

ROUNDTABLE
REPORT

Preparing Students for 21st-Century Careers

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Art by Luke Choice

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a roundtable discussion
held at The Chronicle's
office, in Washington, on
May 20, 2019.

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Julia Schmalz*

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INTRODUCTION



College and business leaders often refer to a “skills gap” — a shortage of qualified candidates to fill open jobs — or debate whether such a gap exists. Meanwhile, conversations across higher education and industry reveal the need for greater collaboration among institutions, employers, and civic groups to help people start or advance their careers. Students who enroll in college, whether straight out of high school or at some juncture in their working lives, face a lack of information about which degrees, credentials, or training will lead to given career paths. And their academic programs may not prepare them for an evolving economy. But new partnerships are generating fresh approaches — micro-internships integrated into coursework, for example, or professional certifications incorporated into curricula. In both the liberal arts and more-specialized areas, college leaders can find ways to add



relevance without dismantling their educational models or compromising their missions.

To explore career development today, *The Chronicle* brought together a panel of experts who approach this work from different angles, through policy and practice. They came to our office, in Washington, to share their insight on persistent challenges and promising new ideas.

The panelists represent a broad range of students, including 18-year-old freshmen and job-seeking seniors at both selective and open-access institutions, as well as adult learners looking for a change or a leg up.

This *Chronicle* report offers key points of discussion to help college leaders update programs and services to set students up for successful 21st-century careers. The following excerpts from the roundtable have been edited for length and clarity.

PANELISTS



Kermit Kaleba is managing director for policy at the National Skills Coalition, which comprises community colleges, employers, labor unions, community-based organizations, and state and local governments advocating for policies to promote work-force development. He leads the group's efforts to advance a national skills strategy, and to support state and local implementation of federal programs. A lawyer by training, he previously served as executive director of the District of Columbia's Work-force Investment Council, where he was the primary author of the city's five-year work-force-development strategy.



Jill Klein is interim dean of the School of Professional and Extended Studies at American University, where she also serves as an executive in residence in information technology and analytics. A former corporate leader in banking and technology, she has taught undergraduates and graduate students at American, led the deployment of online degree programs, and directed the university's Center for Teaching, Research, and Learning. Through the Greater Washington Partnership, she is collaborating with representatives of 12 other institutions and 14 employers to create a technology credential that would be recognized throughout the national capital region.



Lakeisha Mathews is director of the Career and Internship Center at the University of Baltimore, where she is working to incorporate career development into the educational experience. A certified professional career coach, she represents the higher-education sector as a trustee of the National Career Development Association, and she formerly served in career-services roles at the University of Maryland University College and Loyola University Maryland. Mathews is pursuing a doctorate in higher-education leadership and innovation from Wilmington University.



Mary Alice McCarthy is director of the Center on Education and Skills at New America, a progressive think tank, where she examines the intersections among K-12, higher-education, work-force development, and job-training systems. A political scientist by training, she has served in the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor, where she co-founded an interagency working group that coordinates federal investments in developing career pathways.



Edward Smith-Lewis is director of the Career Pathways Initiative at UNCF, the organization formerly known as the United Negro College Fund. The project, supported by a \$50-million grant from the Lilly Endowment, seeks to improve the career outcomes of students at about two dozen historically or predominantly black colleges. Smith-Lewis, a former program officer in postsecondary success at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and an analyst at McKinsey & Company, also leads UNCF's Institute for Capacity Building, which serves its 37 member institutions.

MODERATOR



Sara Lipka has focused on the student experience in 16 years as a reporter and editor at *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. She has covered a range of topics, including student and academic affairs, campus life, legal issues, and community colleges, and has appeared frequently on radio programs and conference panels. As a senior editor, she directs special reports on pressing questions in higher education, most recently “[The Truth About Student Success: Myths, Realities, and 30 Practices That Are Working](#)” and “[Career-Ready Education: Beyond the Skills Gap, Tools and Tactics for an Evolving Economy.](#)”

SECTION 1

“There’s a natural tension between higher education and the business community around the mix of knowledge and skills that students are going to need.”

—Mary Alice McCarthy



Achieving Career Readiness and Promoting Opportunity

Higher education strives to lift students' prospects and prepare them to navigate their careers and lives.

