ALIGNMENT OF POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Introduction

- The focus of the study is to:
  - determine whether a formal alignment mechanism exists in Connecticut to match the production of skilled graduates from the state's higher education institutions with the current and projected workforce needs of the state's employers.
  - assess current workforce supply and employer needs, and review whether pathways exist for technical high school graduates to pursue postsecondary education certificates and degrees.
- There are many external factors that impact the alignment of postsecondary education and employment including demographic trends and the economy.
- Executive and legislative branch initiatives to better coordinate postsecondary education with workforce development can be traced back to the early 1980s and has been a persistent concern of policymakers.

Section I: What is the Current and Near Future Workforce Supply in Connecticut?

- Less than five percent are working in the computer and mathematical, and architecture and engineering occupational sectors—key areas for the new global economy.
- In general, New England states have had older populations than the rest of the United States for almost the last 30 years.
  - Although the relatively older median age of Connecticut citizens is not a new development, its impact on the proportion of the state's working age population still needs to be examined.
- Connecticut's increase in the award of bachelor's degrees outpaces national trends. However, compared with the U.S., Connecticut has made less progress in awarding associate's degrees (with a 14 percent decrease in Connecticut between FY 01 and FY 06).
- Approximately 81 percent of working age residents are actually in the labor force and of those, two-thirds (66 percent) have at least some college.
- Between 2004 and 2008, the percent of Connecticut high school graduates planning

to attend college has fluctuated narrowly between 78-80 percent.

- Approximately 85 percent of the students at Connecticut's public colleges, and 45 percent of students at Connecticut's independent colleges, are Connecticut residents.
    - It is estimated that just 20 percent of those who migrated to New England to attend college were still living there one year after graduation, while over 90 percent of native graduates remain.

Section II: What is the Employer Demand?

- While many of the technologically advanced jobs in today's economy require a college degree or certificate, most jobs in demand (74 percent) do not require any postsecondary education.
- Employer demand for workers with postsecondary education is greatest in the following major occupational groups:
    - Healthcare (especially registered nurses)
    - Computer/math/science
    - Business/financial (especially accountants and auditors)
    - Management
    - Community/social services (especially child, family, and school social workers)

Section III: Are Supply and Demand Aligned?

- There is evidence of *alignment* of postsecondary education and employment for several occupations (e.g., registered nurses, occupational therapists, and actuaries).
- There is evidence of an *undersupply* of college graduates to meet the demand for several occupations (e.g., veterinarian technologists and technicians, industrial engineers, and special education teachers).
- There is evidence of an *oversupply* of college graduates to meet the demand for several occupations (e.g., licensed practical nurses, lawyers, and elementary school teachers).
- All Connecticut employer needs do not have to be met by graduates from state postsecondary education institutions (e.g., veterinarians).
- Regardless of occupation, increasing the percent of students who complete their degrees and certificates — especially at the community college level — will better meet overall employer demand for a skilled and knowledgeable workforce.

Section IV: Connecticut's Higher Education System

- Connecticut has 18 public degree-granting institutions and 29 independent colleges and universities, with approximately 185,000 students.
- The Board of Governors for Higher Education (BGHE) is the central policy-making authority for public higher education in Connecticut and serves as a coordinating body for all of the public and independent colleges, universities, and postsecondary institutions of Connecticut.
- The Department of Higher Education is the administrative arm of BGHE.
- The public system of higher education is organized into four constituent units, each with its own board of trustees including University of Connecticut; the Connecticut State University System; the Connecticut Community College System; and State Academic Awards.
- Although BGHE presents a single consolidated budget compiled from those submitted by the constituent units, it has only review and comment authority.
    - Legislative appropriations are made directly to each constituent unit's board of trustees.
    - Each board has jurisdiction over its respective college or university system and makes policy and budgetary decisions regarding its system.
- State law has supported postsecondary and workforce alignment efforts by creating statutory incentives for student loan incentive and post-graduate loan forgiveness programs.
    - Although many of these types of programs either exist in statute or federal grants are used for funding, they are usually considered pilot programs and continued funding of them has not always occurred.

