The COVID-19 Pandemic's Impact on the Job Market Across U.S. Major Metropolitan Areas: American Workers' Perceptions

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The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many aspects of American workers' lives disproportionally; including geographical locations, demographics, mental and physical health statuses, socioeconomics, and type of industries. In this paper, we focused on examining the pandemic impact on American workers and the job market and how the impact was different in various geographical locations. Specifically, the purpose of this paper was to explore (a) the impacts of pandemic on American careers in major metropolitan areas, (b) the barriers to American Career advancement, (c) American perspectives toward the future of their careers, and (d) the resources and support that Americans need to advance their career. To fulfill the purpose of this study, percentages were used to analyze the archived data collected by Edelman marketing firm for the University of Phoenix. Edelman firm conducted a survey study using 5-point Likert scale questions to explore career perceptions of 5,000 American workers who participated from 20 major metropolitan areas in the U.S. in Jan 2021.

Background: The COVID-19 Pandemic's Broad Impact

The impact of COVID-19 on the global economy started with China's economic plight and continued as the pandemic spread throughout the globe in 2020. China's economy was devastated in the first quarter of 2020. Specifically, China's manufacturing, exports, and disruption of manufacturing supply chains were affected which in turn affected manufacturing in other countries (Açikgöz & Günay, 2020). As the economic effects on China spread to other countries, global effects emerged; including loss of jobs, stock market drops, and governments' endeavors to counteract the economic, health, and social impacts of COVID-19.

The economic shock of COVID-19 is already larger than the 2008 global financial crisis (Açikgöz & Günay, 2020). One aspect of the economic impact relates to labor market shock. The COVID-19 labor market shock occurred more abruptly and deeply than prior market shocks (Botha et al., 2021; Groshen, 2020). The prior recessions built up over longer periods of time. For instance, by April of 2020, 15% of the job market was gone as compared to 6% during the Great Recession. The economic recovery has also been faster than previous recoveries, as restrictions were lifted in early summer of 2020. However, the recovery was not complete as only about 52% of lost jobs returned and the pace of recovery slowed July through September 2020. COVID-19 cases dramatically increased during the fall of 2020 requiring additional closures and restrictions, further enhancing the labor market shock.

The disproportional economic impact of COIVD-19 on various geographical regions depends on the type of the industries located in the regions. Some industries like leisure and hospitality, retail trade, professional and business services, and healthcare and social services were affected more strongly (Groshen, 2020). American workers and job earnings were differentially impacted by the pandemic depending on location within the United States (Dey & Loewenstein, 2020). To examine the career status of American workers, six of the most exposed industries have been proposed including (a) restaurants and bars, (b) travel and transportation, (c) entertainment such as casinos and amusement parks, (d) personal services such as daycare providers and barbers, (e) sensitive retail like department stores, and (f) sensitive manufacturing like aircraft and car manufacturing (Vavra, 2020). Applying these 6 most-impacted sectors to employment statistics reveals that while the largest number of workers impacted came from large firms, firms in the most exposed areas tended to be smaller with fewer workers (Dey & Loewenstein, 2020). The states of

Nevada, Hawaii, Florida, and South Carolina all had more than 23% of their employment in highly exposed areas, largely due to the number of employees working in the travel and transportation sectors (Dey & Loewenstein, 2020, p. 5). On the other side of the spectrum were the Midwestern states (esp. Nebraska, Iowa, Arkansas, and Minnesota) focused on agriculture, which had less employment in the most exposed sectors (with the 4 states mentioned all having less than 18% of employment in highly exposed sectors). Washington D.C. also reported low percentage (12.9%) within the most exposed sectors, which was due to the presence of the federal government. American workers who work in the lowest paid jobs were often working in the shutdown and most exposed sectors, impacting those with lower incomes more than those with higher incomes (Dey & Loewenstein, 2020).

Method

While several studies have identified geographical, sociological, and economic factors influenced by COVID-19, there remains much to be learned from individuals themselves living through the pandemic. Edelman's (2021) targeted several main research objectives, including the measurement of people's career optimism and geographic, psychographic, and firmographic data. Thus, in this paper, Edelman's archived data was used to address the following research questions:

1. What are the impacts of pandemic on American careers in major metropolitan areas?
2. What are the barriers to American Career advancement?
3. What are American perspectives toward the future of their careers?
4. What are the resources and support that American need to advance their career?