A few main factors shape that work today: the rising cost of college and increasing attention to the return on investment of a degree, as well as a diversifying population, with students from historically underrepresented groups more likely to enroll than before.

Colleges are paying more attention to equity of outcomes, promoting opportunities for low-income, first-generation students in particular — and trying to track graduates' social mobility. Whether traditional-age students or adult learners, they must go into this labor market versatile and resilient, poised to pivot several times over the course of their working lives.

Our panelists discussed the dual purpose of college, to learn and to become career-ready; what “employability” means and who gets to decide; and how stratification in

postsecondary education can limit students' horizons.

Sara Lipka: College is about getting an education and a job, but these days there's more emphasis on the latter. Where do you see the influence of increasing public expectations for the value and relevance of a degree?

Lakeisha Mathews: What we hear when prospective students come in is, Which major gets me the job? How much money will I make? Especially when you're working with first-generation students who are looking for social mobility. What we hear from employers is, We need graduates to be able to do something — and to be able to think.

I work with freshmen a lot, and I try to explain to them that getting a degree doesn't mean you can do a job. Because learning has to take place. You come to learn so that you can produce. You can get an A, you can get a B, you can get a C. But when you get to the job, the employer wants to know what you have to offer.

Edward Smith-Lewis: It's learning, career readiness, and social justice. If you look at where the demographics are shifting, you're now educating a population of students who have never had someone in their family go to college. You have to expose them to careers, to what they are good at, to what they can do, to what they may be interested in — especially when you're saying that a college degree is the ticket to the middle class, whatever that means today. That's becoming harder and harder for those students to believe, given the weight of loans to pay for college.

It's really about helping students find vocation. This idea of vocational education has gotten a bad rap. But vocation is about passion. What are you good at? What excites you? My hope is that higher education moves away from the idea of a career within your degree field. The essence is the excitement of the topic. But if you're an art-history major or a mathematician, you still have to have these 21st-century skill sets — project management, information literacy, computational understanding — because that's where the world is today.

Lipka: When people in higher education talk about “employability,” that can be either a rallying point or a source of debate.

Mary Alice McCarthy: It's a word that's kind of crept into the lexicon. It traces back to work on literacy and adult education, which is appropriate, because Americans who don't have literacy or English-language skills really do struggle to get jobs. But if we take a step back and think about the relationship between postsecondary education and employability, what the big-picture data tell us is that people who complete associate and bachelor's degrees or longer-term certificate programs do well in the labor market. The folks who get into the most trouble are the ones who go to college and don't complete and end up with a lot of debt.

Every American college graduate is employable. But there's been an odd moving of the goal posts of employability. A lot of it is about how much time employers want to spend working with their brand-new employees, people like me who started their first jobs after

college and didn't really know how to answer a phone professionally. Employers do less onboarding and orientation and entry-level training. They don't want to do that anymore.

There's a natural tension between higher education and the business community around the mix of knowledge and skills that students are going to need. Right now we're in a time of 3.6-percent unemployment, so higher education is more able to say to employers, We're going to produce folks with some specific skills but also some broad-based knowledge. And then you can hire from across our institution, and your part of the equation is to bring new employees up to speed.

Kermit Kaleba: There's historically been this cultural divide between work-force development and higher education. That divide is starting to go away, but there is a whole subset of students for whom the entry point to higher education is different from what most of us think about. And they continue to be at a disadvantage, in large part because of a set of artificial cultural barriers.

The biggest challenge is often pretty strong resistance when it comes to transferring what students have learned on the work-force side of the house, the noncredit side of community and technical colleges, over to the credit side. It's not impossible, and there are a lot of institutions doing a good job of it. But from a policy perspective, that's something we need to be thinking about how we change, because you're never going to fix things for those students unless you break down those barriers.

McCarthy: A lot of our students start at community college, and to make it to the finish line, they have to go through this arduous transfer process. We tell them, Here's a great deal. You can start your four-year degree at a community college, except that you'll probably lose 37 percent of your credits along the way. There's all this fine print. And we are doing this to our most vulnerable students. We keep telling them that community college is a great deal for them. I actually believe it is a great deal. But we need to really rethink our relationship between two- and four-year institutions. We are looking a lot right now at applied associate degrees, which

focus on the practical skills and training needed for a specific job — and at how students can build on that without losing any credits to get an applied bachelor's degree.

