

The Washington Post

Transcript: The Role of Higher Education in Society Before and After COVID-19

Washington Post Live

March 25, 2021

Featuring Taskforce on Higher Education and Opportunity Founding Members James Milliken, Chancellor of the University of Texas System, and Dr. Anne Kress, President of Northern Virginia Community College

(Go [here](#) for transcript of entire U.S. Higher Education: Rethinking the Possibilities program; [video](#) available here)

MS. LABOTT: I'm Elise Labott from American University, and today we're talking about how higher education can address some of the societal challenges that have been exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. Leaders from 38 organizations launched the Taskforce on Higher Education and Opportunity to act upon these challenges, provide greater opportunity to students and their communities, and reimagine higher education's contributions to society. Today I'm joined by two of the taskforce's founding members: President of Northern Virginia Community College Dr. Anne Kress; and James Milliken, chancellor of the University of Texas System. Welcome

MS. KRESS: Thank you.

MR. MILLIKEN: Thank you. Good to be here.

MS. LABOTT: Chancellor Milliken, let's start with you about the opportunity for higher education to address some of these societal challenges that have been exacerbated by the pandemic and talk to us about what are some of the biggest challenges you're finding that are facing students and the communities.

MR. MILLIKEN: Sure. So, for some time we've known that the best new jobs being created require education beyond high school. And educators and policymakers have been grappling--and employers--grappling with what the future of work means and what we need to do to improve opportunity for our students and for adult workers.

But COVID has taken this and compressed it. It has brought all kinds of challenges with unusually high unemployment rates--not only for older workers who've lost their jobs during the pandemic but for young graduates of institutions. And so, one of the things we needed to do was to step up in a much more urgent way to find ways to intervene now and to be able to reskill, upskill, connect our graduates and displaced workers with the opportunities in the workplace that we see developing.

MS. LABOTT: Dr. Kress, let's build on that. COVID and the recession has accelerated these trends that already existed while also creating new challenges. Let's talk about why now is the time to act to reduce some of those challenges and gaps for students that are preparing for graduation and how the Taskforce for Higher Education and Opportunity plans to address new challenges like rising unemployment and these new future of work trends.

MS. KRESS: Sure, absolutely. And I think that is really the power of the taskforce. You have institutions of every type, two-year institutions, liberal arts institutions, research institutions, coming together to say that we do have a responsibility to our students and our graduates and soon-to-be graduates who

are going out into this economy to find that success in a post-pandemic world. We know that the future of work has been accelerated.

And furthermore, we know that the challenges that we have long faced, too long faced in terms of equity and opportunity have really been exacerbated and illuminated by the pandemic. So, by coming together and really taking on that responsibility and saying we can do more, we can do more around coaching, we can do more around providing those skills--that's a change that we can make as higher education institutions at scale while still focusing locally on the communities that we serve best.

MS. LABOTT: Well, Chancellor, it really seems like this could be potentially very impactful for the taskforce to work to set students up for success during this post-COVID recovery. Let's talk about some of your immediate goals and how they play into these larger efforts.

MR. MILLIKEN: Well, so one of the things that I think that's unique about this group, as Anne mentioned, is that it's all kinds of organizations. It's university systems, it's community colleges, it's research one universities. Anne's always been in this space. The community colleges in this country have been much more nimble and responsive to changes in the workplace than research universities have been.

What this taskforce is really encouraging is the sense that we all own this responsibility. This is an obligation for all of us to be engaged in how to be more responsive, both for our students who are graduating into a pandemic that's unprecedented, for recent graduates who are having more difficulty now, and particularly people of color who are experiencing unemployment rates at about twice the level of other young graduates, and for displaced workers who need to get back into the workplace, but probably not with only the same set of skills they had before. So, this is an effort across the Board in higher education-

-community colleges, research universities, and others--to address in a new way what the challenges are of the economy that we're facing today.

MS. LABOTT: Dr. Kress, we just have a moment left. But it really does seem like a real opportunity here to kind of reimagine how higher education can make this contribution to society.

MS. KRESS: Absolutely. There is this opportunity to help our graduates and soon to be graduates pivot to where opportunity still lays. For example, at NOVA, we're really focusing on the IT economy. Six of the top jobs in our region are in the information technology sector. We know the opportunities there. Just month on month, employment has increased between 6 and 12 percent in those fields. All of us are really rethinking how we can help our graduates find that opportunity out there and connect to it in meaningful ways.

MS. LABOTT: Well, you know, it certainly seems as if COVID has added to the challenges facing recent and pending graduates but also creates a lot of opportunities here to imagine the future of higher education. President of Northern Virginia Community College Dr. Anne Kress and Chancellor of the University of Texas System J.B. Milliken, thank you so much for joining us.

MS. KRESS: Thank you.

MR. MILLIKEN: Thank you.