



## **REGIONAL ROUNDTABLE ON STUDENT RETENTION**

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### **Findings and Conclusions**

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## INTRODUCTION

On Thursday, February 2, 2012 representatives from 15 Connecticut public and private colleges and universities, the state Board of Regents, four community organizations and a foundation met at the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving to discuss the ongoing challenges associated with student retention and opportunities for addressing these challenges. Convened by the Hartford Consortium for Higher Education, leaders in academics, admissions and student services, outlined what they perceive as the current issues, identified some promising practices among institutions and entertained future action steps. While no definitive conclusions can be drawn, this preliminary dialogue among participants encouraged further exploration of both the problem and its solutions. The appendices to this report enumerate participating institutions (A), current state initiatives as outlined by Dr. Robert Kennedy, president Board of Regents (B); and some promising practices already underway at various participating institutions (C).

## KEYNOTE REMARKS

Dr. Robert Kennedy, President of the State Board of Regents, opened the proceedings. The Board of Regents succeeds the former Commission on Higher Education and is comprised of the 4 state universities, 12 community colleges and Charter Oak State College that enroll approximately 96,000 students as the largest higher education system in the state. In conjunction with the state Department of Education, the Board is responsible for publishing the P-20 Council report on postsecondary enrollment and degree completion among graduates of Connecticut public high schools. The formation of the "ConnSCU" system under the Board of Regents and the report, issued in December 2011, served as timely benchmarks for Dr. Kennedy's remarks.

He pointed out that one of the primary motivations for reorganizing the system was to send additional dollars to the campuses to spend on classroom instruction and to connect our community colleges and state universities in a way that had not been done before in Connecticut, and to reduce or eliminate the traditional educational "silos" that traditionally mark higher education. First steps at reorganization will result in about \$5.0 million a year diverted back to the campuses for faculty and student support service staff.

Turning to the findings in the P-20 Report, Dr. Kennedy highlighted some sobering statistics for the high school class graduating class of 2004 that served as the data benchmark:

- Two out of five (41 percent) public high school students in the class of 2004 completed at least one degree or certificate.
- **At least another third enrolled at a college or university during this period, but did not complete a credential.**
- And still another quarter (25%) was not found in the National Student Clearinghouse database, suggesting they did not enroll in a collegiate institution during those six years.

In 1990, Connecticut was #1 in the educational level of its workforce. By the time of the P-20 Report, Connecticut has dropped to the *bottom half* of states in the rate at which young adult educational attainment is

improving. Among 16 out of the 17 ConnSCU institutions in the report for the first-time, full-time class entering a Connecticut State University in Fall 2004 19% graduated from that CSU within 4 years and 46% graduated from that CSU within 6 years. For the first-time, full-time class entering a community college in Fall 2006 only 3% finished their degree from that institution in 2 years, 11% in 3 years, and 16% in 4 years. (Importantly about 60% of community college students attend part-time.) Most significantly, the report found a cohort beginning at state community colleges in which only 28% finished any degree or certificate from any institution anywhere in the U.S. in six years.

The question must then be posed: WHY are students not graduating with their degrees more quickly? Part-time work or other extra-curricular responsibilities account for an increasing share of the issue but the lack of a seamless transfer agreement is another and this latter issue is something we can clearly do something about. Students were often staying an extra semester or even an extra year, because they report issues with ease of credit transfer and lack of full-time, tenure track faculty on their campus, and the consequence of that in terms of advising, mentoring, extra help, etc. Most strikingly the ratio of students to counselors is often 1000:1; yet counselors are one of the most critical elements in student success. We also need the transfer process to be seamless.

Dr. Kennedy also addressed the related issues of remediation and admission standards: students should enter college prepared, and we must improve college readiness opportunities for those who are not. Teacher training programs must be more clinically-based; students who want to be teachers need to spend more time in the classroom, and that time should be early in their collegiate career so they know what path they are choosing. The state must also raise admissions standards for these teacher training programs. It can't all be based on GPA, but we should expect a healthy educational foundation from the people who want to teach our next generation. This is an area in which a strong, robust, and two-way partnership with the State Department of Education is critical, and the Board is engaged already in those discussions with SDE and others.

Another extremely important issue is student financial aid and the way it is distributed. A challenge exists in operationalizing college readiness and providing a mechanism whereby students can prepare without using up all of their federal financial aid eligibility on remedial courses before they even take a college course for credit. One possibility is to provide preparation programs that are not course-based and are offered each term. For example, Eastern Connecticut State University already has an innovative and successful program working with guidance counselors in the Hartford Public School System to identify students who wouldn't meet the admissions criteria at Eastern, but show a great deal of promise overall. Raising private funds for these students, Eastern houses them, and they take their remedial courses at Quinebaug Valley Community College, while taking other courses on the ECSU campus. Through this innovative program, students become fully integrated into a college experience they might otherwise not have.

