

## Workforce Development

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### ***Opening music***

Theory. Practice. Discourse. Research. Insights. Dialogue.

### ***WGVU's Jennifer Moss:***

Your'e listening to Tilting the Earth's Praxis, a weekly discussion of important issues that impact civil society. With host Salvatore Alaimo.

### ***Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.***

We need to be concerned that the potential of the individual is not wasted. New forms of work that enhance the social good will have to be devised for those for whom traditional jobs are not available. In 1879, Henry George anticipated this state of affairs when he wrote in *Progress and Poverty*. The fact is that the work which improves the condition of mankind, the work which extends knowledge and increases power and enriches literature and elevates thought, is not done to secure a living. It is not the work of slaves driven to that task, either by the task of that of a taskmaster or by animal necessities. It is the work of men who somehow find a form of work and brings up security for its own sake. In a state of society where I want is abolished. Work of this sort could be enormously increased.

### ***Salvatore Alaimo***

That's the late, great Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in an August 16th, 1967 speech reminding us of the importance of work. Welcome to Tilting the Earth's Praxis. This week's topic is workforce development. Our guests are Melissa Robbins, Chief Executive Officer of the National Association of Workforce Development Professionals. Welcome, Melissa.

### ***Melissa Robbins***

Thank you. Thank you. I'm excited to be here and have this discussion today.

### ***Salvatore Alaimo***

We're excited to have you believe me. And we are lucky to have two Grand Valley State University alumni today. Justin Arnold Or actually, I have to call him Dr. Arnold because he did get his Ph.D. He's director of workforce Development at the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission. Justin got his undergraduate degree in public administration at Grand Valley and then went on to get his master's at Ferris State University and a doctor of philosophy and workforce development at Western Michigan University. Welcome, Justin.

### ***Justin Arnold***

Thanks. Glad to be here.

### ***Salvatore Alaimo***

Jordan Baah-Sackey Program Manager, Jobs for the Future. Jordan also got her master's degree well, she got her master's degree yes, here in Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership at Grand Valley. Oh, she's a two-time alum. She also got her bachelor's in international relations here at GVSU as well. Welcome, Jordan.

***Jordan Baah-Sackey***

Great to be here. Thanks for having me.

***Salvatore Alaimo***

Thank you. And in typical full transparency, I'm proud to say that I once had Justin and Jordan in my classes here at Grand Valley. So that really makes me feel good. Jordan, let's start with you. Tell us what you do as program manager Jobs for the future. Give us a sense of your work. And along with that, some of the challenges that you're seeing out there in workforce development.

***Jordan Baah-Sackey***

Yeah. So I am, like you said, a program manager at Davos for the future. Most of my work is supporting some national scale projects, doing a lot of that back end work. We do a lot of administrative pieces as part of my role, and I specifically work within the education practice of jobs for the future. So most, if not all, of my projects are focused on using education as an onramp or a pathway to developing skills and getting people into good quality jobs. So that's what I do in my day to day. And I'm working on a couple of projects from Colorado to Minnesota to Texas and then a larger scale national project with some external partners. So, really exciting work and it's great to be at Jobs for the Future. And I think one of the pieces that we're seeing right now, especially in the education sector, is getting students from the high school space into the post-secondary and work or space in a manner that allows them to move through that system quickly without getting caught up in, you know, specifically like remedial education, where they're taking college credit or college courses with no credit, which then leads them into this cycle where they're stuck in education and not able to move past their college. And then they get stuck, you know, with debt and not able to, like, join a quality job or a quality organization. So a lot of my work focuses on breaking that barrier, you know, that could be dormant or creating pathways for work based learning in the high school space that allows students graduate from high school and then join the workforce or a post-secondary path that will lead to a quality job.

***Salvatore Alaimo***

Thank you, Jordan. How about you, Justin? What are you seeing? Tell us about your work and what you're seeing in the counties you serve out there in Illinois.