We need more opportunities for people to combine work and learning, not just to go to work and then have a tuition-assistance benefit

to get the next degree on their own time. We need structured pathways and supports. One of the research points that comes back to us over and over again, both from the work-force-development world and the higher-ed world, is how much of a difference career counseling makes.

“If you’re an art-history major or a mathematician, you still have to have these 21st-century skill sets — project management, information literacy, computational understanding — because that’s where the world is today.”

—Edward Smith-Lewis



SECTION 2

“Career development is a campuswide responsibility. But I don’t see a lot of campuses with that value system — or even a definition of what career development is. It’s a new space, and we need innovators.”

—Lakeisha Mathews



Integrating Career Development Into the Educational Experience

The observation of one longtime educator has become a refrain in the field: “Students don’t do optional.”

That’s why many college leaders are trying to figure out how to make career development an integral part of students’ experience, in and outside the classroom. What does that mean, and what forms does it take?

One approach is active learning, a teaching technique that requires students to grapple with subject matter through activities like problem solving and group projects. Experiential learning is a related model that incorporates hands-on work, often with a partner like a local company or nonprofit group. Colleges that engage their faculty members in creat-

ing such options will expand their students’ opportunities to learn and to gain practical experience.

Our panelists discussed how to reach the “murky middle” of the student population, the need for faculty professional development, and ways to work across a campus to develop students’ career readiness.

Lakeisha Mathews: Let’s talk about the fact that the career center is an opt-in service. We have to recognize that the co-curricular offices on campus are typically used by either the high achievers, who don’t really need us but show up anyway because they take advantage of everything, or the lower level, which is referred — by the counseling center, the disability office. The murky middle does not

show up. And they need that career counseling. So a lot of schools need to ask themselves, Should it be mandatory? And if it is, what does that look like?

On our campus, business students have a career class, which is great, but the university's other colleges don't. That's an uneven experience right there. That needs to be looked at on every single campus. If we say we value career readiness, do we really value it if it's opt-in?

Career development is a campuswide responsibility. But I don't see a lot of campuses with that value system — or even a definition of what career development is. It's a new space, and we need innovators. We have to define what career development means in today's world. The hard part is it's different on every campus. You have to look at who your students are, and what it means for them to gain experience and be career-ready.

Edward Smith-Lewis: I partner with 24 institutions to essentially begin the transformation process — because that's what it takes to improve career outcomes. Our approach to career-pathway development includes what we call integrated co-curricular engagement. There is no way you can get an A in a seat in class and be successful in a 21st-century environment. You have to get an A out of the seat as well.

We like to ask, especially for residential campuses, How do you imagine a holistic student experience that's more than the three credit hours in the classroom, but pushes students to think about an internship or a research project, leading a student organization, or doing some service-learning activities? Unless we raise those expectations in a structured format, many of our students are just going to sit in a seat, get a degree, and hope that they can make it in the world. We have to be more intentional about that.

When we started our Career Pathways Initiative, we sent out an invitation to 88 primarily four-year predominantly black institutions or historically black colleges. We got 70 letters of interest back, and 90-plus percent of them focused on career services only, whether it was adding career-services personnel, updating the computers, or renovating the room. And to us, they were all off base.

Career services is hugely important. I actually think it should be on the academic side, and

report to the provost. You know, far-fetched idea. But unless we see career services as an institutional asset that should be integrated into the curriculum heavily, we're not preparing students to be successful when they leave our institutions.

Mathews: Part of it is we have to train faculty on active learning and what it means to teach this generation. This is a TV generation, it's a social-media generation — even the adult learners. When I was in school, you talked to me for 90 minutes, and I went home and studied. You can't do that today. No one learns like that anymore.

We also need to make the classroom more relevant, which is why I think experiential learning is going to be a big piece of higher ed moving forward. If we can really help students understand how college connects to life and how it connects to the workplace, I think they will engage differently. And we'll see a better connection between discipline, learning, ability to learn, and then how to apply that.

