TRAILBLAZERS TALK

Ravi Kumar S.,
President, Infosys,
in conversation with
Dr. Meghan Hughes, President,
Community College of
Rhode Island

Link to conversation: http://bit.ly/2YLmmws

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Ravi Kumar S. (RK): Welcome to the next version of Trailblazers at our beautiful Rhode Island Providence hub. Trailblazers, as most of you know, is about individuals making significant impact in the organizations they work, in the communities they live, as well as in the industries they represent. Today, I have one of my friends Dr. Megan Hughes, the President of the Community College of Rhode Island. She's been the president at CCRI for the last three-plus years and she has been running this ecosystem, one of the largest in New England area. 22,000 students and a very inspiring educator. Last year, CCRI had one of the record graduation rates in an ecosystem where the graduation rates are much lower. Community colleges have much lower graduation rates. You know, I find it very inspiring because after teaching at Tufts, and a graduation at Yale and a Ph.D. at the New York University, she decided to come and serve a community college ecosystem. So, thank you so much, Megan, for joining us today in our version of Trailblazers. Every time, I meet you what makes me learn so much from this, from speaking to you, is about the extraordinary opportunity community colleges have in this country. I am actually told 50% of the students in the US actually go to community colleges and the graduation rates are much lower because, you know, students leave, they come from underserved communities and in a society, they're kind of doing this part-time. What gives you the confidence and what gives you the conviction that they could actually be the future of talent in a digital age we are all living in?

Dr. Meghan Hughes (MH): Thank you for the question, and I first just want to take a minute to take us both back to the first time we were in a room together, which is just about two years ago and for some of your listeners, you know, we have these moments in our lives whether it's our professional lives or our personal lives that you just remember and you remember them in a really detailed fashion. So, if I can set that scene, it was at our State House here in Rhode Island, it was a summer day, it was incredibly hot inside the State House. So, all the windows were up and there were a whole lot of academic leaders from around the state and a whole lot of employers and a big part of your team and you were coming here to ask yourselves, "Is this where you're gonna put your next flag down and are you gonna join this community?" and what I remember as then a relatively new president, you know, we were at the very early stage of just a full-scale redesign and we had to decide where to put our resources and that included actually my time and my resources and you stood up after being introduced and I can honestly say, I knew within two minutes that our values were aligned and that your vision for how to think about talent, it's just perfectly wedded to our community college and to community colleges across the country. So, I really do want to start by just sort of marking that moment and saying thank you, okay?

RK: Thank you so much for those kind words.

MH: So, now to your question. Now, if it wasn't someone with your values and vision, that question I think is presented in a way that has some assumptions and those assumptions really are about can community college students really do this kind of work or are they just not sufficiently, you fill in the word, "motivated", "intelligent", "talented", right? We hear those questions asked in a variety of ways and the way I would get at answering the question is the following: Community college students and graduates can absolutely join the kind of knowledge economy you and I are trying to create for them and why do we know that? I would say our lamentable graduation rates and those across the country; the fault isn't theirs, it's ours. So as a designer and someone who thinks about design, historically, community colleges were not designed to effectively serve the kind of student we serve today with some of the attributes you've named, right, part-time, low-income, first-generation, balancing families, balancing jobs and so when I came in to our college we had an embarrassing graduation rate and it had been stagnant for the last five years. [**RK:** That's true across the nation or so yeah.] There are pockets of great news but nationally it's not a great number these days for a two-year rate and we were at a third of that number. So, what I would share is, you know, we're in the early stage, really, of a transformation but what we've been able to do in three years is triple that graduation rate. So we've gone from being a third of the national average to this May, I predict we will go right by the national average and be 50% better and we're just going to keep going. And so to answer the question, it would be we had to be ready for the students we serve today and that required a complete redesign, building a schedule that meets their needs, designing curriculum that actually meets their needs and forming partnerships with employers like you all. So, I think we're on the move, we have ways to go but I think our students are proof of what's possible if the opportunity is put in front of them.

RK: Awesome, so, Meghan you know we are getting into an age where higher education, which I personally, when I grew up, higher education was the kind of the measure of how you get into jobs. We're getting into an age of digital where skills are going to be the real driver versus higher education and continual learning, lifelong learning is almost going to become a virtue of the digital age. Do you think that's a sweet spot for community colleges because you're going to get off this, you know, uphill task of doing higher education to get to a job to really looking at skills?