***Justin Arnold***

Sure. So, there's the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act. That's a federal act that sends funds to states for workforce development. There's Title I, II, III and IV. The first one, Title I, is for workforce development boards and for employment services and job training. The other three titles are around adult education, employment services and vocational rehab for folks with disabilities. And so those federal funds come to a state and

the governor designates workforce areas. In Illinois, we have over 20 workforce areas. I think it's 23 or 24 or something like that. Each local workforce area has a director that convenes a workforce board, operates one stop, which is where folks can come to get services and then provides career services and job training grants to the public while trying to get those other titles to work together. So that's what I do here. I have a five-county service area. I'm the director of Workforce Development. That means I work with the board on governance and strategy issues. I work with partners on service integration, and I work with program and frontline staff on serving the public and working together. I'd say the biggest issues I'm seeing right now is that workforce development means something different to everyone that you talk to. So, for businesses it means one thing and for higher ed it means something else. And for high schools it means something else. Being part of the public assistance workforce development system, that really creates a problem because people will try and get us to do things or have expect expectations of us that we're just aren't able to do. And that's really tough.

### **Salvatore Alaimo**

Thank you Justin So, Melissa, any of these things resonate with you? Can you add anything to and give us the lay of the land of what the world of workforce development this country looks like today?

### **Melissa Robbins**

Yeah, absolutely. So, you know, a lot of what Jordan and Justin just said, the NAWDP, which is our short term for the National Association of Workforce Development Professional. That's not what I used to write in our fiction. We just say NAWDP. But our members are made up of all different. I oh, I'm going to say workforce specialists regardless of their funding. So traditionally, it comes from the funding that Justin was just talking about, the WIOA Workforce Innovation opportunity. There is so much nontraditional funding right now out there in the system. So a lot of these change packages that were passed during COVID had millions and millions of dollars of work were done, you know, and incorporated into them, which is fantastic. However, that also makes for not very clear lines. So, you think about your traditionally funded job centers, that there's job centers in every state and territory. But, when you had these nontraditional workforce and it becomes interesting on how everybody works together. Right. And like Justin said, the expectations of what some of these dollars can actually pay for, and that's happening in every state, that's happening in every territory. And, and we're all still Yeah, I know everybody's tired of hearing about the pandemic. We're dealing with like most pandemic now. So, and I think everybody across the country is going through those same issues. People are not walking into the job centers at the rate that they used to. So, it's now it's about meeting people where they are. But that's easier said than done. You know, like Justin was just saying, there's there's governments and policies that that encapsulate all of this grant funding. Sometimes it's not as easy as just going out and meeting people where they are. And that is happening all across the country, you know as well. So, navigating the funding that's available. And then I think, you know, another I guess I would be remiss to not mention child care. That is one of the things all across the country that if you're talking workforce development, if you're talking quality jobs, if you're talking moving

people through a career pathway, if you're want to be a child care and the availability of child care and you're really, really missing the boat because it's one thing, you know, like Jordan and what she's talking about with education and moving people through that. Well, once if you don't have available childcare you can train people. You can match up with employers. Employers can find perfect job seekers. And at the end of the day, and I'll go so far, it's not just childcare elder care as well, so dependent care. We want to just call it dependent care. But I think I think that's probably is, if you look at the country, those are probably the things that. These challenges that bind us.

### ***Salvatore Alaimo***

Well. I appreciate that. And, you know, that's an important point, Melissa. And I was going to say this question for later, but it's a great segue to just dive right into now with all four of us here. Obviously workforce development as a topic impacts this ideal of civil society, which is a society in which individuals can strive to reach their potential, not only to be productive citizens, but, you know, to, you know, expand the human experience. So, you mentioned child care. It does beg the question what other issues that impact civil society is workforce development related to and does it impact?

### ***Justin Arnold***

When I think of the public assistance system, you are thinking about low income or skill deficient folks, which means people who've been disconnected from education and employment for some reason. It could be that they're a single parent, that they're an English language learner, that they dropped out of high school, that they became incarcerated, they became homeless, etc. It could be a youth who didn't go anywhere after high school, or it could be older adults who didn't really navigate their career. Now they're older and they want to change careers or get upskilling, and they don't know how. And so, these are challenges to these folks to getting a better job because a lot of folks in these situations don't have the. They did grow up with the role models on how to navigate a career and how to navigate an economy and how to navigate a community in order to be prosperous and thrive. Which was why there's generational poverty or they don't have the social capital such as a new American or a refugee. So, there is barriers to employment for a lot of these folks, which is what I think the value of the public system is. And workforce development can be as is helping people with barriers overcome those barriers because those issues of being low income, being skilled, division deficient, lacking social capital, lacking maybe a role model, needing some support, needing help. Those are real issues that we can make a difference in if if we're there to support as a society.