Edelman's (2021) study conducted a self-report survey study using 5-point Likert Scale questions with 5,000 participants from 20 major metropolitan areas in Jan 2021 and explored American workers' perspectives, expectations, and emotions toward their career statuses. Edelman's (2021) report is provided for the University of Phoenix with the title of "The University of Phoenix Career Optimism Index." We have used descriptive percentage to analyze Edelman's (2021) archived data and address the above research questions.

Demographics

To better learn about the nature of the archived data used in this study, the participant metropolitan areas, number of participants, and demographics of participants of the Edelman's (2021) study are provided in this section. The metropolitan areas that participated in Edelman's study (2021) are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

The U.S. Major Metropolitan Areas Participated in the Edelman Study (2021)

Metropolitan areas	n	Metropolitan areas	n	Metropolitan areas	n
New York City	300	Minneapolis	301	Houston	301
Los Angeles	301	Miami	305	Boston	302
Chicago	300	Denver	301	Atlanta	304
Philadelphia	300	Orlando	300	Phoenix	301
Dallas	302	Cleveland	300	Tampa	304
SF-Oak-San Jose	302	Sacramento	301	Seattle	300
Detroit	301	Washington D.C.	304		
Total N = 5000					

Demographics of the Edelman study participants are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Demographics of Edelman' (2021) Study Participants

Demographic factors					
Race		Employment Status		Household	
White	61%	Employed full-time	65%	Income	12%
African or		Employed part-time	16%	Under $25,000	8%
African descent	6%	Employed part-time or with		$25,000-$34,999	11%
Asian-American	5%	reduced hours/pay due to	2%	$35,000-$49,999	17%
or Asian	2%	COVID-19		$50,000-$74,999	13%
Mixed race		Temporarily unemployed	1%	$75,000-$99,999	17%
American	1%	furloughed (paid) due to COVID-		$100,000-	18%
Indian or Alaska	0%	19	3%	$149,999	
Native		Temporarily unemployed	5%	$150,000 or more	
Native Hawaiian	0%	(unpaid)	0%		53%
or Pacific		due to COVID-19	5%	Gender	47%
Islander		Unemployed prior to COVID-19		Male	
Middle Eastern		Retired		Female	
		Student			
Age		Education		Region &	
18-24	13%	Some high school (Grade 9-11)	2%	Environment	
25-34	23%	Graduated high school (Grade	22%	South	37%
35-44	21%	12)	7%	West	24%
45-54	21%	Vocational/Technical school	33%	Midwest	21%
55-64	17%	Some college	21%	Northeast	18%
65+	5%	Graduated college	14%	Suburban	56%

	Post-graduate degree	Urban	25%
		Rural	19%

Results: The COVID-19 Impact on American Workers' Careers Across Major Metropolitan Areas

It is very valuable to develop a deeper insight about American workers' perceptions in each of the major metropolitan areas. The descriptive analysis of the Edelman's (2021) data has shed light on how the COVID -19 pandemic has influenced American workers' careers across major metropolitan areas in the U.S. and addressed the four research questions in the following perspectives:

- The strained landscape of American careers,
- Emotional and structural barriers to American career advancement,
- The American perspectives toward their future careers, and
- Resources and supports needed for American career advancement resources and supports.

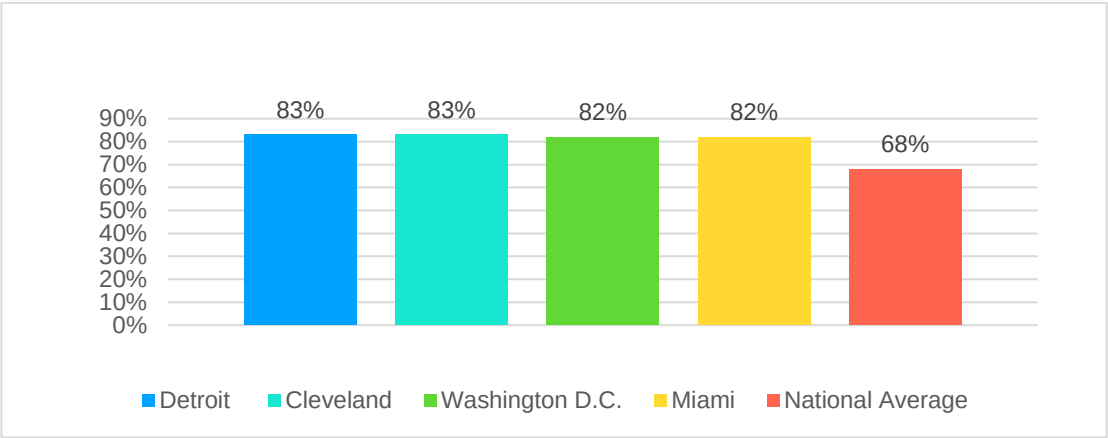
The Strained Career Landscape across the Metropolitan Areas