Dr. Kennedy reported that 3 community colleges recently received funding to launch state-of-the-art manufacturing centers which should allow several hundred students to participate in these much-needed precision

manufacturing programs that align with emerging needs in STEM careers and are modeled on the successful program at Asnuntuck Community College. Centers at Naugatuck Valley CC, Housatonic and Quinebaug Valley not only will prepare students for a career in advanced manufacturing, but will partner with local industry to help ensure they are actually employed upon graduation. This program—funded by the legislature’s Jobs Bill from last October, is tremendously exciting for the state and it will be fun to watching them grow. The Board intends to consider what is working among programs like these — including Western Connecticut State University’s “Building a Bridge to Improve Student Success” with the Bethel and Danbury school systems, and expand these best practices to resolve this serious, longstanding challenge.

Lastly, Connecticut colleges and universities need to explore what has been done in other states to identify what’s working; for example, Tennessee and Kentucky are working toward ensuring that the high school graduation standard is the college entrance standard – the best case scenario is this regard.

Conversely many ConnSCU institutions are taking steps to improve retention, persistence and degree completion (Appendix B). But progress is not happening quickly enough. The Hartford metro area experienced a 4.2% increase in degree completion during the past 3 years, but the average increase for all metro areas was 8.1%. The state has to scale successful efforts quickly and be the state where innovation is the standard operational practice. Connecticut must education not just the top students, but all students. And, it must be the state where the expectation to go to college translates into the success of finishing college.

Parents and students alike in Connecticut must understand that the 17 ConnSCU institutions offer an accessible and affordable degree. It may not be what everyone is looking for, but we need to better market and communicate about ourselves to ensure people know it’s an option. Connecticut has a lot going for it, but we need to connect the dots and focus on cross-silo, cross-agency and cross-industry partnerships. We’ve already seen evidence that people here want to do that – increased collaboration helps all of those who are involved, among public and private institutions.

## **PLENARY SESSION – CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Dr. Kennedy’s opening remarks provided a springboard to the general discussion of issues facing both public and private colleges regarding student retention and degree completion. The group identified several critical areas/themes where challenges exist in retention:

- Gender differences among college students in terms of their needs and expectations
- The special experience of “first-gens” that are first in the family to attend college
- The importance of advising
- Preparation for college level study
- Financial challenges, especially among first-time and part-time students
- Disconnect between high school guidance and college reality

Several participants addressed the different types of problems their institutions face in working with male and with female students. Young men, especially young men of color, are far less likely to request assistance. There is both a gender gap and a gender disconnect evident in self-confidence and ability. While females may be more able academically they are less confident than males in the classroom and that may affect their course selection. Similarly male students may forge ahead in a course, without seeking assistance, but may perform less successfully overall. Some colleges and universities are putting special measures in place to address these gender differences and needs. Participants were urged to read *The Gender Gap in College: Maximizing the Developmental Potential of Women and Men* (Jossey-Bass, 2008) by Linda Sax, UCLA professor of higher education.

The issue of "hyper-masculinity" was raised as being a possible contributing factor in retention challenges. This trait is particularly evident in some males of color, who also tend to be a larger proportion of "first gens". Some males demonstrate levels of self-confidence and independence (even aggression) that outdistances academic and personal ability. In these cases male students may founder without early intervention to minimize this pre-disposition.

Gender and other differences often are exacerbated when working with students that are the first in the family to attend college. Although residential institutions encounter fewer problems than "commuter" campuses and community colleges, Eastern CT State University undertook a study of the special needs of this cohort in 2009 (RETENTION of MOST-AT-RISK ENTERING STUDENTS at a FOUR YEAR COLLEGE, Hari P. Koirala et al.), concluding that "the most at-risk groups are first generation, low income [students] that do not know how to navigate campus and academic life and are reluctant to ask. . . . Greater focus is needed on family issues, financial and other counseling, and especially in engaging students in university activities early on."

In the case of "first gens" gender does not seem to play a role; both males and females in this group are less likely to seek assistance of any sort. Participants indicated that their institutions are turning their attention increasingly to this cohort to address its special requirements and challenges to persistence (Appendices B & C). ECSU is in the third year of a retention study that indicates challenges to retention may actually *increase* past the second year of school and there are not many existing models in this area of retention work.

