

The Importance of Well Informed High School and Post Secondary Education and Training Choices

Testimony Offered May 28, 2014 by Laura S. Fisher
Senior Vice President, Workplace, Allegheny Conference on Community Development

The resilience of southwestern Pennsylvania's economy during the Great Recession, even as other parts of the country have stagnated, has garnered national recognition. Thirty years after the collapse of the steel industry we have a very diverse economy with no sector comprising more than 22%. The unemployment rate in the Pittsburgh region has consistently remained lower than the national average.

Right now, the job aggregator on ImaginePittsburgh.com shows more than 20,000 open jobs in our ten-county region, with an unemployment rate below 6%. Our challenge is that we know many of these open jobs require skills that our residents simply don't have, and the increasing pace of innovation means that so-called "basic skills" will become increasingly sophisticated. Employers frequently tell us that they are worried about being able to fill the jobs they are creating. Some employers in our region are actually turning away new business because of their uncertainty about the talent they need.

Aggravating this supply and demand mismatch is the fact that we have the oldest working population in the county, and because of the lack of growth during the 1980s and 1990s, the talent pipeline is thinner than that in other regions. In our 2012 *Energy Occupational Analysis*, undertaken in partnership with Development Dimensions International, employers stated that they felt confident they could find only one in five of the suitably skilled workers they will need between now and 2020.

The energy analysis identified 14 high demand occupations common to most (and in some cases all) energy and related manufacturing sectors. Importantly, there is strong and continuing demand for jobs that require many different levels of education: certification, two year and four year degrees. Too often young people are told that there is a permanent fork in the road as they finish high school: college or no college. This construct is as outdated as many people's images of energy and manufacturing jobs, and it is a singularly deleterious message.

For our region's businesses to continue to thrive, our education system must adapt to the changing needs of employers, and also to the rapid pace of change in the economy in which we live. All children need to complete high school and they also need additional education and training, no matter what occupation they may pursue. They also need to leave high school with more than competencies in reading, writing and mathematics. Computer science is the foundation of innovation in every enterprise, but employers tell us that frequently the young people they hire are great with handheld devices and social media, but really don't know anything about IT.

A study issued by Harvard's Graduate School of Education documented the importance of all students having both academic and technical skills, not the either/or that is so often promulgated.

This morning I'd like to suggest just two key ways by which we can begin to effect how we prepare our children for productive lives and careers.

1. Provide students with a range of education paths

Numerous regional and national education and workforce studies have stressed a new reality: everyone in the workforce needs to be a lifelong learner. The pace of technological change means that the work we do, no matter the sector, will require concomitant new skills from each of us in order to remain productive. There are now more pathways to achieve that continued productivity and agility, from e-learning to four and post-graduate study, community colleges, technical colleges, and employer sponsored training. Many people refer to these multiple pathways as creating many "on and off ramps," and our schools need to be sure they are part of these new circulation pathways.

Despite the demonstrated demand for graduates trained and certified in technical fields, many school districts are reluctant to recommend CTE to their best students. Teachers and counselors are pressured – often by parents and school boards – to steer students away from technical education, and toward four year degrees from the outset, even if the field of study or interest is not yet defined. Post secondary choices need to be as well informed as possible. The opportunity to attend college and graduate with a BA or BS degree has been fundamental to this country's growth and prosperity, and so have been the CTE programs that have provided family sustaining wages to millions. The headline here is that what once required only a high school degree and short term training now requires far more advanced skills. That means a much wider range of opportunity to all if we equip all students with academic and technical competency.

2. Create one system that connects K-12 with Higher Education

Integrated programming between CTCs, community colleges and four-year colleges is one of the best ways to build strong skills in our students, and provide them with a range of educational and career paths. One effective way to create this continuity between secondary and post-secondary programs is through articulation agreements in which course credits are transferable across institutions. Similarly, dual enrollment programs, in which high school students take college classes, have been shown to increase the likelihood of pursuing post-secondary degrees and improve students' first semester grades. These portable credentials give students more flexibility and more opportunity.

Unfortunately, while such agreements exist between many schools, it is mostly on a piecemeal basis. The lack of articulation agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions

in Pennsylvania is particularly notable. This is due in no small part to the reduction or elimination of federal funding that supported these types of activities. There are also many administrative barriers to the collaboration between high schools and post-secondary schools, including state mandates about teacher certification. It is important that the state government consider secondary and post-secondary education as a coordinated system, not as separate systems.

At the same time, in order to build a broad system of articulation agreements between CTCs, Community Colleges and the PASSHE schools, we need to consider the pressures created by current funding models. Because dual enrollment and other credit transferring arrangements lead to reduced tuition revenue for the participating higher education institutions, it can disincentivize such programs. To build a more connected we need to recognize these constraints and provide supports for schools that are willing to offer students those opportunities.

Rising education costs, shrinking public resources, the clear evidence of a skills gap and a shift toward growth in middle skill jobs suggest now is a good time to proactively realign our education and workforce systems to meet the 21st century economy. We must embrace the many possible paths to career success, and give our students real information and real choices about the skills and education they can achieve. We must foster meaningful relationships between schools and businesses so that education is aligned with the needs of the job market. And finally, we must begin to consider secondary and post-secondary education as a coordinated system, not purely separate entities, and make sure that state regulations don't stand in the way of important educational innovations.