MH: No, I think... thank you for the question and I, in a word the answer is, yes, and I think the reason for that is, you know, acquiring the kind of as you say digital or technological skills that's not a level playing field. So, you know Americans born into some privilege are always gonna get a richer shot at the beginning but that field is more level than others and why is that? So, you know this, our brains are all more or less exactly the same, the difference is in material right? So, if you as you are doing with this partnership you give our students access to technology and the training and sort of the wrap-around environment that comes with us, they can play just as well as students from more elite institutions. So, I think it's a very opportunistic moment for us to sort of interrupt what this is.

RK: Absolutely, and any disruption we do in the community college infrastructure now is going to scale significantly in the age of digital, where I think skills will take precedence over higher education and actually, I'm also hearing the lines between white and blue-collar jobs are blurring and you know, we're calling it the new collar jobs in many ways. So, help me understand this, what about aspirations? How do you raise aspirations in community colleges, you know, we're trying to experiment with you, with this digital economy aspirations lab and I personally believe most community college students need role models in their lives They don't find them in their families, they don't find them in the circles they actually grew up in. How do you raise aspirations for them to take up jobs of the future?

MH: So, thank you for the question and I think the one qualification I would make to the way you presented it is that our students generally have remarkable role models in their parents and their grandparents and their families and then their neighbors in terms of grit, persistence, hard work. What they don't have, and you're quite right, is professional role models. So if you want to see grit and hard work, but they don't have professional and I think what is so promising about this model that we're launching here with Infosys, the difference between what our students historically have been able to access and students that come from more elite or more selective institutions like mine, right? My history, my Yale, my NYU, my RISD, my Tufts, what do they have? They have social currency and they have social confidence and how do they get that? They get that from experiential learning, internships. They get that from mentors, you know, your dad's friends, your mom's friend, they get that from networking that comes out of those kinds of accesses and that access, that an internship or other experience would provide. So I think what is so disruptive and so radical and so encouraging about what you all are offering our students is access to that kind of social currency that is otherwise very challenging for our students to find.

RK: And, do you see this a scaled experiment because I know that a lot of institutions and corporations are doing a little bit towards community colleges because it's a good part of the narrative, but this is a chance for all of us to really bridge the digital divide, as I call it, you know, technology created a divide because technology was very exclusive. The digital future actually is a broader embrace and it's going to kind of bridge the gap but, you know, what do institutions and corporations do to scale this, you know, everybody is doing small numbers?

MH: I think it's a great question, and I think we're gonna answer it together and hopefully bring some friends to the table that will help us get there, you know, I think about this question every day and I listen hard to people who I think are asking the bold question whether it's in my space or whether it's in the corporate space and I think for a minute about someone like Brian Moynihan, right? We know who he is. He has a workforce of 300,000 workers across the globe and a couple of things I think are true about what we're seeing in a company like Bank of America. They know, as Infosys does, that you have a talent gap here in America and that if you continue to use the same traditional channels you're not going to close the gap. So, I think what you and Brian and others are really looking at is, "Look there have been many sort of boutique programs, which ones are scalable and how do we take them to scale quickly?" I mean my aspiration for this lab is that we're able to answer some of these questions together

and very quickly take it to national scale. I think the good news for community colleges is, we know that American companies cannot access the talent they need that there is a shortage right now and we also know that we need to be as a group far more proactive, far more dynamic, listening far more carefully to employers about what your needs are, understanding that those needs are gonna change and adapt rapidly. I think if I strip it all away, I'll think about a conference I attended maybe three weeks ago at Brown and it had presidents from around the world, the President of the Sorbonne was there, for example. And, what struck me sitting in that room, honestly, so many advantages that those leaders and their institutions have over mine and over other community colleges in this country, right? Endowments that are literally ten thousand times the size of my own; incredible advantages. I do think a strength of community colleges, we know who our client is and those are our students and when they walk through our door they're very, very clear about what they're looking for, they know they're looking for incredible learning and they're looking to get a better job for themselves than they've had before. And, so, I don't have any confusion about, you know, I think the title of the conference was something like "The role of higher education in the workforce space" I don't have any confusion about that, we need to deliver what our clients who are our students are asking for and that is the kind of pathway you and I are talking about.

