

## **Testimony for the Senate Committee on Community, Economic, and Recreational Development**

October 11, 2022

I'd like to thank the Senate Committee on Community, Economic and Recreational Development and the Senate Labor & Industry Committee for holding its hearing today at Luzerne County Community College and for inviting us to provide testimony on regional workforce development initiatives.

My name is Susan Spry and I am the Associate Vice President of Academic Affairs at Luzerne County Community College.

In my remarks I'll address how higher education and specifically Community Colleges contribute toward solutions to the current skills gap and labor shortage. I'll also discuss some of the challenges we experience in this space.

Post-secondary education can take many forms, including schools specializing in skilled trades, unions, competency-based programs, community colleges, and traditional public and private colleges and universities. We need all of these institutions to educate and train individuals for our regional workforce as the skills and academic credentials needed to drive economic development in our region are varied and diverse. We are fortunate in northeastern Pennsylvania to have a large number of institutions that support this development of our human capital.

At Luzerne County Community College, approximately a quarter of our degree-seeking students are enrolled in Associates of Science transfer programs and half of our students are enrolled in Associates of Applied Science Degrees, Certificates, or Specialized Diplomas. Another quarter of degree seeking students are taking courses in preparation for application to our health science programs. Especially in the scenarios where our students will be entering the workforce upon completion of their credential, we see our role as providing foundational skills that will help accelerate the employees' ability to become productive when they are first on-boarded by a company. This saves thousands of dollars in training costs for companies as workers become productive for the company much more quickly than those without foundational skills.

Another growing segment of our college population are students enrolled in early college courses. Early College and Dual Enrollment courses enable students to "get a head start" on college while completing their high school requirements. At Luzerne, we are especially encouraged by students who did not possibly see themselves as capable of succeeding in higher education taking college courses and gaining confidence in their ability to succeed. Early College has a proven track record for improving college access and completion rates and for lowering the cost of degrees for students and their families.

We also have a sizable and growing number of students who have limited English proficiency. Although many of these individuals are working, their ability to prosper is limited

by their lack of English language proficiency. Luzerne Community College provides English as a Second Language remediation as part of our credit-based programs and also through our Adult Literacy Program which is funded through the PA Dept. of Education. Each year we serve over 500 individuals in our Adult Learner's Training and Assistance Program. Some of these students are preparing for their high school equivalency and some are taking English as a Second Language training to prepare for post-secondary education or for employment purposes. Luzerne has also worked with various businesses to offer ESL in the Workplace to improve safety and communication among workers.

On the economic development side, the role of higher education and, particularly the role of a Community College, is to provide the training and education that helps build the foundation of the regional workforce. An additional role that the Community College plays is to upgrade the skills of the current workforce through lifelong learning and training opportunities. Yet another role of a Community College is to assist those who already have a credential and are looking to develop particular skill sets or to find another career.

At this point, economic development and workforce development are so closely aligned that the terms are often used interchangeably. The number one concern expressed by many businesses looking to locate into a particular region is whether they have the current workforce talent or the talent pipeline to support their business.

The presence of a skills gap is evident in many employment sectors. Workforce development and labor pool availability have become key factors for economic developers' work centering on business attraction, expansion, and retention. As we get together and speak with our employer partners, a common concern that we hear is that there aren't enough students going into the skilled trades and advanced manufacturing careers and that in addition to pipeline problems, large numbers of long-time employees are retiring in the next few years and those employees will be taking that skill, experience, and tribal knowledge with them unless we become much more focused on transfer of skills and knowledge between those exiting and younger workers within the organization. This can be accomplished through Apprenticeships, through intentional succession planning, through microcredentialing of specific skills that are a subset of larger degree programs. An example of a microcredential might be learning to use a software program that is an essential element of a business. In a manufacturing environment, microcredentialing might be learning how to use programmable logic controllers to run some part of a machine process. Microcredential is just-in-time learning of a particular skill set that can be documented and replicated.

The skills gap is also being addressed at Luzerne County Community College through focus on real-time labor data and employer feedback that contributes to curriculum development, delivery, and program revision.

Luzerne County Community College relies heavily on its Program Advisory Boards for input on our programs. The College seeks feedback and guidance from employer representatives who are content experts. These individuals assist faculty and administrators in designing and delivering the best instruction to prepare students for their role in the workforce. This engagement with the employer community is an example of a guiding principle at LCCC as it relates to our workforce programs – to start with the end in sight and work back from there. In this case, employment opportunities for our students is the outcome

we work toward whether it be by transferring to a four year higher educational institution or by joining the workforce after earning an Associates Degree or short term credential. This focus on developing workers who bring skills into the workforce is a central mission of LCCC. As is typical for most community college graduates, the large majority of Luzerne's students stay in the region and fill a significant number of the middle skills jobs found in northeastern PA.

Registered apprenticeship programs combine on-the-job training and mentoring along with related educational instruction. This is another initiative that can help fill critical skill shortages. LCCC is the educational partner in several registered apprenticeship programs in northeastern Pennsylvania being run at businesses and through economic development organizations.

Additionally, employers express concern about new employees sometimes not being "work ready" even though they possess the skills and knowledge necessary to perform their job tasks. So-called "essential skills" or "foundation work skills" are lacking in some employees. Qualities such as communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and teamwork are work skills necessary in virtually all job categories. Luzerne addresses this by structuring classes to simulate the work environment and by placing students in applied learning situations that challenge them to develop these critical work behaviors. Some of Luzerne's programs offer work-based learning opportunities such as internships, field placements, or clinical rotations that are built into the academic program. In addition, some students participate in community service projects to learn these skills.

Supporting students with financial aid and resources and providing them with wage support during their work-based learning helps them persist in their program to completion.

We often say that our students are in their "final mile" toward work the moment they start with us because we are committed to hiring the best faculty to facilitate this transfer of learning from the classroom to the worksite. We have a laser focus on that in our Associates of Applied Science Degrees as well as our Certificates and Specialized Diplomas.

A primary challenge at this point in time is attracting students into programs that directly train for high priority occupations, specifically in the skilled trades and applied technology fields. This perpetuates the mismatch between open positions and qualified applicants.

State-of-the-art equipment and facilities are a costly investment, yet employers expect educational institutions to possess these critical assets in order to adequately prepare students for employment. Grants and capital investment in education by the public and private sectors enables entities such as Community Colleges to buy equipment and upgrade facilities to educate and train the workforce needed to attract and retain business and industry. Business and Education partnerships which combine talent and resources across a number of stakeholder groups is another strategy which can strengthen our economic development reach.

Luzerne County Community College welcomes the opportunity to be involved in economic and workforce development in northeastern Pennsylvania and we see ourselves as a critical partner in efforts to harness our collective regional talents and resources.

In closing, I would like to thank the panel again for the opportunity to address you on this topic. I anticipate that the testimony provided by other panelists today will speak to the need for partnership and collaboration among those in economic development, workforce development, education, and the private sector. None of us can do this by ourselves, we need the collective resources and talent of many organizations to help our region grow.