### ***Jordan Baah-Sackey***

Like Melissa had mentioned. I mean, childcare is a huge issue. I mean, myself, I've got three kids who need child care. And if we didn't have a preschool program like we would be, you know, top space. But then if you're thinking about kind of those other support systems, I mean, transportation, I live in a non-walkable subdivision of Grand Rapids, So I mean, somebody around here, the options are limited or where you can work and where you can even, you know, transport yourself to. Whereas if we were living in like a more, more urban space, the options may be more open. But I think transportation is a huge

issue that, you know, is a big barrier for folks to be able to seek out employment and then get there on time. So that job retention piece as well, I mean, if the bus is running on time and you're, you're running late, like you've only got a couple of chances before your employer, or that becomes an issue. So I think some of those system pieces and infrastructure pieces are barriers as well.

### ***Melissa Robbins***

I think that if we if we look back over the last year, about a decade, I think there was also a huge shift in the thought of students who are going through high school, post-secondary education. And what, what does that look like? What does life look like after high school? I know that when I was going through high school, college was the gold standard, and I went to college. I love college. I'm lifelong learner. You know, most people wouldn't say that, but I would go to a new class every day. Oh. But what we're seeing right now is we're seeing a huge decline, within trades. We're seeing huge decline in manufacturing workers. But if you start to trace that back, it's because I believe we need better. Well, there was some thoughts around what is the gold standard after, after high school? Was it appropriate to go in and do short term skilled work training? Was it appropriate to do a registered apprenticeship and go straight into work, or was it the best case to go into, you know, into furthering your education? And I think at the end of the day, we do need colleges and universities. We do need short term prototype training. But, because there was such a huge focus on some of those things for so long, now we're seeing some huge shortages. And so I think all of us that are doing this work and putting a lot of thought into this, we really need to be thinking further out, what are we prioritizing right now? Right. And are we prioritizing it to a point where we're diminishing what we're actually going to be in in 15 or 20 years? And that's so hard because I've been at 15 or 20 years ago, I didn't know some of the jobs would even exist that are, you know, here today. And I think that's another challenge, quite frankly, because there had been periods of time where you could go to high school, college, a career tech, and because you wanted a certain job, I want to be a dentist. This is where I go to be at that. I want to be a dental hygienist. This is where I go to be a dental hygienist. And things are so customized and, and scaled now that sometimes even those career pathways are, are tough, right. Which makes a lot of what Jordan and Justin do every day difficult.

### ***Salvatore Alaimo***

Very, very good. Yeah, I want to build off of that, Melissa So, with the understanding that technology is moving rapidly and it's admittedly challenging to keep pace with changes in the environment has higher education dropped the ball. Or have they had they kept pace? Are they doing their part to adequately prepare people for the work world of today? Are they stay in front of it enough or trying? What can we say about that?

### ***Melissa Robbins***

I don't know that we can lump everybody into the same category, right? I don't think we could say that higher education is doing what they need to or higher education is dropping the ball. I think that there are people in higher education institutions that are doing a really, really good job of working within business and industry and their local communities on what's needed and really taking some of those risks And then there's, I think, some folks

who are in higher education, just like any other one of our branches of service that are a little more reluctant to change. Right. But I don't think that you can probably, you know, categorize them 100% completely. I think working, and we talk about this all the time, I think knowing what the businesses are going to want and what the business schools are going to want when we get these people through training. So, what do you need today? But what do you need in five years? What do you need in two years? Or four years when everybody starts graduating? Those are super, super important conversations and we could all probably do a better job at having.

***Salvatore Alaimo***

You think we will see? Or, maybe it's happening now and I'm not aware of it. A resurgence of trade schools?

***Melissa Robbins***

I'll actually probably send that over to Justin because he probably needs that more on a day to day basis than that. I do. But just in talking to workforce boards and workforce professionals across the country, I can tell you that skilled trades are definitely. Needed. You know, we do need people that can build those skilled trades. But again, I'm going to let Justin build because he probably sees this every day.

