who are going to be impacted by this. We're still waiting for a lot of the details. But our president's been on record that we're in support of this. Anything that's going to increase access to higher education for students, we're in support of. To Miriam's point, I think to dismiss certain populations, I feel would be ill-advised. However, what I would hope is that maybe this could be an opportunity if implemented to really help us expand the Chancellor's mission of every student having some form of experiential learning opportunity.

**LARKIN:** Right now, one of the big problems we have is business and education aren't in alignment with even each other. Business wants people with these skills, education is graduating people with these skills, and not a very big percentage are aligned with each other. There will be a lot of people out there unemployed with an education. We're trying to build a new center over at Hudson Valley, an advanced manufacturing center. When we get the new building built, we want to take two- and four-year grads that don't have a technical background and give them a one-year certificate program in operations management technology. And those people, the types of peo-

ple that go in, they have good communication skills, they have good writing skills, maybe good computer skills.

**VANAGS:** I can't imagine why an employer would care whether a person got through college for free or not. I think it's what they learned and the skills they picked up. I think the real issue with tuition is a continued lack of financial support by states for their public universities and colleges. It's the cost of running these universities and educational institutions and the lack of support for it. Like it is for transportation and infrastructure and everything else that we want as citizens, we want our free ride. If we can find a way to pay for free tuition for students and families that have trouble paying for it, then it ought to be implemented.

**DRAGONE:** I want to make sure part of the notion of the free is we don't lose sight of the dual credit programs going on, because that's really important. We talk to families, and junior has 38 credits going into college. So when you look at that opportunity -- just last year alone, our families saved over a quarter million dollars in tuition costs alone just with Schenectady. That's just with one community college. That doesn't count the 275 kids we have enrolled in our early college high school at Hudson Valley, the kids that go to our dual credit programs with SUNY Adirondack as well, and UAlbany and Syracuse and RIT and RPI and everyone else that we work with.



**So many low-skilled minimum wage jobs are disappearing. How can schools and colleges prepare for that shift, and what options are there for people who are mid-career to**

**develop new skills?**

**LARKIN:** About 10 years ago, General Electric came to us and said they were very short and they couldn't find skilled machinists and toolmakers and programmers. And they don't just go to this region, they go from Maine to Ohio to look. They started to train at Hudson Valley, train all the machinists and toolmakers. Right now, over 60 percent of the machinists in building 273 are all Hudson Valley grads of our program. They went as far as they pay the books, tuition, fees, plus paid them full-time wages for two years. They worked one day a week, and when they weren't in school, they worked full-time. They're taking people that had no college education, weren't skilled, converted them into machinists, and they're actually producing large steam turbines and generators out in Schenectady right now.

**ZIESKE:** From the college's perspective, one of the things it's important for us to be doing is offering flexible programs. So looking at having full programs online or in the evenings, folks can continue to work while they do that career shift and see what direction they want to go.

**LARKIN:** We have an evening school where students can come, employees can come and get a two-year associate's degree. It takes them four years. They go to school half time. They basically go to school two nights a week. And starting next year, that will be full for all four years at Hudson Valley. And that's working out very well. Companies like that. Some companies can't send their students because they're employed full-time, so this part-time program works out very well for them.

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**Is there too much emphasis on channeling secondary students to a college-bound program, including students who are better served by a more vocational program?**

**LARKIN:** Yes. High school counselors, for the most part, are graded on how many students they send to a four-year college. On the technical side, for every four-year degree student, like say an engineering student, you need approximately six technicians. We do a very good job in the four-year degree. We do a horrible job in the supporting technician roles. That is coming home to roost. For instance, in the United States, there's a shortage of 300,000 machinists and programmers. The jobs, they'll hire them, but the people aren't there to hire. There's hundreds and hundreds, maybe a couple of million jobs that are going unfilled.

**DUSHANE:** Businesses need to expose young people to the opportunities that are available at all levels, and I think they also need to expose the earning potential at all levels, not just the earning potential for four-year degree positions, but also those trades. Those trades and those vocational programs are being under-utilized and under-advertised as an option for a lot of kids. So you've got this stigma almost in a way that if they don't have a four-year degree, they're not as well educated or as highly skilled as someone who does. I think it's not just the education system, it's also parents, high schools, guidance counselors, teachers, talking with businesses and making sure kids know all of their options.

**DRAGONE:** How many different opportunities can we provide kids along an entire continuum? When we look at the opportunities we provide, we start with the kinds of kids and what their interests are and what they want to do. Our staff works hard through collaboration to provide those opportunities. It starts as young as elementary school and it goes through high school, and it's our partnerships with higher education and with all of our 50-plus business partners that allow us to be able to create or demonstrate a scope, a span of opportunity in all these fields. And that makes all the difference in the world.