The pandemic strained the American workforce in various metropolitan areas differently in terms of work environment, career derailed, work-life balance, and job replacement fearfulness.

Work Environment

About 68% of the American workers participating in this study stated that they worked from home as a result of COVID-19; however, some metropolitan areas were impacted deeper. More workers were impacted in Detroit and Cleveland (both 83%), Washington D.C. (82%), and Miami and Philadelphia (both 81%) than in other areas as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Work from Home due to COVID-19 across the U.S. Major Metropolitan Areas

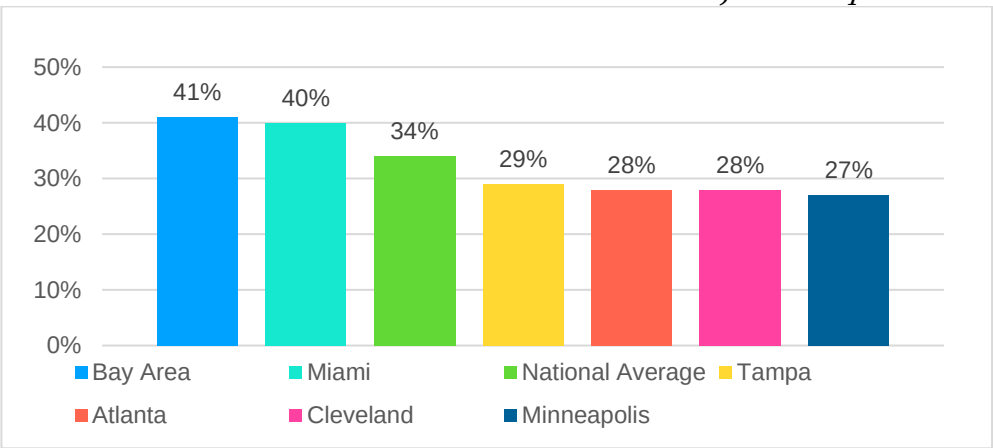


Careers Derailed

About 34% of American workers shared that their careers were derailed as a result of COVID-19. While workers in the San Francisco Bay Area (41%) and Miami (40%) felt their careers were most impacted, workers in Tampa (29%), Atlanta and Cleveland (both 28%), and Minneapolis (27%) felt least impacted by the pandemic in terms of reporting that their careers were derailed, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Careers Derailed due to COVID-19 across the U.S. Major Metropolitan Areas



Work-life Balance

The pandemic disrupted American workers' work-life balance in various metropolitan areas differently. More than half (51%) believed that the pandemic negatively affected their work-life balance. The metropolitans where workers' work-life balance was impacted the most were Miami (63%), New York City (61%), Houston (60%), and San Francisco and San Jose (59%), while the least impacted metropolitan areas were Tampa (50%) and Chicago (49%).

Career Replacement Fearfulness

The participants in the study were fearful to various degrees about their jobs being replaced with technology, depending on the various metropolitan areas. About 22% of workers nationally believed their job became automated as a result of the pandemic while the participants in some metropolitan areas were more concerned about this, including in Washington D.C. and Miami (both 30%), Orlando (28%), Houston (26%), Atlanta, Los Angeles and New York City (all 24%).

Emotional and Structural Barriers to American Career Advancement

Workers in the study shared that they struggled with emotional and structural barriers for advancing their careers during the pandemic.