***Justin Arnold***

I'm going to There is two points that I wanted to comment on, a comment on the trade school one, but then I want to jump back to higher ed real quick. Harvard's Pathway to Prosperity came out in 2011. And so, there's more than one way to prosperity. It's not just a university. It's also trade, school, military employment, apprenticeships, etc. And, so there are the discussion ten plus years ago that we should change. And some people are trying to change and recognize that. And so, you moved away from college readiness to college and career readiness as a nation. So, I think people are people in the know are recognizing that this is an issue. But culture as a whole is really slow to kind of catch up from what people in the know, know. So although we know this someone's parents or the the majority of parents in the community might not know about Pathways to Prosperity and they might be still thinking that a university is the gold standard. So, it's a little tough because you have an uphill battle with parents and people, meaning students. And so, you have to have intentional conversations around. For example, my brother went to U of M to get an MSW. He came out with seventy grand in debt and it took him three years to figure out how to get a job. I can work with someone right now that can make the same amount of money out of a trade school being an eight track installer with no student debt. So it's telling the story that is not being told or not understood in a way that people can appreciate what their opportunities are and make their own informed decision. But to pivot real quick, back to the higher ed thing. I have two ways of answering higher ed and doing a good job. One is research and one is experience. So, my dissertation is Emerging Adults at Public Universities choosing a major based on the career they want. So, I spent a lot of time looking at higher education and career services in higher ed and emerging adults as, as traditional undergrads. And the basic themes around a lot of the literature over the past ten years is universities don't do a really good job with career readiness of graduates and that there needs to be a really intentional conversation in the universities around what

are you going to do after the university, not just come to the university and have an experience. And so, a lot of people. I've seen from experience at universities are trying to do that. So, for example, going to Grand Valley and seeing how much the public and nonprofit administration program emphasized internships and job shadowing and go on and career services and service learning so that you could really think about what you were going to do after school. People are trying. Universities are trying to grab a hold of that. But having now been in Michigan and Nebraska, North Carolina, Illinois, there is kind of sometimes a disconnect between higher ed and jobs experientially speaking and then also from the research for my dissertation.

### **Salvatore Alaimo**

Jordan, You're in that education space. So, what is that like? And if someone's a, a client is someone who served by Jobs for the Future, what do you want them to experience?

### **Jordan Baah-Sackey**

Yeah. I was thinking about that last night thinking about what both Justin and Melissa said, I think that higher eds really need to improve the ability of having those on and off ramps for students. So, providing those credentials and value and then allowing students to, you know, get some credentials. Maybe that begins with like a certificate or, you know, a stackable credential so a certificate that you can go and start working as a dental hygienist or in the HVAC space. And then, you know, a couple of years down the road when you're maybe a little bit more financially stable, you have a clearer idea of what you want to do. You have some of those infrastructure supports in place. You are able to use that credential and then go back to school and then you can build on that And, having those on and off ramps where credentials are transferable, they're stackable, I think is a really important piece of this conversation because it allows students and learners to leave education when they have some, you know, a degree or some really valuable skills that align with like the industry and market needs. And then you can immediately go on to a job where you're earning money, you're gaining that social capital, and then you're able to go back and further develop yourself, maybe when you're in a better spot and then continue to build that up. I mean, some of, there are stackable credentials that go out, Oh, I didn't know you could start from a construction, right? There's a great program here in Michigan where I can't remember what community colleges, but you can get an Associate's in construction management or a certificate in it, and then, you know, that can stack all the way up to potentially an MBA where you're running some type of construction company or you're using your MBA in an industry that is needed. But then you're also working your way up to having that financial piece that I think is really important. So yeah, all of this is I have a lot of notes written down, but it's really important, I think, for higher ed to understand that. But not everybody's in a spot where they can commit to four years of a degree for a traditional four year. And, you know, along with that, there's a huge piece, like Justin said, you know, walking out with 70 grand in debt is a, a big ask for folks and not everybody's in a spot to do that. Not everybody's comfortable to do it and not everybody's willing to do it. So I think being able to provide those alternative pathways other than a four year degree is really critical.

