

Building an Equitable Workforce in Atlanta

BY JULIAN THOMPSON & MICHAEL HOLLAND • DECEMBER 14, 2020

the past two decades... [it] has among the lowest rates of upward mobility for children who grow up there.”

In the midst of the pandemic and an economic recession, education and workforce outcomes are undoubtedly worsening. According to recent research from Brookings, [the shift to remote learning in K-12 schools has disproportionately harmed students of color](#), resulting in increased chronic absenteeism and drop-out rates that threaten future earnings. Employers, for their part, admit to preferring investments in technology over workforce training, and have relied on four-year degrees to identify talent, [even when their current employees do not necessarily hold those same credentials](#).

Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms recognizes these challenges, which serve as the background for her newly released [One Atlanta Economic Mobility, Recovery & Resiliency Plan](#). This plan “establishes clear objectives to achieve better outcomes for all Atlantans, particularly Black and brown communities, so they can be more resilient to economic downturns, build intergenerational wealth and achieve economic mobility.” Central to this strategy are collaborative, cross-sector efforts to “align training and education with employer needs.”

HBCUS LEADING THE WAY

UNCF is the nation’s premier capacity building and advocacy partner to HBCUs, awarding upwards of \$100 million in scholarship funding to more than 100,000 students annually, as well as providing additional financial support directly to its member HBCUs. UNCF also studies the [“HBCU Effect,”](#) which examines the outsized impact of HBCUs on closing the racial education gap in the United States. [According to UNCF President and CEO, Dr. Michael Lomax,](#) “Today, the nation’s 106 HBCUs make up just 3 percent of America’s colleges and universities, yet they produce almost 20 percent of all African American graduates and 25 percent of African American graduates in the STEM fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics – the critical industries of the future.” UNCF is based in Atlanta, as are six HBCUs – Clark-Atlanta University, Morehouse College, Morris Brown College, Spelman College, Morehouse School of Medicine and the Interdenominational Theological Center.

In addition to leading UNCF, Dr. Lomax advises the [Mayoral Leadership in Education Network](#) at Harvard Kennedy School’s Ash Center, a community of practice that builds the capacity of cities – including Atlanta – to improve educational and workforce outcomes for youth. In his early contributions as an advisor, Dr. Lomax called out the failures of the workforce ecosystem (including K-12 schools, higher education institutions, workforce agencies and employers) to produce meaningful and flexible opportunities for students of color, who are [less likely to complete college and more likely to accrue and default on student debt than their white peers](#).

Agreeing with Dr. Lomax, Stephen Goldsmith, Derek Bok Professor of the Practice of Urban Policy at Harvard Kennedy School and Director of the Mayoral Leadership in Education Network, further acknowledged the role that mayors in particular can play in repairing the fragmented, dysfunctional and discriminatory nature of current workforce ecosystems in cities. Mayors hold unique convening power and are able to leverage their bully pulpit to chart a vision for workforce development that engages all of the players in the regional ecosystem. Both Goldsmith and Dr. Lomax agreed, however, that any strategy to effectively connect education to work for students of color must be rooted in data.

ADVANCING A DATA-DRIVEN APPROACH

One of the key inefficiencies in the current workforce ecosystem is the inability of stakeholders to have a shared understanding of the skills that are needed in their regional economy, and a more precise mechanism for predicting how the demand for skills evolves in real-time.

With funding from Strada Education Network, UNCF and Harvard Kennedy School's Ash Center collaborated with **Emsi**, a labor market analytics firm, to develop a new, data-driven and networked approach to workforce development in Atlanta. This pilot project brings together a collaborative of regional workforce stakeholders, led by the mayor's office, that uses a shared language of real-time skills data to advance opportunities for students and workers of color. With mayoral leadership, better data, an explicit focus on equity, and regional coordination, all workforce stakeholders can improve their ability to develop career pathways for the residents who need them most.