RK: Absolutely, and I think a task force which can bring institutions together in an ecosystem, I think the government has a role to play, the corporations have a role to play, community colleges have a role to play, but I think if they come together I think it's going to be a wonderful way of really bridging that talent gap and every time I see this problem on hand I keep thinking, new technologies and digital technologies take away jobs of the past but they actually create significant jobs in the future and we don't know how to fill them and here we have this huge talent pool which is under-tapped. So, help me understand this, how do you deal with the immense amount of resources the private colleges and actually in our public colleges as well have. How do you deal with that? Do you think there is something we should change on the funding of community colleges?

MH: You know, before I came to you this afternoon we had a meeting with Senator Reid and he is our senior senator from Rhode Island and he was talking to us about this very question, you know, how do we as a country reimagine what our collective role as Americans, is to create educational opportunity for all Americans the same way that vision was of the GI Bill 50 or 60 years ago? I think it's the right question to be asking, I think we have to be thoughtful about how opportunist moment is from a federal perspective to really get some traction with that in Washington. I'm not sure we will see a significant amount of new dollars coming in through the federal government. What I can say is actually two things: one you and I both know our governor, you know, that she epitomizes [**RK:** She is just awesome, she is one of the best governors I know of] and she launched as you know, a free tuition program for all Rhode Island high school graduates who enroll directly at our community college student. So, she's an example of someone who said I'm putting a stake in the ground, you know, the high school diploma that was good enough for her grandfather and my grandfather, it just isn't good enough anymore in this knowledge economy, right? New England, what we actually need to produce, so she put her resources behind that and what I can say with ease, that with tripling of the graduation rate, we've brought a lot of elements to bear, to create that kind of rapid performance improvement. We would not have tripled without the launch of her Rhode Island promise, so, you know, she is actively going around the country trying to get other states on board. I do think it's a moment where states can take the lead right now and think about the question you're asking, you know, what is ours as taxpayers, to contribute to this next generation in order to create a strong economy? I think that's sort of my first reflection. The second one, though would be this and I will use Yale as an example, right? I will sort of use my own history, the current cost of being a Yale undergrad is 13 times the cost of being a community college student at our state and our college and there are a lot of reasons why that's true and we can all imagine what those reasons are. I think the good news for us is Rhode Islanders, thinking about the Community College, what our students can do with a relatively small investment is extraordinary. And you know this from the Indian model. I think people imagine who don't really know our students, they imagine that the scope of the challenge is so intense and so vast that you can't actually take it on but it's just not true, you know, for our students a $500 annual book scholarship means they stay in that class, they do beautifully in that class, they get their degree and they're on their way. So, I would want to… I have enormous optimism about what we can do with just a little bit more money and I think we're going to get there.

RK: So, let me ask you one last question and you know you're such an inspiring educator of all the college presidents I meet, you're one of the few who makes me think every time I come and see you. What's the tipping point on this? Where you think the community colleges will dominate the talent model for large enterprises?

MH: So, I'll let me answer it this way, I sat with maybe 12 presidents earlier this morning. I was the only 2-year representative in that space. I think a key contributor to that tipping point is cost, right? I heard a President of a private school say that if the costs of educating a student and his college increase at the rate that has been increasing over the last five years, that will be a $90,000 buy for a family to send, in America, we can't do that, it's unsustainable and he was acknowledging we are on a path to destruction. So, I think the tipping point is already starting to happen when you have families including middle-class families saying I'm doing the math and I can't figure out how we make this investment at this price point pay off for our family. So, you're gonna get your start at a community college. What would I actually like to see, I want to see community colleges lead this disruption, I think we're ripe to do it, you know, I don't think we have what would I call - 'Similar Hang Ups' with compressed courses, shorter time to degree, just thinking in new ways that I think four-year schools with perhaps a longer more prestigious history will have more trouble disrupting. So, I think we can lead the way. I actually do though think four years are gonna have to come along in this conversation to think about it if we're gonna get where we need to go as a country.

RK: So, Meghan, thank you so much, you know, this is indeed an opportune time for community colleges to be the mainstream talent pool for a digital age. There is an inflection of skills versus higher education, blurring lines between blue-collar and white-collar jobs, the significant opportunity related to scaling a large talent pool. I think this is amazing and thank you so much for the partnership. I'm really looking forward to working with you on actually setting some new standards, actually hoping to get to the tipping point very soon. Thank you again.

MH: You're welcome. Thank you, Ravi. Looking forward to it thank you.

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