### **Salvatore Alaimo**

Melissa, I have read where here in Michigan, they estimate between 80,000 and 100,000 high tech manufacturing jobs are unfilled because our workforce doesn't have the skill sets, to take those jobs. Is this a Michigan centric problem or you had you seen this issue around the country?

***Melissa Robbins***

Unfortunately, it's not just in Michigan and some places in are in worse situation but others. So, but it is definitely something that we're seeing everywhere. I will say that there are a lot of reasons that are that are affecting the open jobs, right. That the job orders that we cannot get filled. There's, you know, a ton of different names. But at the end of the day, there are a ton of baby boomers who when COVID hit, they decided that was their time to retire. Now what? They have retired anyway without paying them? I don't know. They do. Maybe not, but we should have seen that coming. We had a lot of people who chose to retire, and rightfully so. That opened up a lot of along jobs that we weren't ready to fill. Another thing that I think as we talk about all of these big ticket items, we have to talk about mental health. We have to talk about substance abuse. Um, because it is, it is one thing. And Jordan and Justin, I know again see this on a daily basis, they have the program and the assistance and the pathways to us that somebody who is willing and able to work, who's prepared to work or procure to get that training and then follow up with that career. That is not the situation that everybody is in. You know, sometimes it is a money thing. Right. And, and those money things, we can assess those grants out there. There's programs out there that we can try to fill that gap. But at the end of the day, there is a mental health crisis in the country, and we are not going to solve the job crisis until we stop a mental health crisis because they truly go hand-in-hand. And I pick up a separate issue, in substance abuse. We do have a lot of people and communities all over the country who are struggling with substance abuse and a lot of pay back sheets from training that keeps them from employment. So, you know, it is not. It is. It is very. What I hear all the time. I can't talk. What I hear all the time is we place somebody in a position, and two weeks later there are no calls and they just never come back. And where we, you know, we can't trace down every single group cause of that issue, but a lot of times it comes back to mental health. So, I just I think, again, we would probably be remiss to have this conversation without bringing back altogether.

***Salvatore Alaimo***

Melissa, I think you're doing a great job here of really framing comprehensively and holistically workforce development in terms of what's necessary to put those pieces together and make this a successful venture for someone who wants gainful employment. Do you think that and forgive me for asking you to generalize again, but do you think that we, we folks tend to have too narrow of a perspective on workforce development where we think it's simple person is not employed, let's train them, let's plug them in, let's get them a job, and magically all of their issues or problems are going to go poof, go away. So, is there is doing what I'm told leading up to saying here is do we need an educational piece for the general public, so they better understand what's necessary for workforce development to truly be successful?

***Melissa Robbins***



Absolutely. So, absolutely, it is it is much more difficult. It is not, there is not a check checklist. So, you know, and it Justin again, the WIOA programs, what we call workforce development. And we talked about this earlier. Workforce development means something different to everybody. So if you go into a job center and you talk about workforce development. We're going to talk to you about the eligibility, the parameters, the guidelines, and really, you know, the outcomes as it pertains to our grant funding. Right? That's what workforce development really is going to be when you go to an institution of higher education and talk about workforce development, that's going to mean something. So, do we get back to that, maybe placing their graduates, you know, business in their companies? You know, when you talk to education and talk about workforce development, it's a completely different concept. So, yes, we have to we you have to think about it bigger. We have to look at some of the programs in the guidelines. Not everybody is going to be able to go from A to B to C, just like Jordan said, having on ramps and off ramps that offer up out of some of these longer term programs and institutions would be fantastic because you, you can't commit to four years even, even adults with all of this work where we're expanding there's a lot that can happen in four years where I mean you need to stop and start again. On what some of the workforce, the federally funded grants, the workforce system, there's eligibility requirements. There are so many pieces of that puzzle that they have to monitor and, and deal with as they're also trying to move to a real life human being from point A to a quality job. So it's it's a huge, it's a huge lift. But, I do think we have to start thinking about it bigger because we have to take into account those outside influences. It's going to affect the outcome. No matter what it's going to affect the outcome.

### ***Salvatore Alaimo***

Agreed. Justin, it seems to me unless I'd been missing something that for a while, we, we lost the concept of apprenticeship. I'm starting to hear a little bit now that it's starting to come back into the fold. What are you seeing out there in terms of that?

