

Senate Education Committee

Public Hearing on Senate Bill 1000 – Rural Regional Community College

Testimony of Susan Snelick

October 2, 2013

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of Senate Bill 1000, the Rural Community College Program for Underserved Counties. I am Susan Snelick, Director of the North Central Workforce Investment Board. I represent one of 23 Workforce Investment Areas across the Commonwealth and six out of the eleven counties designated in this bill. Our core mission is to ensure that our business and industry have an educated and skilled workforce in order to remain competitive in the 21st century. It is my belief that Senate Bill 1000 will help us accomplish this goal and will ensure our regional economy continues to grow and prosper. The focus of my testimony will center on the workforce needs not only of our state but of the nation. The needs we will discuss today aren't contained within county walls but extend out into every community across the country. The opportunity presented to us through this bill could position Pennsylvania as a leader amongst states by taking real steps to address these very real issues.

One major issue is a growing middle skills (technical skills) gap. According to the National Skills Coalition the definition of a "middle-skilled job" is one that requires training beyond high school, but not a four-year degree. The Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce in their report "Recovery - Job Growth and Education Requirements through 2020" states that by 2020, 65 percent of all jobs in the economy will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school. According to the study 35% of the job openings will require at least a bachelor's degree; 30 percent will require some college or an associate's degree; and 36 percent will not require education beyond high school. You can see how this has changed over the years and the need for education beyond high school is now more of a necessity than ever. According to the Pathways to Prosperity Project Report from the Harvard Graduate School of Education since 1973 jobs that require at least some college have exploded while opportunities for those with just a high school education have shrunk dramatically. Specifically the report cites that in 1973 72% of all workers had a high school diploma or less compared to 41% in 2007. In addition this report also states that in 1973 only 12% of all jobs required an associate degree as compared to 27% in 2007 of some college and an associate degree.

Middle-skilled occupations are increasing, particularly in the advanced manufacturing and healthcare sectors. According to a joint report of the Northwest and North Central WIB technical training, certifications, and associate's degree programs meet the skill needs found in a growing number of job openings. Employers stress their fears that they anticipate losing many skilled workers over the next decade due to retirements. An aging workforce contributes to the current and looming gaps between their entry-level and highly-skilled workforce.

According to the Georgetown Report by 2020 there will be 55 million job openings: 24 million from newly created jobs and 31 million openings due to baby boomer retirements.

The North Central Workforce Investment Board has had a growing concern over the accessibility and affordability of post-secondary education in our region for many years. In 2005 the Board contracted with World-Class Industrial Network, LLC to complete an analysis of the Regional Workforce Development System. This study identified that our region does have the infrastructure in place with seven technical and vocational technical schools, ten middle schools, twelve high schools, fourteen junior highs, and fifty-three elementary schools. In addition there are a number of post-secondary providers and PA CareerLink® centers that could collaborate with the Regional Community College for space and services. In fact one recommendation from the study was “that a larger managed portfolio of such efforts might in fact be run as a Virtual Community College” much like is being suggested here today.

Another glaring concern cited in this report was in regard to the affordability of post-secondary education. According to this study our PA rural counties attribute a much greater percentage of mean earnings as well as mean household income in comparison to the state average and PA urban counties; with the highest percentages Clearfield at almost 32% of mean earnings and Cameron at almost 19% mean household income. The state average was at 23% of mean earnings and just under 14% of mean household income with PA urban counties at 22% and 13% respectively. The Regional Community College will lessen the burden on our citizens with tuition not to exceed the Pennsylvania in-resident community college average as stated in the bill; therefore, giving many more individuals the opportunity to participate in education in our region.

I will end with an excerpt from our joint report with the Northwest WIB: Our shared vision for community college training breaks down silos and barriers to access, capitalizing on our existing resources where possible to avoid duplication and direct funds for the types of training that are in highest current or projected demand by local employers. Strong partnerships with employers, existing educational entities and one-stop PA CareerLink® providers are a high priority so we may leverage our investments to benefit all rural residents.

As the Budget and Finance Committee report notes, only 37 percent of rural Pennsylvanians 25 and older have training beyond high school compared with 50 percent of non-rural Pennsylvanians. This is unacceptable and not sustainable to the future of our workforce. We are fully prepared to support efforts to bring affordable, accessible middle-skill training to our region – specifically through the Rural Regional Community College Pilot Program.