Smith-Lewis: You can't continue to teach what we were teaching 20, 30, sometimes 40 years ago. You can't continue to use a model that was developed in the 17th century to educate a student. And so we have to figure out how to engage faculty in active learning — and understanding that there's a shift in terms of both pedagogy and curriculum that needs to take place.

We're excited to engage our faculty. They not only create the institutions' most critical asset, the curriculum, they also deliver it. But especially for lower-resource institutions, the first thing cut is professional development. We think about faculty as a missed opportunity for higher education. The reality is that they've been underinvested in, just like every teacher. They're underfunded and undersupported. And so how do we flip that to really overinvest in the faculty?

So much of our effort is around placing faculty as the change agent in the work. When we go to employers, we always want an internship for students. We're now pushing faculty internships. If there's a skills gap with the students, well, there's a skills gap in the academy. And we have to think about closing them at the same time.

“Most people who went to college when I did have stayed in their careers. Now our students have to pivot. And sometimes it’s not going to be their choice. So we need to give them that resiliency.”

—Jill Klein

Jill Klein: One of the challenges is to help faculty who have traditionally lived in their disciplines recognize that we still want them to teach their disciplines. We also want them to get students excited to go deep and really learn how to learn, because those are the skills that will help students pivot as their jobs change. Most people who went to college when I did have stayed in their careers. Now our students have to pivot. And sometimes it’s not going to be their choice. So we need to give them that resiliency.

How do we help faculty look across courses in a major or in the curriculum and say, Here are a couple that are perfect? We’ll switch those to the experiential side as opposed to the theoretical side.

Mathews: When I first came to the University of Baltimore, I said to faculty, All right, we’re going to get career-ready. They were like, No we’re not. But when I started to go in as a listening ear, asking, What do your students need

from the career center? and beginning to have that conversation, they just opened up.

As a career-center director, I work very carefully with the provost, who’s over our center for teaching and learning. I go and do workshops on career readiness. And that’s how I engage faculty. What we have learned is to take a consultative approach to what each program needs. Every discipline is different — your criminal-justice folks need a different type of experience than your game-design versus your accounting folks. We now have a career assignment embedded into our Writing 300, which every single student takes, even our transfer students. It’s a career inventory and a reflection assignment where they have to define a professional goal. That doesn’t mean they have to stick to it. But it’s engaging them in this deep thinking about career. And that took me and my staff sitting in our office with faculty. We often speak different languages, and we act different, too. But we bridged that gap to develop something we’re both satisfied with.

SECTION 3

“There’s a real role that higher education can play in expanding apprenticeship and workplace learning by helping to create some of the structure for these conversations to happen.”

—Kermit Kaleba



Reinventing Work-Based Learning

Practical experience has long been part of higher education. That's especially true in career and technical education, at institutions with co-op programs in partnership with local employers, and at work colleges, where students' jobs on or off the campus help to pay their tuition. Now traditional four-year colleges are also exploring more forms of work-based learning.

Some faculty members are incorporating so-called micro-internships into courses, helping students complete short-term projects, often virtually, for employers. And colleges are forging new relationships with organizations like coding bootcamps and job-training programs to help students develop hard and soft skills.

Our panelists discussed how to make the most of campus employment and the federal Work-Study Program, the challenges of conventional internships, promising alternatives, and the prospect of expanding the apprenticeship model across industries.

Sara Lipka: We're seeing some new variations on models of work-based learning like internships, apprenticeships, and co-ops. Where do you see potential?

Lakeisha Mathews: Most students need to

work today. And if they're working in the dining hall or even in the career center, we typically have no programs for them. We aren't training them. Most campuses do not have an office of student employment. Believe it or not, most of our students jump through hoops just to find a job on campus. Some of them go to HR, some go to financial aid, some go to career services, some don't know where to go.

On our campus, I said, Hey, why don't we just meet? The career center, financial aid, and HR have been meeting for over a year, and now we know what the left and the right are doing. No one owns it, but we're working together. Just getting a dialogue going can help a lot, because there are people across campus who care about these things.

Did you know that financial aid can be used off campus, too, at a local nonprofit? So students can work in their majors, using their work-study money at local nonprofits. It's under federal Work-Study — JLD, Job Location and Development. "Placement" is a dirty word in career services, but this is the one area where we place students in nonprofits. If we can get them an opportunity to use their federal Work-Study money, give back to the community, and get relevant experience, we think that that's a wonderful opportunity. Corporations can also use JLD if they pay a percentage.