### ***Justin Arnold***

That like workforce development it's a buzzword that people are excited about, but it means different things to different people. And most people don't know how to apply it, but there is an opportunity here with apprenticeship. So, the basic understanding of apprenticeships is I'm going to get an employer who's going to develop a program where someone's going to come in, get on the job training and mentoring some related instruction, and they're going to stick with us for an amount of time over that time, as they reach milestones with their on the job performance and their training requirements, they're going to get wage increases and upon successful completion, they will be that thing that they trained for and they'll be certified in that job. That is a great idea. And, when you're having a workforce shortage, meaning whether it's people not coming in to the workforce or not participating it in some way, or it's people leaving the workforce or low birth rates or mental health, whatever the reason is, when you have a workforce shortage, you still have people in your company who are showing up to work. And if you invested in them, they're going to kind of run with the opportunity that they're given. And so apprenticeships a lot of time as it's a strategy to train incumbent workers who came in at entry level and who've been dependable. And you can design a program around

upskilling them to perform at a higher skilled job so they can get a higher wage. So, it's kind of like a promotion. That's where a lot of folks are using apprenticeships in in different industries, but trying to connect apprenticeships and that classroom instruction piece, although employers are exactly excited about it, the government's excited about it. It's hard to connect it to the education piece because when you have a when you say related instruction, a university or community college hears that may go, how can I sell a certificate? How can I sell a degree? How can I get FTEs for a semester? And the business is going. Now, I wanted X I wanted Y. So it's as good as interesting as an idea as it is and as valuable as it could be. There's starts and stops as we try to figure out how to do the educational piece.

### ***Salvatore Alaimo***

The ancient Greek playwright Sophocles said "Without labor, nothing prospers." 13th century Persian poet Rumi said, "Everyone has been made for some particular work and that desire for that work has been put in every heart." Stephen Hawking said, "Work gives you meaning and purpose. Life is empty without it." So, a lot of discussions around workforce development, this is one of my pet peeves, goes in the economic development direction. And by the way, I have no problems with economic development I'm all for it. My question to all three of you is how much of workforce development is human development?

### ***Melissa Robbins***

I think it depends on um, who is doing that development and quite plainly, and I hate and I hate to say this, but oh, where that funding is coming from. If you have private foundation funding where you can truly focus on the person and not necessarily the performance measures that you've negotiated for that particular year, irregardless of what's actually happening in the given moment. I think there are people out there who are doing really great work with you in a focused work force, career pathway, job quality, job development. What I think sometimes happens and those of us who do work on grant funding don't buy that. So, my background, I used to be a workforce director in South Central Missouri. We were in a very rural area, so we didn't have busses, trains. Transportation was always an issue. We didn't have Uber right? So, we, we truly dealt with some of those rural things. But, grant funding was, you know, few and far between. It was hard to come by. So, we could not we could not chance not meeting our performance measures which meant we designed a lot of our programs around the performance instead of around the people that need in our service. And it wasn't a lack of compassion, right? It was honestly so we could be your tomorrow to help somebody out. I mean, that truly what is what it was about. But, so I think that a lot of that just comes from goose, actually what the capacity is, right? What the capacity is. We all want to do it. We all want to make sure that that somebody may want have a job, they have a quality job and they go the bill and that helps them in their personal life. But, in the real world, it's hard.

### ***Jordan Baah-Sackey***

Yeah, I think I really agree with the investment piece that I think they're from a nonprofit standpoint, right? There's got to be some type of a change in how the money comes

through in order to provide the holistic support that folks need. I think that's kind of been a theme of every point that we've talked about today. Come back to some piece of, well, looking at the person as the whole in that holistic view of workforce development and if you're chasing performance measures. Right. Like you said, Melissa, it's not for lack of compassion. It's that you need those dollars to do the work. But from a funder's perspective, when you know what, what benefit is that if you have people who aren't actually able to do work that's going to really build people up and you're just going to have people churning back numbers and data. You know, where is the cost benefit analysis of giving folks money and then allowing them the time to build those programs up, you know, developing that, you know, programs, relationships, systems, that doesn't happen overnight. And I think sometimes funding models have restrictive guidelines on what, you know, you have to build out a program in a year or we want to see X amount of people through the door in the next six months. And that's not always realistic and then it's not always sustainable. So where from a funding perspective and we have this mindset shift where, you know, things can become a little bit more realistic and understanding that dollars still need to be coming in. But you know, you're not going to see as many outputs as soon and you know, that funders might want.