**DUSHANE:** Starting at a younger age is really important. I think middle school and younger even, elementary, kids need to start. You know, you go to middle school and you take these courses. Then, once you're in eighth grade, you and your guidance counselor start talking about what pathway you want to go in. Why can't we do that in the middle school so that these kids start to get exposure to these things a little bit younger so they can get on that right pathway, regardless of what it is? I think businesses need to do more. We need to be outreaching more, we need to be aligning ourselves and working with the educators to make sure. We can't sit back and wait for these kids to graduate from college and not have the skills.

**LARKIN:** About three years ago, Simmons Machine Tool, Dave Davis is the President, he brought 50 counselors into Simmons and gave them a half-day program, showed them what they were doing in manufacturing. To a person, they had no idea this went on, this is what manufacturing was. A lot of them don't understand manufacturing. I want to push kids to different areas. If you have no idea what goes on in that area, you're never going to push them. Ever. A lot of the counselors walked out and they were impressed. They were saying, 'We didn't realize this even existed.' Companies have to get more involved. They just can't sit back and wait for things to happen.

**DUSHANE:** If the parents don't know what opportunities are there for their young people, how can they influence? I'm in a unique position. Educators, we



**(Standing, left) Miriam Dushane, Joe Dragone, Marty Vanags and Denise Zieske. (Seated, left) Matthew Grattan and Dave Larkin.**

DONNA ABBOTT-VLAHOS

put a lot on their shoulders. I really think that parents need to get more involved from day one in their kids' education, up through and including college education, so they can guide their students.

**VANAGS:** But you're assuming that the parents know all those things, they know how to talk in public. There's a big gap there, and it affects our workforce today, because if they don't know that, the kids don't know it as well.

**LARKIN:** Open houses at Hudson Valley when the students comes in, the parents ask 90 percent of the questions. The students don't know what they don't know. When they leave, a lot of parents say, "Jeez, I didn't know a student in two years could make, x amount of dollars." Not everybody's a four-year student. Not everybody's a two-year student. Some people shouldn't go to college at all. In the next 10 years, you're going to see a gigantic shift where you're going to see a lot of general education, non-technical colleges go by the wayside because there's just an overabundance of them. I think businesses are going to force it.



**What more can businesses do to help the high schools and colleges develop curriculums that will prepare students for good paying jobs? How do businesses do that? You've talked about GE, you've talked about the big guys. But what about the smaller businesses?**

**LARKIN:** When I send communications, I don't send it just to people in GE. I send it to all the small companies, too. And we try to keep them updated on what's going on. What do they need? We have companies come in and say, "Jeez, we didn't know you taught machinists and toolmakers and programmers. When did you start that?" I say, "1953." Years ago, company A and company B and company C employs these people. Company A used to go to company B and say, I need somebody. I'm going to pay them a dollar more an hour and grab them. Then company B would grab

somebody from company C, and in turn, C would grab somebody from company A. But we wouldn't produce any more people, we just kept turning them around. We talk about wanting to bring companies into New York. We want to bring companies into the region. If they don't have a supply where they can tap to get the people they need, they're not coming. They're just not coming.

**VANAGS:** When it comes to workforce, it's always a problem because we have a hard time aligning what companies need in terms of workforce with the supply of workforce. I think Dave said it earlier on, that education and the companies are not aligned. So, we go out and do a study. You find out we need welders and nurses. The problem is that today, in this moment in time, we need welders and nurses. And in two years, the welder comes out of the program and says, "Where's my job?" We passed that. Moving things quickly is very difficult. My thought as we're talking about this is, are we asking businesses the wrong questions? Rather than ask them what do they need today, we should be asking, "What do you need three, five, eight years from now?" And the problem is GE might do some long-range planning, but Bob's Machine Shop probably doesn't. He's biting and scratching for his next customer. They're not thinking about what's going on into the future. Some companies will be looking at long-term things if they're smart that way. But I think that as we train students in high school, we should always be emphasizing post-high school educational opportunities. Whether it's community college, vocational training, union, electrician, plumber. And maybe we should be playing a bigger role in talking about what happens after high school.

**GRATTAN:** To add to that, in my experiences in working with the Labor Department, working at SCCC and now at UAlbany, when we talk to employers, soft skills are the No. 1 issue. As educators, you kind of get tired of hearing the soft skill piece. But it needs to be addressed. So in our URI (Upstate Revitalization

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Initiative) strategy, one of our pieces is a talent initiative. We understand the soft skill piece, but I find a lot of businesses struggle in really describing the technical skill components that they need.

**DUSHANE:** My son goes to Tech Valley High. Part of the grading process is not just grading on what he does on a test. They grade on self-direction; they grade on collaboration; they grade on critical thinking. Every high school needs to do that. It's not getting an A or 92, but he's held accountable to not only be a good student, but to be a good team player, critical thinking, communication, presentation, all of these things. I don't think it's a bad idea to introduce that to all schools and have that as part of the grading process.

**VANAGS:** Another thing is, economic programs, by and large, are pretty dictated by the federal government. Training programs, they won't fund soft skills. They think our technology has got us all doing this so we don't look and talk to people anymore. I tell my employees, if you sit one office away from me, don't send me an email. Come talk to me.