Participants at the roundtable universally agreed that advising/counseling is the most critical factor in student retention and success. The discussion revealed that advising and counseling encompass the other challenges, including financial matters, college preparation and the problem of disconnection between high school guidance and college readiness. Challenges to successful advising come in many forms. As Dr. Kennedy noted the ratio of students to counselor on some state campuses is 1000:1. Some schools are separating the advising role from faculty obligations while others are utilizing faculty as advisors only for degree-seeking students (as opposed to part-time, continuing education students). Several institutions have initiated "boot camp" for advisors to better prepare them for their role in supporting student success.

More students arrive on campus poorly prepared for college-level work and must utilize precious financial aid dollars for remediation. The demand for remedial work and tutoring has added to the advising burden. Some campuses are matching remediation with connection by utilizing student tutors as peer support. Others are in the process of developing, or have already undertaken, a “one-stop” approach to student support by integrating counseling and advising services into a center that also provides financial aid information and campus job opportunities among other things. This more comprehensive approach creates a conduit to services that also helps in breaking down student resistance to seeking help. Most institutions also have crafted a “first year experience” class that introduces new students to the kinds of critical thinking and writing they will need to master en route to a degree.

High school guidance counseling was cited as a particular challenge. Participants suggested that many students arrive on their campuses, not only under-prepared, but with misinformation and mismatch between their major/career expectations and their abilities. One participant characterized the need to “recalibrate” students’ plans due to inappropriate or incorrect guidance in high school. Some state campuses have so many feeder high schools that it is not possible to meet with guidance counselors individually. Although less of a problem for private institutions, all participants agreed that the increasing demands on high school guidance counselors today are resulting in less effective student preparation and understanding of the college experience, and, worse, ending up at the wrong fit school.

## **CONCURRENT SESSIONS (2 & 4-YEAR INSTITUTIONS)**

### **PROMISING PRACTICES**

The diversity among participating colleges and universities of course means that there is no single solution to the problem of student retention. However, despite differences, some universal practices are helping to interdict attrition. Moreover some of the emerging promising practices identified by participants may be adapted to campuses, regardless of size, governing authority or student population.

What is the level of accountability on campus for student success? Participants agreed that successful retention efforts must include representatives from across campus: academics, financial aid, admissions, diversity. For example, some schools have discovered that scores are poor predictors of success while the ratings given by admission officers have a strong correlation with future performance. Additionally admission staff members have learned the “back stories” of applicants that may influence their future success when shared with student affairs officers. Other institutions utilize student focus groups that not only invest students in the changes they want to see but aid colleges in better programming. By examining the current delivery systems, institutions are better able to align students’ needs with programs. Everyone on campus owns, or should own, retention.

Learning beyond the classroom has proven to be a retention booster. Co-curricular activities such as community service and internships provide practical learning opportunities while, at the same time, connecting students with others who can form a larger network of support and encouragement. Research opportunities for

undergrads also offer career exploration and meaningful connections and learning experiences. A recent FYE study shows the top 3 factors in retaining students are:

- Making a connection with *some adult* in first 6 weeks of school (not necessarily an advisor or professor)
- Involvement in supplemental learning through co-curricular experiences
- Having a campus job which satisfies the first two items, engages the student beyond academics and provides some money that can reduce financial anxieties

While colleges cannot be expected to hold every student hand, providing seamless and holistic support for students certainly can improve retention. College athletes receive this kind of holistic service routinely with academic advisors, required study time, and healthy eating plans among other things. One participant suggested this model be examined for its adaptation across an entire student body. While schools may not be in the position to adopt this methodology, Appendices B and C offer a list outlining promising practices already in place at colleges and universities represented at the roundtable. The list is by no means comprehensive but points out efforts underway that can bear fruit in the future.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The greatest challenge to retention efforts is fiscal. Colleges and universities, regardless of funding source, acknowledge that more money for counseling, risk management, internships, academic support and career counseling would have an immediate and significant impact on student retention. However it was also emphasized that too often there is duplication of effort and services which wastes precious resources.

Some of the recommendations presented will involve funding while others can be put into practice using current resources.

- ✓ Ensure that financial aid awards are not for one or two years only
- ✓ Identify additional paid internships to provide purposeful work and learning options
- ✓ Add to the counseling staff, including generalists like those used at community colleges which do a great job of advising, but also risk management and substance abuse specialists, as well as those whose focus will be solely with "first gens"
- ✓ Offer early diagnostic and career counseling, especially for adult students, within the first year of college
- ✓ Provide online options for learning to accelerate degree completion
- ✓ Conduct academic support workshops for early identification and intervention
- ✓ Utilize the Consortium-sponsored website for
  - listing all partner programs and resources (and reduce potential duplication by easy cross-referencing of resources)
  - creating a master calendar of programs and seminars

