Filling the Skills Gap

By JOE NOCERA

A man named Gerald Chertavian came by my office not long ago, and, by the time he left, I was filled with renewed appreciation for the potential of community colleges to help stem the decline of the middle class. There are few more urgent tasks.

Chertavian is not the president of a community college or even a teacher at one. Rather, he runs a program, Year Up, which he founded, that makes it possible for poor high school graduates to land good jobs. It does so, in part, by imparting important soft skills that the upper-middle-class take for granted, like how to interact with colleagues in an office setting.

A second aspect of the program involves teaching marketable skills in such areas as computer support, say, or back-office work at financial firms. These are called middle-skill jobs; they require more than a high school education but less than a four-year baccalaureate degree. Thirty years ago, said Chertavian, middle-skill jobs didn't exist. "There were jobs that required a college degree, and jobs that didn't. Now," he said, "up to a third of all jobs are middle-skill jobs." Almost universally, companies complain that they can't find enough workers to fill those jobs.

As a result, Chertavian has had no trouble rounding up corporations like General Electric and Bank of America to give internships to his charges; if all goes well — and it usually does — they wind up with a well-paying job. The entry-level pay can be as much as $40,000 a year.

The trouble with programs like Chertavian's is that they are akin to pebbles being thrown in the ocean. He has identified a sweet spot in the economy — matching motivated, but disadvantaged, young people with a genuine economic need. But Year Up, which operates in nine cities, can absorb only 1,400 students a year. What about the millions of others who don't have access to a program like that?

It was when I posed that question to Chertavian that he started talking about community colleges. He is a fierce believer in their transformative potential. All

the students in Year Up are also required to be enrolled in a local community college, but, more recently, Chertavian has begun to affiliate more formally with community colleges. That would allow Year Up to reach many more students.

Most notably, it is about to begin operating at Miami Dade College, which has a staggering 174,000 students. Its president, Eduardo Padrón, says that 90 percent of its students are minorities, 40 percent live in poverty and 60 percent require remedial education. Many are enrolled in four-year baccalaureate programs; though it remains primarily a community college, in recent years, it has begun offering four-year degrees. But most are not. They are looking to earn a certificate or an associate degree and acquire a skill that will lead to a good job.

"Community colleges are the great American invention in terms of education," Padrón said at a recent panel discussion I attended in Aspen, Colo. Their raison d'être has always been to help grease the wheels of social mobility. But, in their earlier incarnation, they were primarily seen as a passageway to a university degree. (They used to be called junior colleges, after all.) Now with the skills gap such a pressing problem — and a high school education so clearly inadequate for the modern economy — the task of teaching those skills is falling to community colleges. There really isn't another institution as well positioned to play that role.

I wish I could say that state legislatures were pouring resources into community colleges, but, of course, I can't. Many state governments have ravaged the budgets of their community college systems, just as they have for many state university systems. In Florida, said Padrón, community colleges have seen their state support drop by 21 percent in three years. "State support used to account for 75 percent of our budget," he said. "Now it is only 45 percent." As a result, tuition at Miami Dade is $3,000 a year — a lot of money for people of little means. Given what's at stake, it would be hard to imagine anything more shortsighted than paring back support for community colleges.

Nor can it be said that all community colleges have stepped up to this new role. In some states, such as Virginia and North Carolina, community colleges have become deeply connected with employers in the state. In others, they remain the stepchildren of the educational system. Graduation rates are low. Overcrowding is common.

“Yes, there are many institutions that need to do a much better job adapting to and connecting with labor markets,” Chertavian wrote in a follow-up e-mail message to me. But he remains hopeful. “They are the mechanism that creates pathways to get young people into the economy,” he said.

Community colleges can be our salvation, if only we let them.