

# Reversing the State's "Brain Drain"

RONALD J. PUGLIESE  
CSUS BOARD OF TRUSTEES



**T**he *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported recently that Connecticut is the fourth largest net exporter of students entering college among the nation's 50 states. There is a gap of more than 6,000 students between those leaving our state to start college and those coming in.

We must work to reverse this trend while recognizing the state's changing demographics and ensuring that a college education is within the reach of more young people. Fortunately, there are some encouraging trends.

The number of transfer students entering the Connecticut State University System (CSUS) – which includes Central, Eastern, Southern and Western Connecticut State universities – has increased 23 percent since 2001, and set an all-time record in 2008. Significantly, just over 1,000 students transferred into the CSUS universities from out-of-state colleges a year ago, with three out of four being Connecticut residents.

Since nearly nine of 10 CSUS graduates stay in Connecticut after graduation, those returning students are likely to enter the state's workforce, which is clearly good news. They were likely attracted back for a variety of factors, including affordability in the midst of an economic downturn and

the increasingly recognized high quality of education being provided in a growing number of academic fields.

Central, Eastern, Southern and Western are working more closely with businesses, responding to their need for well-prepared graduates possessing analytical as well as technical skills. New programs have been initiated in the engineering, nursing, and environmental management fields; these also have an impact on potential students, both transfers and incoming freshmen.

The Connecticut Economic Strategic Plan, unveiled last month by the Department of Economic and Community Development, stated that "more than a third (34 percent) of Connecticut's job openings in the next 10 years requires post-secondary education, while 38 percent require short-term on-the-job training."

The report noted that the difference in wages in those two categories "is almost \$20 per hour," concluding that "the incentive to pursue higher education is clear, yet there is still a gap in Connecticut minority achievement."

Those observations are not lost on CSUS, or Connecticut students. Since 2003, retention rates for Hispanic and African American students have each grown by 8 percent, and the graduation rate for Hispanic stu-

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dents has increased 14 percent during the past five years.

Increasingly, students are majoring in programs with an eye towards job prospects after graduation. In fact, the number of accounting majors moved up from eighth to sixth place among degree recipients across the four universities last year. Marketing, a key ingredient for both businesses and non-profit organizations, broke into the top 10 for the first time, at number 10.

At both Southern and Eastern, business administration was the top major; at Western, management topped the list; and at Central, accounting was the second most popular.

Satisfaction with the education attained could barely be higher. In a survey of 2008 graduates - the most recent data available - 96 percent said they were satisfied, or very satisfied, with their university experience. More than nine in ten said they would recommend their university to a potential student.

Applications for the current academic year were up 11 percent from the previous year, following an 18 percent increase over the previous four years. The number of full-time undergraduates and full-time graduate students both reached all-time highs this year.

Across the four universities, 93 percent of CSUS students are from Connecticut, and although students from across the nation and around the world attend each of the universities, the focus is on Connecticut students first and foremost.

Last year the number of Western students attending classes in Waterbury grew considerably, with attendance in the business management program increasing by 6.8 percent and the RN to BS nursing program by more than 40 percent.

There remains much to do, and if we are to ensure a strong economic future, higher education is fundamental.

The good news is that with concerted and collaborative efforts, building on progress already in evidence, the numbers in the years ahead can tell the story of a resurgent and reinvigorated Connecticut.

■ *Ronald J. Pugliese of Southbury has served on the Board of Trustees for the Connecticut State University System since 1997. He is an alumnus of Western Connecticut State University.*

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