

Senate Majority Policy Committee  
Senator David G. Argall, Chairman  
Hearing on Higher Education and Workforce Development  
Testimony of Charles W. Edmonds, Ed.D.  
President, Lycoming College, Williamsport, PA  
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Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, fellow testifiers, and guests, thank you for the opportunity for Lycoming College to host this hearing and to participate in this critically important conversation in service to the Pennsylvania economy, the higher education sector, students, and the long-term vitality of our Commonwealth. In addition, thank you Senator Argall, and all of our elected officials, for the work you have already done and the work you will continue to do, in service to higher education and workforce development – the lifeblood of our current and future workforce and the building blocks for a thriving citizenry and democracy. And if I may, I am pleased to acknowledge Senator Argall and Senator Yaw, as Lycoming College graduates. You have served our Commonwealth and communities with distinction and are illustrative of the role that Lycoming College has played in the educational and career aspirations of the over 10,000 Lycoming graduates who continue to reside in Pennsylvania.

I join this august group as the new president of Lycoming College, a position I am most proud and humbled to occupy. Since starting on July 1, it has been a privilege to champion the needs of our students, both current and future, as we equip and educate them to pursue degrees that will not only prepare them to land their first job, but pursue a career trajectory that will be durable and dynamic. I was struck by recent and consistent comments made by both Elon Musk and Jensen Huang (CEO of Nvidia) when speaking on topics around education and majors/disciplines that best equip students interested in careers in technology, AI, robotics, and innovation. To quote Mr. Huang, "In the age of #ArtificialIntelligence, they argue that deep understanding of the world's core principles will matter more than ever. As #AI tools become more capable of writing and debugging code, the value of basic programming skills is decreasing. But what cannot be automated is strong conceptual thinking, creative problem-solving, and the scientific mindset that powers innovation. That starts with mastering equations, energy, forces, and logic". Similarly, Musk said, "Studying physics provides a strong foundation for understanding reality and developing analytical skills that apply across all fields. Physics is fundamentally just understanding how the universe actually works."

I don't simply mention these comments because one of Lycoming's top five majors/programs is physics; I also don't share this example because I believe the vast majority of us will become the next Elon Musk or Jensen Huang. Instead, their comments speak to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the current and future workforce, higher education, and the complexity of the learning objectives required, and the essential and underpinning educational characteristics needed for jobs of today and especially tomorrow. In Pennsylvania, we must build and support an educational system that attends to this complexity and ensures that we provide the right messages and funding streams for both the short and long-term economic objectives of our

Commonwealth. We cannot think of our system as a simple math problem that can be solved with addition and subtraction, but instead a calculus equation that has the capacity to interpret and recognize the incredibly diverse set of talents, abilities, educational attainment levels, and academic disciplines needed to ensure a durable work force over decades, not just months and years.

And how is it that we can support and ensure that these educational and workforce needs occur? I would posit that it occurs when we ensure a healthy tension between theory and practice. Indeed at Lycoming College we ensure both of these priorities are hardwired into our teaching, student/faculty research, and professional experiences through enhanced academic experiences. It is in our primary brand message. #thinkdeeply and #actboldly. It is only when we think deeply and effectively about theories, societal issues, ideas, economic practices, and academic disciplines that we can then act, practice and apply these aspects of our learning in ways that will contribute meaningfully to our economy and society. This overlapping of theory and practice better enables students to challenge their current ways of thinking and answer questions/problems that don't have easy answers. It is about solving problems that have not yet been solved. And ensuring that our educational system continues to revere and assign value to the need for institutions of higher education to better prepare students how to think and not what to think.

Higher education must be dynamic in the ways it responds and adapts to the needs of our economy and workforce. Beyond the classroom, we must teach the soft skills that our employers consistently ask us to produce – things like critical thinking, grit, pragmatism, resilience, the ability to work well with teams, strong communication skills, effective problem solving, and educational experiences that equip our graduates and members of the work force to be curious about seeking the answers to questions that we don't yet know. These skills are the backbone of innovation and economic growth. Pennsylvania has been blessed with one of the most remarkable educational systems not only in the United States, but in the world. We remain one of the top net-importers of students in the country. Maintaining this treasure will not happen without investment. It also won't happen by investing in certain sectors to the detriment of others. Indeed we have an obligation to both serve the needs of our current employers through a well-educated and trained workforce, but we must also acknowledge the macro trend of our knowledge based economy so that Pennsylvania has the capacity to thrive and remain competitive for the long-term.

My aim today is not to be a commercial for a particular industry, economic sector, or specialized field. Instead, I would suggest that in this period of exceptional change, disruption, and innovation that we invest in our educational system in ways that are economically cost effective, provides meaningful ROI, and prepares students for the wide range of jobs and careers needed for our Commonwealth to continue to thrive. In this way, the independent sector of Pennsylvania's higher education system has a vital role to play. As president of Lycoming College, I welcome the opportunity to work hand in hand with this committee, our elected

officials, and all those who care deeply about ensuring that the next generation of students has an equal opportunity to pursue and achieve the American dream, perhaps the most powerful promise that fuels hard work, ingenuity, and human nature's deep seeded desire to contribute their labor in a way that makes the world a better place.

I'd like to close by sharing the story of one of Lycoming College's alumni who grew up in a small town outside of Pittsburgh and came to Lycoming to study accounting and play basketball. Gene Dodaro came from a very blue-collar family, but attended college with a deep sense of ambition, a desire to work hard, and to pursue a degree that would prepare him well for the workforce. Mr. Dodaro now serves as the Comptroller General of the United States, a 15-year presidentially appointed position – serving as the head of the bi-partisan Government Accountability Office and the top accountant of our land. Mr. Dodaro pursued an accounting degree at an institution that insured who could write effectively, speak and communicate with accuracy, lead teams and solve problems, to think and act ethically, and to compete productively with fellow students in service to accomplishing difficult tasks and not settling for easy answers. Pennsylvania has a system that has long produced these kinds of results and outcomes – and it is a privilege to give voice to these experiences and many others that are possible because of your service, and many before you, and hopefully many after you, who invest in our Commonwealth's higher education system and its workforce in ways that attends to both the immediate and long-term needs of our economy, society, and work force. Thank you for the good work you do and for your time today.

Other talking points/themes:

- Given Pennsylvania's unique system, PHEAA is a very efficient and powerful funding model to support educational attainment and workforce needs.
- Centrality of the Independent Sector as a huge ROI and cost savings to taxpayers (six largest private sector in the country). One of the reasons the sectors that has benefitted PA's HIED system's performance despite the current ranking of 49<sup>th</sup> in funding.
- Lycoming and independent sector outperform in its commitment to creating educational access for low-income students. Lycoming: 40% Pell eligible. Independent sector provides access to low-income students in equal or greater measure than the public sector.
- Largest economic sectors in PA: 1. Finance, Insurance, Real Estate, Rental, and Leasing: \$154.7 billion (approximately 19.6% of total GDP). 2. Professional and Business Services: \$131.3 billion in 2024. This area grew to **1.5 times its 2014 level by 2024, reflecting demand for expertise in a knowledge-based economy**. 3. Educational Services, Health Care, and Social Assistance: \$106.5 billion in 2024. Pennsylvania's world-class institutions (e.g., University of Pennsylvania, Carnegie Mellon) and aging population drive this sector. 4. Manufacturing: Approximately \$93.75 billion in output (11.89% of total in 2018, with recent estimates holding steady around \$116 billion annually).