The Emotional Barriers

The findings indicated that about 1 in 4 participants (25%) experience emotional barriers to career advancement such as low self-confidence and fear of change. Workers in Washington D.C. were most affected in terms of low confidence for career advancement (34%) and other emotional barriers than the general population, as shown in Table 3. Workers in Dallas, Houston, and Sacramento (all 29%) experienced the highest percentage of fear of change as an emotional barrier to career advancement.

Table 3

Emotional Barriers to Career Advancement across Major U.S. Metropolitan Areas

Emotional Barriers	General Population	Metropolitan areas
Low self confidence	25%	Washington, D.C. (34%)
Fear of change	25%	Dallas, Houston, and Sacramento (29%)
Not knowing what to do in their career	24%	Washington, D.C. (33%)
Low focus/motivation	23%	Washington, D.C. (32%)
Feelings of hopelessness	20%	Washington, D.C. (30%)
Mental Health	19%	Washington, D.C. (24%)

Structural Barriers

The findings indicated that about 1 in 4 (24%) participants in the metropolitan areas do not have enough education and lack opportunities to upskill themselves to advance their careers. Sacramento and Dallas (both 30%) indicated the highest percentage for these barriers. Table 4 shows all barriers and metropolitan areas where workers reported the highest percentages of these barriers.

Table 4

Structural Career Advancement Barriers across the U.S. Major Metropolitan Areas

Structural Barriers	General Population	Metropolitan areas
Not having enough education	24%	Sacramento (26%)
Lack of opportunities for upskilling	24%	Dallas and Sacramento (30%)
Lack of required skills	22%	Seattle and Sacramento (24%)
Lack of time/schedule flexibility	21%	Washington, D.C. (27%)
Financial Problems	21%	Miami (27%)
Lack of mentorship/advocacy	20%	Sacramento (32%)

The American Career Future Perspective

About 78% of the participants were hopeful about the future of their careers. Workers in Los Angles, Seattle, Atlanta, Houston (all 82%) have the highest hope while workers in Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago (all 75%) have the lowest hope for their future careers.

Resources and Supports Needed for Career Advancement Across Metropolitan Areas

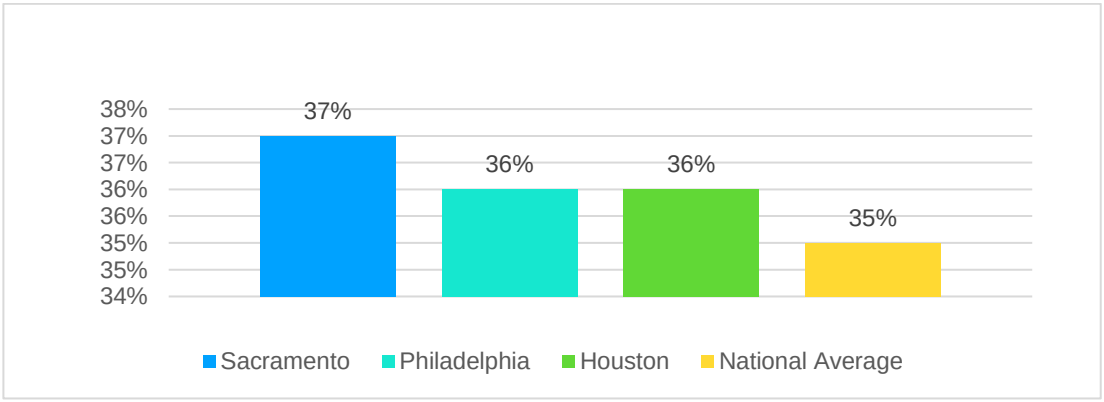
The American workers shared their essential needs and types of support necessary to achieve their career goals.

The Need for New Skill Development and Support

About 35% of participants in all metropolitan areas shared that they don't have access to opportunities to develop new skills. Sacramento (37%) shows the highest percentage of lack of access to resources for new skill development as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