Mary Alice McCarthy: The federal Work-Study Program is relatively small, a billion dollars, but it's massively underleveraged. Mostly it's used to give students jobs on campus in the cafeteria or something. The opportunity to be able to use federal Work-Study to connect it to what a student is studying needs to be encouraged — and institutions need to understand it better.

Jill Klein: One of the challenges with a lot of internship programs is just sending a student off for an internship without what we call mentored oversight, meaning you don't know what the outcomes are. In our school within American University, all of our internships are mentored. But we're the only part of the university that really does that, having the students engage with each other and with the faculty member.

Another real challenge is that internships are expensive, so there is a lot of privilege there. We're trying to find resources so that students get paid in a way they can afford, so that they can focus on a really amazing internship without also working retail or waiting tables or babysitting. We want them to be all in on the internship.

There are certain careers that students love, like sports and gaming, and the amount of paid internships in some of those industries is zero to none. There's really very little opportunity unless you come from money.

McCarthy: It reinforces inequality. Not only are a lot of internships unpaid, but the student is paying to get academic credit. So they're paying to go and work for someone for free. And it might be unmentored. Both Kermit's and my organizations have worked a lot on how to improve work-based learning opportunities, so that they're earn and learn.

Mathews: We are going and teaching employers what internships mean for us. We did a training for managers at one of the Baltimore City agencies. We went into a room with people who said, I don't want an intern. I don't want some young person here following me around. But by the time we finished the training, you could hear them articulate, I can see the power of this.

Many big companies have college-recruit-

ment teams, but at your medium-sized to small companies, there is no strategy for bringing in new talent. Career centers are equipped to facilitate that conversation with employers — to say, You will have students do a reflection. Pre- and post-internship, you will do a career-readiness survey with them, to make sure there's an educational element to the experience.

Every now and then we have to explore virtual internships or other opportunities, because some people have families and jobs and mortgages to pay, and they just can't do a traditional internship. There are a lot of industries — especially publishing, design, tech — where you can work virtually. All of our students get a videoconferencing account so they can do some of that.

Lipka: What kinds of things are you seeing emerge as not just opt-in, but part of the curriculum, even integrated into a syllabus?

Klein: Starting in the business school, we're going to look at things like co-ops. Some institutions are real leaders in this space. And

“One of the biggest challenges we see when it comes to expanding work-based learning is that it's actually very hard for employers.”

while co-ops may in fact lengthen students' overall time to degree, the idea is that they would really do nothing but work for a period of time. That could also affect how we look at summer, since in a traditional institution, summer is a lost moment. What can we do with summer so that students have a meaningful experience that makes them work-ready?

Mathews: In Baltimore, the city office of information technology has a log of projects

that need to be completed. The office was looking for classes and faculty to mentor students to offer solutions to these projects. I was amazed at how many faculty members raised their hands and said, Yes, my students can do that because they're learning this — and we can make it a project in the curriculum. All we needed was a middle person like myself to bring those two groups together and facilitate the process. We let the city present what they wanted, and then the faculty signed up. And now we have students solving problems for Baltimore.

It's on the local level, and it's really external relations. A lot of our executives focus on the community-engagement office that does government relations. They forget about the co-curricular offices that are doing community service and career development and are talking to local alumni organizations and companies all the time. But a lot of career centers are stuck in the old model, not doing that kind of work and reaching out. They're staying in the office, saying, Counseling, counseling, counseling. But a lot of it, especially with first-generation students, is connecting, connecting, connecting.

Kermit Kaleba: One of the biggest challenges we see when it comes to expanding work-based learning is that it's actually very hard for employers. A lot of times there's an expectation that employers should be coming to you and presenting you with job opportunities. But the reality is that job training is not what businesses mainly do. Most of them, particularly small and medium-sized businesses, don't even have the capacity to provide internal job training. Big companies may have a whole department devoted to internal learning, but most companies don't have that.

That's the thing that higher education can bring to this conversation — to serve as that intermediary, both bringing students to the table and also educating employers on how learning works, how to connect learning outcomes to business outcomes, how to build systems within those companies that are efficient and effective, and help them get to where we really want to be. There's a real role that higher education can play in expanding apprenticeship and workplace

learning by helping to create some of the structure for these conversations to happen.

