

Higher Education Can Drive Economic Growth

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There is a tendency to equate economic development with research universities and the environment for innovation and technology development they represent. That is the promise offered by Jackson Laboratory's commitment to Connecticut and the bioscience initiative which led to it. I worked with Jackson extensively as president of the University of Maine, and the potential of this initiative is enormous.

There is, however, more to be done if a state's education system is to respond to economic need.

Since arriving in Connecticut last month, I am learning the state has tremendous business, education and community assets. What we need to do more of is break down the silos – between individual institutions and between higher education and business. That is why the state's higher education reorganization under a Board of Regents – which brings together four state universities (Central, Eastern, Southern, Western), 12 state colleges and online Charter Oak State College - has so much potential.

Academia's greatest contribution to economic development is in the graduates we produce. That is as true for the 17 institutions under the aegis of the new Board of Regents as it is for any research institution.

The sheer numbers of the Board of Regents

institutions – with more than 95,000 students – tell a compelling story:

- About six out of 10 students graduating from high school going on to attend college in Connecticut attend one of these 17 institutions. Importantly, more than 90 percent stay here after earning their degree.
- More than 14,000 degrees and certificates were granted last year to individuals completing a course of study, who then took that credential and accumulated knowledge into the workforce. (An increase of 2,000 from five years ago.)
- Many pursue what is described as “middle-skill jobs,” which are the backbone of Connecticut's economy - jobs that generally cannot be outsourced and which keep our economy humming.

Board of Regents institutions are the preeminent jobs pathway for students seeking post-secondary education who intend to stay and work here. The impact of these 17 institutions is too often overshadowed or underestimated. We are hoping to change that by reducing redundancies and developing synergies to be more effective for our students and state, and we have started this process.

We also must be cognizant of Connecticut's changing demographics and the accompanying challenges and opportunities. As Bill Gates

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once said, “success in this century will depend on how well America does what we have so far done very badly – give low-income and minority students a world-class education.” Recent data on student enrollment from Connecticut’s cities is somewhat encouraging, but only a beginning.

The intellectual capacity and creativity of faculty, staff and students in the Board of Regents institutions is considerable. Now, we must more fully capitalize on that potential. Ours must be a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach working from elementary school onward, with community-based organizations, nonprofits and local organizations – businesses and otherwise – for whom the caliber of our graduates is the highest of priorities.

The Board of Regents includes, as ex-officio members, the state Commissioners of Economic and Community Development, Education, Labor, and Public Health – specifically to heighten the level of collaboration and coordination in economic and education policy.

Today, job openings don’t necessarily match with graduates. There has been a national trend away from practical skills – such as manufacturing – in favor of basic liberal education. We need both.

To address the mismatch, we must examine the academic programs of these public institutions

for how well they prepare their students for careers and the needs of the state.

There is extraordinary potential here, and pockets of excellence to build on. The organization of economic/business clusters in Connecticut is as impressive as any I have seen in the nation. But we must develop stronger and new alliances. We must scale up programs that are working – which is where the reorganization can be a huge plus.

We understand that businesses need individuals with critical thinking skills, the agility to adapt rapidly, and the technical know-how to contribute from day one.

That is why we need to look ahead - to learn from the past but not dwell on it. As hockey great Wayne Gretsky put it: “I skate to where the puck is going to be, not where it has been.”

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