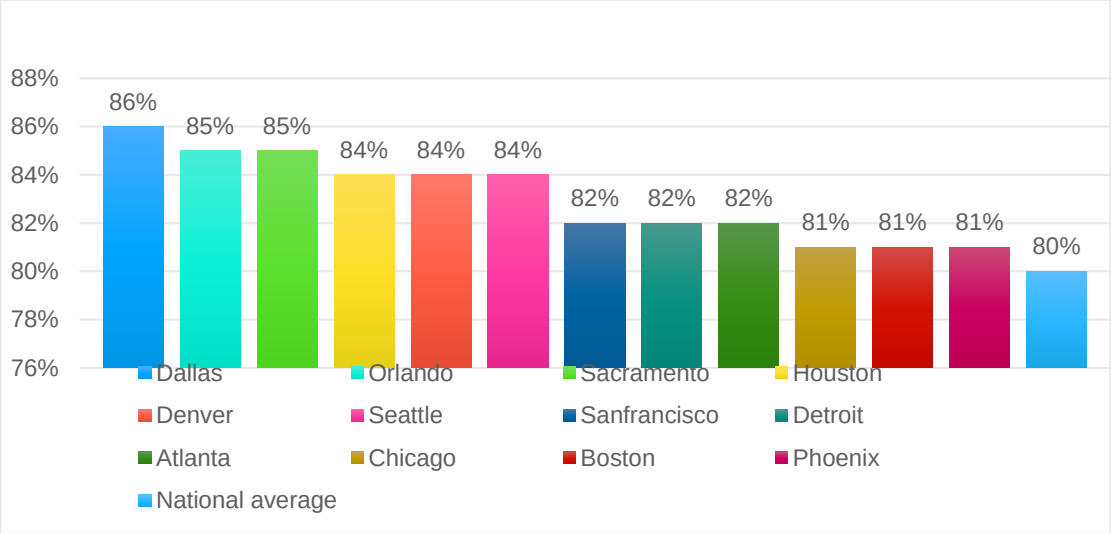
Lack of access to Opportunities to Develop New Skills across the U.S. Major Metropolitan Areas



Additionally, in some metropolitan areas, American workers are more interested in expanding their skills to advance their careers such as Dallas (86%), Orlando and Sacramento (both 85%), while the national average is 80% as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Interest for Developing New Skills across the Major U.S. Metropolitan Areas

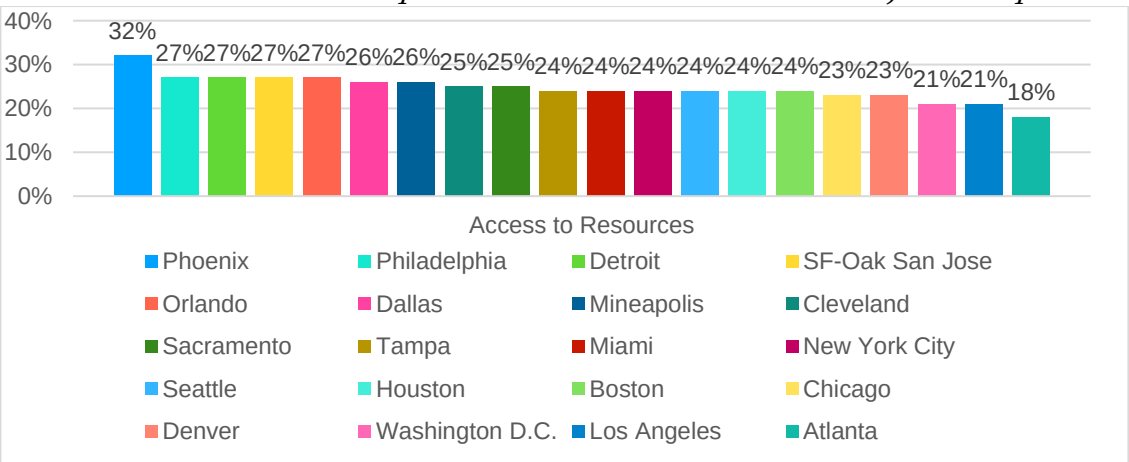


The Need for Resources to Achieve Career Goals

About 27% of participants indicated that they don't have access to the right resources to achieve their career goals. Phoenix (32%) has the highest need along with Philadelphia, Detroit, San Francisco, San Jose, and Orlando (all 27%) while Atlanta (18%) has the lowest need as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5

Need to Access Career Development Resources Across the U.S. Major Metropolitan Areas



Types of Career Support Needed

The needed career supports that more than 50% of participants selected include (a) connecting with others in desired field (55%), (b) finding a mentor/advocate (54%), (c) seeking out training programs (52%) which increased +44pt since the last year, and (d) creating/updating resume (50%). Washington D.C. has the highest need in all these four types of supports as shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Career Supports and the U.S. Major Metropolitan Areas

