



Testimony

Submitted on behalf of the
Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry

Public Hearing on Higher Education & Workforce Development

Before the:
Senate Republican Policy Committee

Presented by:
Aaron Riggleman
Manager, Government Affairs

Lycoming College
Williamsport, PA
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417 Walnut Street
Harrisburg, PA 17101-1902
717.720.5472 phone
pachamber.org

Introduction

Chairman Argall and honorable members of the Senate Republican Policy Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Aaron Rigglesman, and I serve as Manager of Government Affairs for the Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry. The PA Chamber is the Commonwealth's largest broad-based business advocacy association, representing employers of all sizes across every sector. Among our members are more than 45 of Pennsylvania's leading higher education institutions—ranging from PASSHE universities and state-related schools to independent colleges, community colleges, and technical schools.

The employers we represent know firsthand the critical role Pennsylvania's higher education system plays in strengthening both the workforce and the economy. Colleges, universities, and technical schools are not only engines of economic growth for local communities but also pathways for students to gain the skills employers desperately need. For that reason, we greatly appreciate the Committee's focus today on higher education and workforce development.

Current Challenges

Pennsylvania is at a crossroads. The Commonwealth faces a well-documented workforce shortage, with just 66 available workers for every 100 open jobs, according to the U.S. Chamber. At the same time, we are experiencing slow population growth, a rising median age, and the outmigration of young people seeking opportunities elsewhere. The

demographic pressures are clear: fewer high school graduates, more retirements, and a shrinking working-age population.

Higher education is directly impacted. Colleges and universities are confronting declining enrollments while Pennsylvania employers continue to need graduates—whether from four-year universities, community colleges, or career and technical programs—to fill critical roles in healthcare, technology, energy, advanced manufacturing, and more.

These realities underscore that higher education is not simply a system we must preserve—it is one we must modernize and strengthen if Pennsylvania is to remain economically competitive.

Looking Forward: Building and Retaining Pennsylvania's Workforce

Addressing these challenges requires more than producing graduates. It requires ensuring students choose Pennsylvania institutions in the first place and then see a future for themselves here after graduation. Pennsylvania must position its higher education system as a competitive advantage, making sure students and families view in-state institutions as their best option compared to neighboring states. That means doubling down on affordability, supporting innovation on our campuses, and strengthening ties between institutions and local employers so students see a clear connection between their education and career opportunities here at home. This approach aligns directly with the PA Chamber's Keystone Initiative, which emphasizes that states gain a competitive advantage by developing, attracting, and retaining a well-trained workforce¹. The Initiative also

¹ https://www.pachamber.org/keystone_initiative/

recognizes that the world of work is changing faster than ever, with many of the jobs Pennsylvanians will hold in the next decade not even created yet. To thrive in this environment, students need opportunities to explore new career pathways and build adaptable skills that prepare them for a lifetime of change. By positioning higher education at the center of this strategy, Pennsylvania can turn today's workforce challenges into a long-term competitive advantage.

Just as important as recruitment is retention. Pennsylvania cannot afford to invest in educating students only to watch them leave. We must create compelling reasons for graduates to stay—through internships, co-op experiences, and partnerships that connect them directly with Pennsylvania employers. When students begin building professional roots while still in school, they are far more likely to launch careers, raise families, and build their futures here. Retaining this talent is not simply an education issue; it is central to Pennsylvania's economic competitiveness and long-term growth.

What Employers Need

Pennsylvania employers consistently emphasize how much they value our higher education system and its role in preparing the next generation of talent. They point to successful partnerships where institutions and industry have aligned curricula with workforce needs—from nursing and engineering to IT, energy, and advanced manufacturing. These collaborations show that when education and business work hand-in-hand, both students and employers benefit.

Employers also stress the importance of graduates joining the workforce with not just technical knowledge but also the durable skills that set them apart: communication, teamwork, adaptability, and problem-solving. Many Pennsylvania institutions are embedding these skills into programs, and employers are noticing the difference.