It's always been the case, but certainly in the last 10 to 15 years, we've seen an explosion of programming at community and

“The liberal-arts context is hugely important for a low-income, first-generation student, because you need that dexterity. It's better to have a broad educational experience than it is to have a narrow educational experience.”

technical colleges. Off the radar, they're doing a lot of work in partnership with industry, with community systems, to connect particularly low- and moderate-income students, including working adults, to create value in the labor market.

In South Carolina, the community-college system is the owner of the apprenticeship system in the state. And they are very intentional about going out and working directly with employers to figure out, How do we get you to create an apprenticeship program? How do we connect you to one of our campuses? The thing they've captured is that you're going to have to push employers sometimes to think about apprenticeship. It takes work. You have to create a space for this person. And they're doing it in finance and hospitality and other sectors where apprenticeship hasn't really been a strong source of talent or a training strategy. They've really expanded apprenticeship in that state.

McCarthy: We're currently doing a whole lot of work on apprenticeship, and I'm as surprised as most people that it's really resonating with communities across the country. We're thinking about how to connect apprenticeship to our high schools and colleges, so that people can be apprentices and students and earn college degrees at the same time. It's just one option for high-school students or adults to get a college credential or some sort of credential of value.

We just launched a multiyear initiative called the Partnership to Advance Youth Apprenticeship, which is going to start programs in high schools that bridge to credit-bearing programs at the communi-

ty-college level. It's a four-year program, and all the while, the student is working in a structured, work-based learning environment with a mentor. So this is possible to do at scale. There are also four-year institutions that are offering apprenticeship programs. A nursing program in Minneapolis is helping associate-degree nurses pursue a bachelor's degree. We're bringing together a bunch of health-care employers and labor unions in New York to talk about apprenticeship up and down the nursing pipeline, starting at the entry level all the way up to the bachelor of science in nursing.

There's a huge opportunity here. It's complicated from a policy standpoint — who



pays for what, and how to get high schools and colleges to think about this as a mainstream, high-quality option for their students. But this is the time to be having that conversation, again with just 3.6-percent unemployment. Employers are looking for new models. We need to engage them in a new kind of conversation, in co-creating. Apprenticeship is a great example of that. So are co-ops, and so are some other good work-based-learning programs.

Edward Smith-Lewis: I don't disagree wholly — I just struggle with “apprenticeship” as a word. An apprenticeship puts you on a path that leads to a job within that field. It's a struggle for many students to make that choice without the right level of awareness. They fall into it because the opportunity is there. Now, if you know your entire life that this is what you want to do, then by all means. But moving the field to create more apprenticeships — for me that puts people on a stratified path. The decision is made before they even know.

We live in a very racist country, and who gets on what path becomes a huge problem. If you start on the wrong trajectory, it's really hard. We have to think fundamentally about that.

McCarthy: We're very concerned about that, too, particularly when we talk about this in high schools. But the apprenticeship system

associated with the construction trades — that's a very old version of apprenticeship. That's not the version our organizations are talking about building out. We're talking about nursing, early-childhood education, software development, engineering.

Smith-Lewis: You can put kids on a path to solve an immediate need to get them some income, while if we would have given them two more years of a holistic learning experience in a residential environment with full support, they would've gotten a better job, taking them to a different place.

I don't believe everyone is ready to go down the path to be a creative. But if the system's not built to achieve the loftiness of that goal, then it's going to do a disservice to a bunch of people. The liberal-arts context is hugely important for a low-income, first-generation student, because you need that dexterity. It's better to have a broad educational experience than it is to have a narrow educational experience.

Lipka: One thing we could probably agree on is that at different junctures in students' paths toward careers, they need information. They need options. We talk a lot about skills gaps and less about information gaps — and the need for people to be aware of different career pathways and what steps are going to get them ready for all kinds of opportunities.

FURTHER READING

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“On-Ramps to Good Jobs: Fueling Innovation for the Learning Ecosystem of the Future,” by Michelle R. Weise, Andrew R. Hanson, Allison Salisbury, and Kathy Qu, Strada Institute for the Future of Work and Entangled Solutions, 2019



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