### ***Melissa Robbins***

So, Jordan brings up a really good point and Justin actually said something about it earlier about registered apprenticeship in the hot topic. Right. So like if you want to be cool in workforce development, we're going to talk about register apprenticeship. And I mean, don't get me wrong, like we have whole programs here at the association focused on registered apprenticeship. But going back to what you said about that, that personal human centered design, right. People don't wake up in the morning and say, I've always dreamt of being a registered apprentice. They wake up in the morning at whatever age and say that I really want to be an electrician. I would love to be an electrician, or I would love to be a teacher or I would love to be a welder. They're, they're not going it's copying in their in their friends' groups informally about their own career pathway. Those are words and terms that we use. And so, you know, that's something else that's interesting. Yes. A registered apprenticeship on the back end may, may work more than like that may be the best way to get them into the employer, you know, the career that they want. But, you know, turns out, we're talking about how workforce development means something different so that everybody you know, most people, if you talk to them on the street and they are unemployed, they're going to say, I want to I'm looking for a job. Right. Like those are the terms. That's how we talk. That's how I thought. Oh, so, you know, I just think that's an interesting side note.

### ***Justin Arnold***

So. This is kind of one of those situations where, again, the public is behind the knowledge. And to your point, when citing people from the past, the knowledge doesn't really go away. It's just people every generation seem to forget it somehow. And the workforce development in large part is based on Frank Parsons. We're all *Choosing a Vocation*. 100 years ago. He was one of the first people to do workforce development with breadwinner society. Industrialization had happened and people were moving from rural

communities to urban areas. Young people were leaving school for jobs and families were looking for jobs. No one knew how to get jobs because they had come from an area that was either community based or economically depressed. And he developed a process and an intervention for working with people on vocational guidance. The foundation of his process was meaning, was the individual. It wasn't just connect them to whatever happens to be available. It was a serious, intentional reflection on the self. What are my interests? What is my personality? What are my strengths? What are my weaknesses? One of my abilities? What do I want to do? What environment do I want to be in? And he strongly suggested that the only good vocational choice is one that's based on the individual, and that's never changed. And then in the I think the fifties, the sixties, maybe John Holland came out and he did Person Environment Fit Theory. And that's where there's basically six work-based personalities conscientious, artistic, realistic, investigative, enterprising, etc. and that each or one of those personalities will fit best in a certain environment. And basically, any career assessment that you take right now is based on his work. So, if you go to if you take a career assessment and it says you should be an engineer. The reason it says that is because of personality and environment and fit. They surveyed a bunch of engineers. That like their job. Then they saw that all of their personalities were this one type of personality. So, if you're that personality, you might want to be this in this, in this environment. So personality, environment and fit. So when anyone comes in for us, we do informed choice where we do a Holland career assessment and we take them through a vocational guidance process so that people make an informed choice that meets who they are and what they want to do. In some cases, that means that they're going to choose something that aligns with their personality, with their interests, with their skills and available jobs, and then some intra. And in some instances, it means they make an informed choice to choose something based on money and schedule. They want to do something first shift with this amount of money because they have these home responsibilities and even if it doesn't fit with their interests. Or their personality. They want to go for it anyway. And for them, their meaning doesn't come from being fulfilled. Doing job tasks that comes from being fulfilled and taking care of their home life, whether that means children or spouse or if they're caregiving to an adult. But all this is very intentional, and it's based in theory, and not everyone knows this theory. So if you don't know this theory, you are often times that giving good. Vocational guidance that leads to meaning for connects to meaning you are trapped on the machine a little bit, and you have to make a really intentional decision to get out of that. And that comes through knowledge, which is, as we all know, power.

### ***Salvatore Alaimo***

I want to build off of that and stay on this thread of the human element. I'd like to hear from each of the three of you. Tell us what you have observed in terms of how today's topic can transform the life of an individual.