**DUSHANE:** That's the same in my organization. One of my managers, I sit right next to this person and they send me an email rather than talk to me.

**DRAGONE:** We're one of two programs in districts in New York that were recognized with the Partnership for 21st Century Skills Award for advancing these things and assessing them. The four C's of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity and innovation skills are as important as content. What and how you learn is absolutely important. But applying it and understanding these other things – you have to work in a group and you have to be able to problem solve. This is not a policy priority in New York state. And that's the reality of it. At a local level, we can be very responsive to our business partners.

**ZIESKE:** I wanted to get back to the original question of what can businesses do to drive curriculum. The craft beer industry was really struggling. In this case, trained brewers didn't have the skills that were needed. So they approached a college that had a culinary program. The craft brewers, as a team, came together, said we're tired of stealing each other's employees, and we'd like to as a team create something to solve the problem.

**VANAGS:** I don't know why she keeps looking at me when she says craft beer. The word is out.

**ZIESKE:** The industry really drove the curriculum. So I want to encourage businesses to say, if there's things you need, please do come to us. Colleges really can react and create exactly what is required and needed for the businesses.

**LARKIN:** We have a large capstone project every year. Companies pay \$2,500 to sponsor a model that they get in the end. So that kind of finances what we're doing above and beyond. We rate the students on demonstrated technical knowledge. They have to work as teams in doing this. We try to run it more like industry than just college where you come in and leave and that's it. In fact, the fellow that runs GE says, "Do not change anything that you're doing. Keep on doing what you're doing because what we find is the students we have in here, they're used to work." One of the things, too ... we have a lot of people in their late 20s, 30s, 40s, even 50s in our program. From a student standpoint, they've already gone through the hard times, they understand what's important, and they go and get it done.



DONNA ABBOTT-VLAHOS

**?** Workforce development includes the ability to maintain well-qualified, high-performing employees. Is compensation the most effective retention tool as the unemployment rate continues to fall and the economy improves? If not, what is?

**DUSHANE:** It's helpful. You have to be competitive. But if we just focus on millennials, it is far more valuable to be able to create a culture that they can buy into. You have to treat them well. You have to pay them well. You have to be competitive. But other than that, they are more interested in experiences. While a lot of places paint them as a more selfish type of individual, I find it's the complete opposite. Part of it is because we're building this project and team collaboration at a small level within education, and then they expand on that when they're in the workforce.

**?** What new programs are you investing in and when do you expect to see a payoff? And why do you think the programs will help?

**GRATTAN:** When the SUNY Poly separation occurred, we realized, through Dr. [Robert] Jones' leadership, our former president, that we needed to reestablish a strength and a core in engineering. We're making that investment. Our dean, Kim Boyer, is really creating a vision. Because of the size and the comprehensiveness of the university, and the fact that we also have core strengths in the humanities and liberal arts, there will be opportunities for our students in the engineering program to take unique electives that they might not be able to take at some of the other engineering schools, and be able to ... apply the engineering skill sets that they're understanding and learning in the classroom in a much more broad way. Our College of Emergency Management, Homeland Security and Cybersecurity is another perfect example, because in that area, the issues of data protection and cybersecurity are probably the hottest business issues right now that we face. These programs are seeing already robust enrollment. We feel we're going to be getting to a point where they're paying dividends for the university very, very quickly.

**ZIESKE:** SCCC has opened a state-of-the-art biotech-

nology facility. Foundational courses are in place, and there's two degrees that we're looking into in the biotechnology area. The first one is an AS in biotechnology. That's for students who are looking to transfer. We also have an AAS in biological technician. So this one is more geared toward students who are looking for job placement, so they can go right on to a company such as Regeneron or Taconic.

**LARKIN:** As far as Hudson Valley goes, the main thing we've got going right now is building our new advanced manufacturing center. We're taking an approach where you build it, and we want to be a hub for manufacturers and technical businesses. We are going to provide companies that are going to partner with Hudson Valley. It's not going to be that full-time office, but they will use it. The students will be training on the software and equipment. Not only will we be offering the company, "You can look at these machines and tools," but our students will be training on that stuff. So if they go in there and they either hire our students or bring a person in and put them in the program, they'll be instantly trained to be productive when they go out into the job market, which is a big deal.

**?** What are some of the hardest jobs to fill in this area?

**DUSHANE:** Linium started a quarterly survey that measures exactly that. The overriding theme is roles in information technology still rank as the No. 1 need across the region, both on the infrastructure side and on the development side ... Engineering and science come in a very close second. We also asked employers, if it's not IT or it's not engineering, what is it? And it's professional roles.

**VANAGS:** I'm looking at the notes from our surveys of what people have said. For example, "hard to find qualified mechanics" is one impact. "Difficult to find close employees willing to live and work in New York state due to taxes and weather" ... "We cannot grow if we cannot find additional qualified engineers." Straight from the horse's mouth as they say. That's what we say in Saratoga County.

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