What employers are asking for is simple: more of what's working. More flexible pathways, more industry partnerships, and more opportunities for students to gain practical experience while earning their degrees or credentials. They see Pennsylvania's higher education system as a vital partner in ensuring the state's competitiveness and want to continue building on this strong foundation.

Higher Education as Adaptive Partners

Pennsylvania's higher education institutions have repeatedly demonstrated their ability to adapt to evolving workforce needs and economic demands. For example, nursing programs across the Commonwealth have rapidly expanded to address critical healthcare shortages, while technical schools and community colleges are developing cutting-edge programs in cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, and technology to meet the growing demands of employers. Colleges and universities are also embracing flexible delivery models, offering online, hybrid, and accelerated programs that make education more accessible to working adults, rural students, and non-traditional learners.

Pennsylvania institutions are already demonstrating how powerful these education-industry partnerships can be. At Gannon University in Erie, the Institute for Health and Cyber Knowledge is partnering with Allegheny Health Network and First Ascent Biomedical

to build CLIA-certified medical laboratories, advancing next-generation cancer research and treatment while creating a pipeline of trained laboratory professionals with immediate pathways into high-demand healthcare careers. In Reading, Alvernia University collaborated with local manufacturers to launch new engineering programs in electrical, mechanical, and industrial engineering. By co-investing in labs and equipment and connecting students directly with industry talent, Alvernia is addressing critical workforce gaps while ensuring graduates have the hands-on experience employers value. These examples show how Pennsylvania's higher education system, when working in close collaboration with employers, not only adapts to workforce needs but positions our communities for long-term economic growth and competitiveness.

Institutions are not only responding to current workforce needs—they are anticipating the skills of the future. Many are creating partnerships with employers to co-develop curricula, provide hands-on learning experiences, and integrate real-world problem-solving into classroom instruction. Examples abound: engineering programs that incorporate local manufacturing projects, IT programs offering internships with regional tech firms, and healthcare programs that place students directly in hospital and clinic settings. These efforts ensure that graduates are not only well-educated but also job-ready from day one.

We commend Pennsylvania's higher education institutions for this innovation and responsiveness. Policymakers should recognize that rigid mandates or one-size-fits-all regulations risk stifling this adaptability. Instead, state leaders should focus on empowering institutions so they can continue evolving to meet the dynamic needs of

Pennsylvania's economy. By supporting adaptive higher education, we strengthen the workforce, attract investment, and ensure that students have meaningful career opportunities within the Commonwealth.

Emerging Opportunities

Looking ahead, Pennsylvania has the chance to lead in the coming technological revolution. A prime example is the wave of data center investment across the Commonwealth. These facilities represent billions in capital investment and position Pennsylvania as a hub for technology infrastructure supporting everything from artificial intelligence to advanced manufacturing.

But physical infrastructure alone will not guarantee success. Data centers demand individuals with a wide range of skills—from electricians and HVAC technicians during buildout to IT professionals and cybersecurity experts in operations. Community colleges, PASSHE schools, Independent institutions and technical programs all have a role to play in meeting this demand through short-term credentials, apprenticeships, and advanced degree pathways.

Data centers are just one example. Pennsylvania's ability to align higher education with employer demand, whether in healthcare, energy, trades, or technology, will determine whether we grow and retain investment or see it shift elsewhere.

Conclusion

In closing, Pennsylvania's higher education system is an undeniable asset. It has produced generations of leaders, innovators, and workers who have powered our economy. But to remain competitive, we must continue to adapt—focusing not only on access and affordability, but also on alignment with the real-world needs of employers.

The PA Chamber and our members stand ready to be partners in this effort. By working together—business, higher education, and policymakers—we can ensure that Pennsylvania not only meets today's workforce challenges but seizes tomorrow's opportunities. That vision is at the heart of the PA Chamber's Keystone Initiative, our comprehensive action plan to make Pennsylvania the most competitive state in the nation for business. A strong education and workforce system is central to this roadmap, ensuring that students are not only well-prepared but also see a future for themselves here in the Commonwealth. By advancing the recommendations of the Keystone Initiative, we can create the conditions for investment, innovation, and lasting prosperity.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.