

Education & Workforce Speaker Series

Summer 2021



Panel Summary: The Vital Role of Technical & Community Colleges

Introduction

In Georgia, the technical sector accounts for [nearly 62% of all jobs, 71% of output, and 66% of GDP](#). Of these jobs, only 4 out of 10 require a bachelor's degree. The pandemic [accelerated technical workforce demands](#). It is vital that Georgia ensure it has the services to enable technical training and upskilling of its workforce.

With a [99% placement rate](#), the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) provides an excellent solution for degrees, diplomas, and certifications to train and upskill workers. Currently, the TCSG system serves the state through 22 colleges and 88 campuses. While the success rate of these programs is nearly unmatched, it remains Georgia's best kept secret. The citizens of Georgia should be utilizing TCSGs to improve their skillset.

On July 14th, 2021, Science for Georgia — in partnership with Science is US, Technology Association of Georgia, Urban League of Greater Atlanta, Partners in Change, and Literacy for All — held the third panel in a four-part speaker series on Education and Workforce. The panelists, representing leaders in the TCSG, education pathways, and marketing spoke on the complex concerns surrounding these issues and put forward evidence-based suggestions. Their advice and resources for continued learning have been included in our summary in the hopes that we carry these recommendations forward. For a complete recording of our panel, please visit <https://bit.ly/GAEduWork21>.

The Issues

The first panelist, [Cayanna Good](#), Ph.D., serves as the Assistant Commissioner of Adult Education at the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSC). With prior leading experience at the Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement, the Georgia Department of Education, and experience as a high school and elementary education, Dr. Good has worked extensively to promote student achievement at every level. The TCSG system serves a wide array of students with diverse interests and needs, with programs such as citizenship classes, adult literacy courses, high school equivalency pathways, workforce certifications, and job site training. Adult learner programs offered through TCSG are free to students and aid adults in placement.

Currently, [1 million Georgian adults](#) do not have high school diplomas. By providing pathways for adults to attain high school equivalencies for free, TCSG helps combat unemployment and poverty, placing students in sought-after, high-paying jobs. TCSG programs have incredible success rates and provide a low-cost, effective solution to our tech sector's labor shortage. Unfortunately, many of these fantastic initiatives through TCSG remain unknown to the public, and enrollment numbers remain low. For vulnerable students, staying in these programs also proves difficult, with childcare and work preventing participation. Dr. Good emphasized the need for these programs to be shared, calling them "Georgia's best-kept secret."

The second panelist, [Philip Gibson](#), Ph.D., is the former Director of Georgia Bioscience Training Center for Quickstart and the Director of Gwinnett Technical College. In his retirement, Dr. Gibson serves as a freelance education consultant and is currently working with the National Science Foundation to establish two-year degree credentialing options for high schoolers.

Dr. Gibson emphasized the importance of beginning with the end in mind when choosing a TCSG pathway. It is vital to support students in determining their end goals in their respective programs to encourage them to pursue the path that is fulfilling for them. For a long time, bachelor's degrees have been falsely viewed as the key credential in job searches, but [bachelor's degrees don't provide workforce training](#). In many cases, the training and certifications offered at the technical college level provide better workforce preparation than undergraduate education. TCSG programs provide more direct job training options that result in increased job placement rates upon program completion. Dr. Gibson highlighted the importance of changing the role of education in our culture and emphasizing the value of learning instead of valuing bottom lines.

The third panelist, 8th-grade physical science teacher [Robert Russo](#) at McNair Middle school further highlighted the importance of changing education culture and our approach in the early stages of the workforce pipeline.

At the middle school stage, learning is rigidly segmented by subject; however, many of the educational gaps students face come from across disciplines. As a science teacher, Mr. Russo has seen how students struggle with the reading comprehension and numeracy skills needed for success in both the classroom and later life. He gave the example of a word problem which shows a pendulum. This problem illustrates challenges students face where science meets literacy. Students need a high proficiency in reading to comprehend the problem ([which only one-third of Georgia students have](#)), and they need to have experimented with a pendulum (and many science programs lack experiential learning).

By [increasing interdisciplinary focus in education](#), students can garner experience that more accurately models real-world challenges, better preparing them to tackle the issues of tomorrow. Additionally, [hands-on exposure to experience allows students to grasp concepts more firmly](#) than regular instruction often permits.

Designating spaces solely for lab and other hands-on demonstrations communicates the importance of this work to students and educators alike. By providing students with these set spaces, they can develop stronger investigational skills and garner valuable practical experience. Through involving the community and parents in education, children are given additional opportunities to see themselves in future careers. Options like parent-teacher days, career days, and workshops for students and parents covering vital life skills help empower communities with the knowledge and resources needed to succeed. Mr. Russo affirmed the importance of starting education as young as possible, highlighting a greater need for fully funded pre-k education to get students on track for learning early on.

TCSG programs produce amazingly high success rates at little to no cost, and yet programs remain underutilized. Stigmas surrounding community college and a lack of information on the programs offered have led to gaps persisting in student enrollment and attendance.

To address this, the final speaker, [Andrew Chang](#), who serves as Vice President of Marketing at Summit Health and Board Chair for the Children's Museum of Atlanta and The Central Outreach and Advocacy Center, among other prominent organizations, was asked to apply his marketing experience to the underutilization problem.

Mr. Chang called attention to the need for changing public perception and getting business involved. He gave the example of Kia. [A while ago they were considered cheap, economy cars, but now they have a positive brand perception.](#) The key in this image transformation was to get owners to love their cars, be proud of ownership, and to talk about them with their friends.

Similarly, TCSG must make students and educators proud of their experiences, creating a campus culture that translates to an altered perception of community college. Those helping students determine their career pathways - such as high school guidance counselors – need to present TCSG pathways as a first choice rather than a fallback option.

Making students proud of their TCSG degree and having them promote ownership of their experience helps bring value to the TCSG brand. It is important to highlight that community college attendees have become supreme court justices, Oscar winners, and high-earning business magnates. This will help people to see TCSG as an equal option for learning.

Many high-demand, high-paying jobs in healthcare, IT, and other fields require a TCSG certification or diploma. Leveraging traditional marketing algorithms and job search engines could aid in promoting these programs to the broad audience they mean to serve. Businesses and educators must show the need for work in these fields and the financial and personal benefits of attending TCSG.

Proposed Actions to Take

From the perspectives of our panelists, as well as current research in the field, we have created a list of actionable ways we can uplift TCSG programming to no longer be "Georgia's best-kept secret."

1. Get Local

Education starts in communities. By advocating for increased emphasis on technical college options in local schools and community centers, you can help improve the scope of TCSG programs. Many programs through TCSG go underutilized because they aren't properly advertised. We can further highlight these outstanding initiatives by suggesting ways to promote these programs in your schools, education board meetings, PTA meetings, community meetings, and other similar settings.

2. Advocate for Technical Programs

Increasing access to technical programs and opportunities early in education can help students place themselves in future careers. TCSG offers many specialized programs that quickly place students into many of these sought-after technical fields. By starting kids early in these tracks, they will foster their interests and develop a passion for the technical field. Speak with your local school board to advocate for increased funding and infrastructure for technical education programs that partner with the TCSG system.

3. Reduce the Stigma

Attending community college has long been stigmatized and is often seen as "less than," despite producing excellent job placement and success rates for students. This stigma prevents many who would benefit from these programs from attending. Encourage those interested in pursuing further education to reach out and empower those in the technical college system with the support they need. There are TCSG programs for everyone, at every walk of life. We must congratulate and celebrate those continuing their education at every stage of their journey.