- ✓ Convene professional development seminars for nonprofit and college retention representatives to improve practices; include business office and registrar personnel that often are overlooked
- ✓ Engage adjunct faculty in retention initiatives
- ✓ Utilize current students to reach out to new students for special programs and opportunities like Black/Latino affinity groups that have low enrollment
- ✓ Restructure admission marketing strategies to promote outcomes (what's in it for the student vs. go to college because that's what people do)
- ✓ Restrict options and promote requirements, especially among students that may require academic support; ensure that meeting with advisor/counselor is one of the requirements
- ✓ Create intentional meetings among faculty, department chairs, program coordinators and transfer counselors to ensure shared focus on retention
- ✓ Collaborate on high school guidance initiatives to educate guidance personnel
- ✓ Focus on "soft skills" for new students, not just scores
- ✓ Develop a robust "first year experience" program
- ✓ Connect the work force with high school students so they understand what they need to study in college
- ✓ Create a culture of ownership on campus across *every office and individual*; we all own retention

***APPENDIX A***

***PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS***

Asnuntuck Community College

Capital Community College

Casey Family Services

Central CT State University

Charter Oak State College

CT Board of Regents

Eastern CT State University

Goodwin College

Graduate! CT

Hartford Consortium for Higher Education

Hartford Foundation for Public Giving

Manchester Community College

MetroHartford Alliance

Middlesex Community College

Naugatuck Valley Community College

Saint Joseph College

Trinity College

University of Hartford

Wesleyan University

## APPENDIX B

### CURRENT STATE RETENTION AND SUPPORT PROGRAMS

*(Excerpted from Robert A. Kennedy Keynote Remarks)*

- Eastern Connecticut State University assigns incoming students to one of four Targeted Advising Cohorts or “TACs.” Based on predictive modeling, TACs provide students with differing levels of tutoring, mentoring and advising depending on their TAC assigning
- Both Central and Eastern have revised the way in which their classes are scheduled to reduce conflicts and facilitate completion in 4 years.
- Understanding that commuter students face issues different from transfer students and both are different from residential students, Central has instituted separate orientation programs for each group.
- The City of Norwalk and Naugatuck Valley CC have identified that student transportation is an issue for some students, and have worked with students and the city to implement transportation programs to help their students get to and from class.
- Understanding that online learning is certainly becoming a viable option for many students, Asnuntuck also offers optional, in-person study sessions for online learners that require more help.
- Manchester Community College is increasing the offerings and enrollment in courses that use flexible delivery methods to help accommodate students’ busy schedules.
- Students who know about services available to them are more likely to take advantage of them. Middlesex Community College is expanding tutoring services and, importantly, the internal “marketing” of tutoring services so more students are aware of the availability of course assistance.
- At Tunxis, all students are contacted about graduation once they have reached the 48-54 credit-hour threshold. *The result—maybe not unexpectedly—has been an increase in the graduation rate.*
- At Capital, to help increase the awareness of and participation in financial aid programs, all students are encouraged to apply for financial aid when they apply or make an inquiry to the college. As a result, for the fall 2010 semester, nearly 70% of all students enrolled received a financial aid award.
- Charter Oak State College, the state’s online-based college, has an important role to play in degree completion providing the opportunity for adults to complete degrees online and at home to accommodate work and family schedules.

**APPENDIX C**

**SOME PROMISING PRACTICES**

Asnuntuck CC	Learning communities that group students to support each other
Capital CC	Black/Latino Resource Center
Central CT State	“Man Enough” program to mentor peers Summer Bridge Institute for students needing additional preparation Orientation programs by cohort (commuter, resident, transfer) Examining retention by academic department to gather data on late-term problems that may arise
Charter Oak State	Starfish = software system that flags students who are floundering academically; information then shared with faculty and advisors for early intervention
Eastern CT State	Creating small, comfortable residential experience for “first gens”
Goodwin College	MOVE – Men of Vision and Education program for males of color that has improved retention (one-on-one mentoring weekly) Students mentoring magnet school students on campus to encourage stronger connections Food pantry on campus that helps students in need and reduces outside stressor
Manchester CC	Special first semester course for Black/Latino males Targeting white males to serve as mentors
Naugatuck Valley CC	Use of faculty advisors for all students First year experience class
Saint Joseph College	Professional advisors during the first and second years and faculty advisors once the major has been declared “Successful Beginnings” program for under-prepared students PRIDE program of peer mentors for new students (Promoting Respect, Inclusion and Diversity in Education)
Tunxis CC	Master advising program (boot camp for advisors) Non-degree students advised by counselors & degree students advised by faculty
UConn	Student mentors to assist peers

Wesleyan University

Bridge program prior to first year for students needing additional support

Partnering with Middletown schools

Convening the Men of Color Alliance to explore issues

Creating a "one stop" experience in the Student Center