Starting in April, UNCF, with guidance from Mayor Bottoms' office, convened more than a dozen organizations from Atlanta's regional workforce ecosystem, including K-12 schools, higher education institutions, private employers, and workforce and economic development agencies. These stakeholders were able to engage with Emsi's data tools and start familiarizing themselves with the career areas and associated skills that are currently showing increasing demand in the region, **including IT/math, healthcare, production/manufacturing, and business/finance.**

Importantly, in addition to illuminating the demands for specific skills, the data tools also allow Atlanta's stakeholders to have a more granular understanding of the regional skill supply, based on an analysis of millions of data points from workers' online career profiles. The data tools reveal racial equity gaps in the fast-growing areas of the economy while providing important insights on the skillsets currently held by excluded populations in the region.

This new insight into the supply and demand of key skills has unlocked several use-cases for Atlanta's workforce stakeholders. K-12 schools and post-secondary learning providers

are able to enhance their curricula to offer more flexible and responsive programs that are tailored to high-needs, high-growth fields. Public sector leaders can target their economic and workforce development investments towards industries, employers, and skills that are growing. They can also validate the skills their residents have in abundance – useful for attracting business to the region – and better articulate their competitive advantages. Employers can also identify and develop talent with more precision, using skills as a primary metric for predicting job readiness, rather than relying on four-year degrees. And crucially, the ability to access real-time skills data allows learners and job seekers to predict with more confidence the return on their education and training investments. One feature of the data tool that is especially powerful during the pandemic is the ability to determine pragmatic and promising career transitions and upskilling opportunities. Stakeholders can use the tool to identify skills held by a specific population or worker group, based on their most recent role in a contracting sector (for example, hospitality), that overlap with the sets of skills required in more high-growth sectors with better wages (say, sales or marketing). They can then identify the additional skills needed in order to successfully transition into the new role.

EQUITY AT THE CENTER

For UNCF, all of this work is intentionally viewed through an equity lens. The data tools allow users to identify industries or skill areas that have a high, medium, or low ratio of minority representation, highlighting opportunities specifically for students and workers of color. Slicing the data in this way also allows municipal and civic leaders to challenge industries and companies that employ workers of color at disproportionately low rates, despite those workers being highly skilled.

Even with the most sophisticated data tools available, UNCF recognizes that a paradigm shift is required to combat the longstanding and enduring racial disparities that have persisted across the country for generations. As admirable as HBCUs are for their capacity to produce results for first generation, low income students and workers of color, that work will be insufficient if we don't commit to a new vision that honors the resilience of excluded communities while calling upon employers, educators and workforce stakeholders to make critical investments to improve organizational culture, resource availability and accountability structures for those most excluded. For centuries, HBCUs have been laser-focused on developing meaningful opportunities and pathways for Black, brown and low-income residents and communities. It's time for cities to follow their lead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



MICHAEL HOLLAND

Michael Holland manages the Mayoral Leadership in Education Network, a community of mayors and senior city officials seeking to improve educational outcomes and develop career pathways for youth in their cities. Prior to joining the Ash Center, he held several roles within higher education, focused primarily on developing experiential and project-based programs that connect learning to careers. He has also worked as a researcher for Project Zero, a research center based at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and taught English at a rural public school in Inner Mongolia, China. Michael holds a master's degree in International Education Policy from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a bachelor's degree in American Studies from Providence College.

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Julian Thompson is Strategist for UNCF (United Negro College Fund) and its Institute for Capacity Building, and is based in Atlanta, Georgia. As Strategist, Julian is responsible for the cultivation of strategies and programs that improve the resilience and sustainability of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and the broader Black community. Prior to this role, he led the development of a new UNCF leadership program for institution presidents and board chairs. Julian began his career focused on the intersection of education and policy with City Year Philadelphia, the School District of Philadelphia and Philadelphia City Council, where as Senior Policy Advisor he led a portfolio that included education, environmental protection, minority business development, housing quality and women's rights. Julian holds a bachelor's degree in History from Morehouse College and a law degree from Harvard Law School.

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