### ***Melissa Robbins***

That's a lot. So here is a good example. Just, I guess, get us started. Working at the workforce Board in South Central Missouri. We had a disaster program. We had some big tornadoes and like that that happened. They came through and we were able to put a program in place repairing roads and doing some public infrastructure, marketing those

types of things. And we were at that point, this was pre-COVID. It was hard to find employment. If you had large gaps in employment. You know, employers would look at that and be like, what were you doing those three years? And in many cases it wasn't anything that they really wanted to talk about during the job interview. Right? There's a reason that there's a three-year gap on that resume. So, we were able to take some job seekers like that and place them in disaster recovery jobs. And I had a gentleman call and he, he very simply said, "We appreciate what you guys are doing so much because I was able to fill our propane tank before the winter started before flood ocean." And honestly, when he said it, I was like his dad just called me and thanked me because he could build his propane tank. And so it took me a second. But I can we continue to have a conversation. And as we continued to talk, it was it wasn't just that it was he didn't have to pick between buying a couple of presents for his kids for Christmas and filling the propane tank. So it was that they were able to everybody was able to be comfortable in their home during the winter. Right. So there were so many things like filling the propane tank with like a tap that he was able to pay more because he had this job. But it meant so much more than him to his family, to his kids, the holiday and tradition. And, you know, one little thing affected so many parts of his family. And it was because he had a job. It was because he was in work and it was earning a paycheck. And, you know, great news like that. Even after the program ended. Then he had a really good job reference, and he was able to find full time employment moving forward. But down the ship, one example, oh, we could, we could very narrowly look at giving somebody a job and then being able to pay their utility bill and end it right there.

But it's, it's about so much more than that.

### ***Jordan Baah-Sackey***

I think one thing that I've been able to just be associated with, just being at Jobs for the future is the work that the organization is doing around supporting formerly incarcerated populations with earning credentials and allowing those people to come out of the prison system and give them a pathway to rebuilding their life. I think JFF has done a lot of work in the last couple of months building out some great programming, but I think that's very meaningful to even just be witness to that type of transformation in somebody's life and, you know, taking. And a barrier that typically disqualifies people immediately from gainful employment, from opportunity and building and supporting systems that allow folks to come out and be able to rebuild their lives with support and without judgment. And where the ability to say, like you've got somebody in your corner. That's something that I've been able, like I said, just been a witness to at JFF. And it's extremely powerful and really proud to be out at an organization that's focusing on supporting that group.

### ***Justin Arnold***

Workforce development transforms lives, but it's very difficult and needs full participation from the person that you're working with. For some reason in society, people think that you press a button and it's over. Instead of realizing it's six months, it's a year, it's two years, it's five years, and it requires a lot of effort on the part of the person that you're working with. I came from, you know, I dropped out of high school. I was in jail, I was homeless, became a single dad, had kids, and out of my group, if there was 20 people in my group and we were all had an intervention with workforce development, which in some

ways we did. There was people who want to get their budget right, wouldn't deal with their mental health one and show up to work. Wouldn't go to school. And those were choices that those people made. Those were choices my friends made. Those were choices my family members made. And if you fast forward ten years later, we all ended up in different places. And it was because of the choices we made over time. And choice and time doesn't seem to factor in anybody's assessment of workforce development. They just say it should work because it exists. But it's really not that easy because of the people that people part. People have to decide, I don't have a car, but I'm going to go to work. I'm far away, but I'm going to take a bus. I don't like second shift, but I'm going to do it for a year until I finish my certificate. And a lot of people don't want to put in that much effort, which is, and I get it. I don't want to put in that much effort either. And so, we really have to coach people resilience and grit and stick with it. And that's worth it. Don't give up. And that's, that's, that's pretty tough.

***Salvatore Alaimo***

Well, the work of all three of you is immensely appreciated. You're dealing in incredibly important space within civil society. And I want to thank all three of you for your work and for our wonderful discussion today. Melissa Robbins Chief Executive Officer, The National Association of Workforce Development Professionals. Justin Arnold, Director of Workforce Development at the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission in Illinois. Jordan Baah-Sackey, Program Manager for Jobs for the Future. Thank you all for being part of our discussion today.

***Justin Arnold***

Thank you.

***Jordan Baah-Sackey***

Thank you.

***Melissa Robbins***

Thank you all.

**Closing music**

***WGVU's Jennifer Moss***

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**Closing music fades.**