

Written Testimony
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I am pleased to have the opportunity to provide commentary on the issue of how constituents can take advantage of what higher education has to offer in partnership with workforce initiatives. As president of Lackawanna College for over sixteen years, I have witnessed remarkable changes in both higher education standards, and those of an evolving workforce, both nationally and in the region of Northeastern Pennsylvania.

One of the unique aspects of education in Northeastern Pennsylvania has been the establishment of NEPACU (Northeastern Pennsylvania Association of Colleges and Universities). NEPACU is the cooperative consortium of 16 Colleges and universities that work together to provide a wide array of offerings that prepare our students to work in the many fields of opportunity that are always evolving. Each of us has offerings that vary, including certificate programs, undergraduate programs, Master's and Doctoral programs.

Despite the abundance of educational opportunity available in Northeastern Pennsylvania, only approximately half of the local population pursues higher education, which irrefutably enhances the quality of any workforce. The concept of "brain drain" continues to be an issue in our region, which basically means that our own students seek education elsewhere, while our own colleges and universities attract students from other parts of the country – especially Southeastern PA, New York and New Jersey – who, in turn generally leave our region upon graduation.

So the one challenge NEPACU continues to put forth to the community of Northeast Pennsylvania is: No matter what an individual's interests are, one of our colleges or universities can meet his or her educational needs, whether one is a new high school graduate or adult learner seeking new employment or career change. Of course, I can only speak to Lackawanna College's involvement in training the workforce, not because we are unique, but because with the efficient use of federal and state aid, combined with the business community's assistance, we have been able to design programs quickly - and ensure they are affordable.

Several years ago, Lackawanna College, along with the joint Chambers of Commerce (Scranton and Wilkes-Barre) surveyed business and industry in an attempt to understand what their needs were. In the beginning, the equation was simple. Students coming out of high school, and later, adult learners returning to the workforce needed to be trained up to a simple standard: math – reading – English – teamwork. From those early beginnings, a joint program was created between Lackawanna College, the Scranton Chamber and Johnson College. Using Workforce Investment dollars, we developed a program to train electricians for Tobyhanna Depot, and pneumatic control technicians for the many defense industries who were desperately short of workers with such skills.

We subsequently designed special programs for displaced workers, and created an Allied Health Program that trains vascular technicians, sonographers, cardiac sonographers, surgical technicians, nurse aids and even paramedics to meet demands. To illustrate our success, consider that 100% of our Nurse Aid students have passed their license examinations, with 100% job placement upon completion of the program.

Most recently as 5 years ago, in anticipation of the growth in the Marcellus Shale gas opportunity, we designed a gas field management program. Our first class will graduate in May, and each of the 25 students has already served a paid internship on local drilling rigs. We have added a second class, and there is currently a waiting list of students for the following year.

Just this week, Lackawanna College was approved by the Department of Education to start a gas compressor technician program that will come on line this fall. This is another example of workforce related education, born of industry demand.

And an additional example of our ability to address local workforce opportunity is our certificate and Associate's degree programs for Entrepreneurship. As the Marcellus shale industry has taken off so rapidly, so have entrepreneurial business opportunities in order to serve the hundreds of gas and pipeline workers who have flooded the region: catering, laundry services, lodging, etc. One component we are addressing with this program includes training of veterans, both disabled and recently returning from deployment. Lackawanna College has received national recognition as a "Military Friendly College."

We have in the past taken advantage of trade relocation dollars, Appalachian Regional Control Programs, and Department of Education Programs to retrain workers who are trying to improve their skills or just need a job.

Lackawanna College is a private, accredited, two year, Associate's degree awarding institution with one main campus in Scranton, and four satellite centers in Hazleton, Towanda, New Milford and Lake Region (Hawley, PA). We also offer several continuing education programs, certificate programs and enrichment and workforce training programs. In two of our locations (Scranton and Hazleton), we maintain a Police Academy, which offers Act 120 certification and other law enforcement training.

Originally established as a business school designed to support local industry in 1894, the college has continued to play a unique role in the ever evolving needs of the regional workforce. In the last decade, enrollment has more than doubled, largely due to our establishment of multiple programs that address the needs of the growth sectors of the workforce. Offering students the option of a traditional education leading to a four year degree, or a specialized education focused on a specific vocation has been the hallmark of our growth and success. With an enrollment of approximately 2,200 full and part time students, we consider our diversity and agility to respond to workforce needs as an educational niche in our region.

In light of the recent threats on the state and federal levels to cut funding to education, I respectfully ask this committee to consider colleges similar to Lackawanna College as stellar examples of success in education, leading to tangible employment. For the majority of our students, Lackawanna College provides the foundation for a continued education, whether it is a four year degree or specialization. An example: many of our criminal justice students pursue Act 120 certification upon earning their degree, and vice versa.

Over 80% of our students are first generation college students. Lackawanna College has the most diverse student population in Lackawanna County, and with the exception of other regional community colleges, it provides the most affordable tuition available. We are committed, despite funding cuts in financial aid, to no increase in tuition for the 2011-2012 academic year. This comes at considerable expense to the college and its employees, but we remain cognizant of our mission and commitment to our own constituents – our students.

Another reason for our growth has been the improvement in our transfer credit acceptance, and our establishment of several articulation agreements with other colleges and universities, including the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education and Misericordia University. We continue to seek additional partnerships, both with other colleges and universities, and with regional workforce agencies.

Higher education is at a palpable crossroad. The value of a two year degree is ever increasing for obvious workforce related reasons. Partnering with business has always been the strength of two year colleges, and particularly in NEPA, the hallmark of Lackawanna College. Despite the inevitable funding cuts to education, I implore this committee to judge the merits of community and private two year colleges, and the effects any cuts will have on the students themselves, and their access to viable employment.

I could go on about how much success we all have had in making Northeastern, PA a place where opportunity meets preparation but I believe if you speak to the employers of our students, they will tell you that what we are doing works effectively. Thank you for the opportunity to communicate the importance of Lackawanna College in our community.