Section V: Linking the Postsecondary Education System to Employer Need

- The current state organizational structure to facilitate the coordination of postsecondary education with workforce development issues involves a myriad of agencies, boards, higher education institutions, offices, councils, and commissions.
    - Some have overlapping responsibilities, but there is no single entity with authority to implement across-the-board strategies, policies, or programs.

Key Points

- Existing and proposed coordinating bodies:
  - Per Executive Order No. 14 established:
    - The Office of Workforce Competiveness to focus on the need to prepare the state's workforce for the new century. The office director serves as the governor's principal workforce development policy advisor.
    - The Governor's JOBs Cabinet to explore, identify, and report on policies and actions necessary to ensure that Connecticut leads the nation in building a trained and employed workforce.
  - Per Executive Order No 2A:
    - Eliminated the Governor's Job Cabinet.
    - Established The Connecticut Commission for the Advancement of 21st Century Skills and Careers (informally called the P-20 Commission), which is chaired by the commissioners of SDE and DHE, and charged with developing a policy framework and other strategies to create an effective education and career pipeline.
  - The Connecticut General Assembly adopted legislation in 2007 establishing a 36-member Blue Ribbon Task Force to develop and implement a strategic master plan for higher education in Connecticut. It has never been constituted.
  - A Workforce and Education Cabinet was recently proposed in the new Economic Strategic Plan released by the governor in September 2009 and charged with overseeing strategies to ensure the state remains competitive by growing talent and being prepared for the technological jobs of the future.
- The Connecticut Employment and Training Commission is the governor's principal policy board for workforce investment – the education, training, and retraining of the current and future workforce – and much of its focus is on funding training and employment programs through grants provided under the federal Workforce Investment Act of 1998.
- In addition to efforts by policymakers to require alignment through legislation, there are also numerous linkages that exist outside of the statutes between independent postsecondary institutions, business organizations, and individual employers.

Section VI: What are Some Possible Barriers to Alignment?

- Barriers Related to Elementary and Secondary School Students:
  - Connecticut fourth and eighth graders do not score as well in science, math and reading as students in other New England states.
  - An increasing number of Connecticut youth reside in urban, low-income settings.
    - In 2007, Connecticut had the widest gap between higher- and lower-income students in the entire country.
- Barriers Related to Postsecondary Education Institutions:
  - An increasing number of new college students are unprepared for college-level work and are enrolled in remedial or developmental courses.
    - Recent figures from community colleges indicate less than half of students are passing remedial or developmental math courses.
  - Despite the increase in enrollment, the annual completion rate for community college degrees and certificates continues to remain below 10 percent.
- Difficulty in Making Accurate Demand Projections:
  - In general, the ability to forecast 10 years out the types of jobs that will be available in the future is limited.
  - There may also be a lack of awareness of these projections, or limited use of projections by postsecondary education institutions and students.
- Current Economic Challenges:
  - Current economic conditions may be impacting college enrollment and decisions of high school students to attend in-state or out-of-state, and to begin postsecondary education at the less-expensive community college versus the four-year state university.
  - Since more people with bachelor degrees are moving into Connecticut than out of Connecticut, and increasingly more Connecticut high school graduates are choosing to attend college in-state, it is questionable whether "brain-drain" is an issue for Connecticut.

Key Points

- Barriers Related to State Agency Organization, Programs, and Policies:
  - Connecticut's system for public higher education is very *decentralized.* Consequently, decisions are often made from the bottom up - at the individual college or constituent unit level - rather than in a centralized manner that makes strategies uniform across all colleges.
  - Another potential organizational barrier is that separate boards of trustees rather than BGHE make budgetary allocation decisions once funds have been appropriated by the legislature. This gives those boards of trustees ultimate authority over a wide range of decisions.
  - Colleges are funded according to enrollment figures rather than outcomes, such as degree and certification completion rates. With little budgetary focus on outcomes, the completion rates, particularly within the community college system, are quite low.
    - Further, a policy of adding or dropping college programs based on enrollment figures rather than employer needs, makes the alignment of postsecondary education and employer needs challenging.
  - A *high level of coordination is needed* across the multiple boards and state agencies that have a variety of responsibilities.
  - Higher education is increasingly being asked to provide non-academic support services to students, particularly within the community college system. It is unclear whether public higher education is willing to provide these supports to students to help them stay in college.