Type of Support	General Population	Metropolitan area
Connecting with others in my field/desire field	55%	Washington, D.C. (66%)
Finding a mentor/advocate	54%	Washington, D.C. (63%)
Seeking out training programs	52%	Washington, D.C. (60%)
Creating/updating resume	50%	Washington, D.C., Chicago (56%)
Seeking out education programs	49%	Sacramento (51%)
Interviewing for job	48%	Washington, D.C. (57%)
Finding job postings	42%	Washington, D.C., Orlando (45%)
Creating/updating LinkedIn profile	40%	Washington, D.C., Chicago (47%)
Applying for a job	38%	Washington, D.C. (48%)

Summary and Conclusion

In the aftermath of the pandemic, higher education institutions and specifically practitioner oriented higher institutions should carefully examine the current status of American careers and modify their programs to support American workers in overcoming these challenges. The purpose of this paper was to shed light on the current status of American workers' careers impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resources needed to support American workers to rise above the current challenges. Accordingly, the summarized findings for addressing the main four research questions of this paper are provided below.

The Career Landscape of American Workers

The pandemic strained American workers' career and life in various U.S. metropolitan areas differently. The work environment of about 68% of American workers switched to home while in Detroit and Cleveland (83%) the impact is higher. This calls for providing remote working support and training for the impacted workers. In the Bay Area (41%) and Miami (40%) participants reported that their careers were

derailed the most as compared to the national average of 34% of the population who experiences career derailment, which calls for additional support for these metropolitan areas. Work and life balance of more than half of the participating American workers (51%) were disturbed by the pandemic while Miami, New York City, Houston, and Bay area had higher work-life balance disruption.

Career Barriers Faced by American Workers

The findings revealed emotional and structural barriers to career advancement in the American workforce. The structural barriers in the order of participants' selection include (a) not having enough education, (b) lack of opportunities, lack of required skills, (c) lack of time/schedule flexibility, (d) financial problems, and (e) lack of mentorship/advocacy. The emotional barriers in the order of participants' selection include (a) lows self-confidence, (b) fear of change, (c) not knowing what to do in their career, (d) low focus/motivation, (e) feelings of hopelessness, and (f) mental health. About 1 in 4 American workers struggled with these career barriers. Low-confidence and fear of change were the highest reported emotional barriers. Workers in Washington D.C. (30-34%) shared a higher percentage of these barriers. The top two structural barriers were lack of enough education and lack of opportunities for upskilling. Workers in Sacramento and Dallas (both 30%) had the highest percentage of these two structural barriers as well as the emotional barrier of fear of career change. These findings require providing training opportunities for all workers but specifically for the metropolitan areas where higher numbers of workers reported barriers.

Career Trajectories of American Workers

Despite all the barriers, the majority of American workers (78%) were hopeful and shared a positive perspective toward their future careers. Workers in Los Angles, Seattle, Atlanta, and Houston (all 82%) reported the highest rates of hopefulness regarding their future career trajectories.

How American Workers Rise; Essential Support and Resources

A critical purpose of reviewing these findings was to understand how higher education institutions can help American workers overcome their career barriers by learning about their needs and providing supports. While the majority of American workers (80%) are interested in expanding new skills, about 35% do not have access to opportunities for upskilling. Workers in Sacramento are in higher need (37%) than the national average in this regard. Additionally, more than 1 in 4 American workers indicated that they do not have access to resources to achieve their careers. A higher percentage of workers in Phoenix indicated that they have this problem.

The type of resources needed that the majority of the participants suggested include: (a) connecting with others in desired field (55%), (b) finding a mentor/advocate (54%), (c) seeking out training programs (52%), and (d) creating/updating resume (50%). Washington D.C. has a higher percentage of need for all these requested resources. Trainings and supports corresponding with these requested resources can be provided to address workers' needs and help them rise above their current career challenges. It is critical to provide

short-length trainings that support workers in enhancing new marketable skills quickly. The trainings and supports should be adjusted based on the metropolitan areas' needs discussed in this paper.

It is hoped that the analysis of findings and discussion provide deeper insights into American workers' career status, challenges, and needs so that U.S. higher education institutions can more effectively support them.

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