

Tuesday, September 2, 2025

Public Hearing: Higher Education and Workforce Development

Hosted by Chairman Dave Argall, Chair, and Senator Gene Yaw

Erica Mulberger, Executive Director, Advance Central PA

Prepared Opening Remarks

Good afternoon, Chairman Argall, Senator Yaw, and members of the Pennsylvania Senate Majority Policy Committee. My name is Erica Mulberger, and I am the Executive Director of Advance Central PA.

Advance Central PA is a non-profit corporation, representing the public workforce development system for the nine-county region that includes Centre, Clinton, Columbia, Lycoming, Mifflin, Montour, Northumberland, Snyder, and Union counties, as designated by the Governor under the guidelines of the U.S. Department of Labor Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) of 2014.

We are a business-led Local Workforce Development Board with oversight from nine county commissioners via a separate Local Elected Officials Board. We lead with a passion to advance the skills of job seekers, provide opportunities for young people, and build a competitive edge for our businesses.

Our MISSION is to be the leading vehicle for regional unification, coordination, integration, and alignment of workforce activities, resources, and initiatives to support economic sustainability, improve education systems, and develop and retain a quality labor force in Central Pennsylvania.

Advance Central PA has several goals and functions to meet our mission.

1. We strengthen alliances with economic development to identify and address the workforce needs of current and future industries and promote the availability of Central Pennsylvania's qualified workers.
2. We promote strategies to improve education levels and basic workplace skills needed to meet the needs of companies and improve their competitiveness in today's marketplace.
3. We support strategies that encourage life-long learning and continuous improvement of workplace skills.
  - Between July 1, 2024-June 30, 2025 Advance Central PA offset the cost of upskilling for 502 incumbent workers in the manufacturing and healthcare industries through the Commonwealth's Industry Partnership grants; resulting in 93 individuals receiving pay increases, and 56 individuals earning promotions as a direct result of the training.
4. We advocate for the importance of workforce policy and offer insights into the need for a skilled workforce.

5. We collect and analyze labor market information to identify employment trends, skills gaps, and education and training needs and disseminate the information to policy makers, educators, businesses, PA CareerLink® partners, and job seekers.
6. We ensure that youth have access to opportunities in education, career exploration, and meaningful work experiences. This is accomplished through the WIOA In-School Youth Program, Business and Education Partnership programs, and our locally developed [Path To Careers](http://www.pathtocareers.org) website at [www.pathtocareers.org](http://www.pathtocareers.org). Path To Careers allows businesses to create profiles with information about the career opportunities at their company and list the details of the types of career exploration activities they offer middle and high school students. Students, teachers, and school contacts can then directly request an experience through the website based on the parameters established by the businesses. This helps connect students with local companies.
7. We bring together policy makers, business, organized labor, government agencies, education entities, economic development agencies, and the public to better understand workforce needs and to identify solutions.
8. We develop and implement comprehensive regional strategies to meet the education and job training needs of the workforce.
9. We oversee six PA CareerLink® locations and one mobile PA CareerLink® bus that travels throughout the Central Pennsylvania Region to provide a variety of services to employers and individuals seeking employment opportunities.

The functions I just mentioned are not unique to Advance Central PA but outline the role of the twenty-one (21) business led and professionally staffed workforce development boards that have been strategically designated across the Commonwealth to represent their local and regional communities.

Before I discuss policy that can bridge gaps between higher education and workforce development, I want to thank all of our elected officials - especially those at today's hearing - for their focus on workforce development over the past few years.

As the economy and labor market have changed, there has been a growing understanding that there are multiple pathways to a thriving and fulfilling career. And policymakers have responded by funding workforce development programs at each stage of a worker's career, making it easier for people to get the skills they need to succeed in their communities.

We don't view workforce development as at odds with higher education. They need to be complementary, and I'm excited to talk about how we can develop programs and pathways that help students, workers, and job seekers get the training, credentials, and experience they need to drive job growth and success in Pennsylvania.

First, we need better and more timely data. Our workforce board and our statewide organization, the Pennsylvania Workforce Development Association, support Sen. Barlotta's Free the Data legislation.

Sen. Barlotta's bill provides us with access to data that already exists but is not shared with local development boards in a timely fashion. We can't build the best programs and interventions without good data, and we cannot be sure of what gaps between higher education and workforce development even exist if we don't have the right data and information. We appreciate the Senate's support of this legislation, and we encourage you to talk with your colleagues in the House to move this nonpartisan bill forward.

Second, we need to expand and align career pathways for students, workers, and job seekers. We need to make it simpler for them. There should be less confusion and less paperwork. A student should be able to get transferable credits at high school, Career and Technical Centers, community colleges, and universities. All institutions in Pennsylvania should be aligned - especially those funded by the Commonwealth. We need to encourage or require reciprocity agreements and streamlined paperwork, applications, and credentialing that makes it easier for students to pursue multiple pathways to a career.

For example, all Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs across the state have the same skill standards that need to be met, offer hands on training, and result in students earning industry recognized credentials upon completion of the program, and many offer a cooperative-education experience at a local business. These are all components of a pre-apprenticeship. Each CTE program also has a Local Advisory Committee consisting of local employer representatives that are guiding the curriculum based on what is happening in industry. Pennsylvania could be registering CTE programs as pre-apprenticeship programs that would allow high school students to easily transition from high school to an apprenticeship upon graduation; quickly connecting them to both employment and post-secondary education. This could be a quadruple win: the company gets a worker, the graduate gets paid while continuing their education, training providers offer the related technical instruction component of the apprenticeship, and Pennsylvania, especially rural PA keeps the young adults in their local community.

Advance Central PA has assisted local CTE providers in registering their courses as pre-apprenticeship programs for Computer Numerical Control (CNC) Operators and continues to assist CTEs in this process for other occupations, however there's an opportunity in Harrisburg to streamline this process, so CTE providers do not have to go through an individual approval process for each program.

Third, we need more investments in internships and co-ops that combine classroom learning with on-the-job experience. Our workforce programs can supplement higher education and vice versa. If we expand these work and learn programs, more students will graduate with academic knowledge and practical skills to help them immediately excel in the workforce.

Fourth, we need to let locals lead and invest in their knowledge. Local leaders, workforce boards, and institutions know their regions best. We should incentivize higher education institutions and workforce boards to co-design programs with local employers in high-demand sectors in their areas to ensure that training aligns with current and future labor market needs.

The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity (WIOA) has limitations on what trainings it can pay for, leaving customers frustrated when the training they want isn't allowable because it doesn't meet the credential requirements or the training provider has not submitted the necessary performance data to add the program to the Eligible Training Provider List as required by WIOA. It's also frustrating for higher education providers because they need to submit outcomes data for all students in a course of study to be on the Eligible Training Provider List and may not have anyone from the PA CareerLink® want to enroll in the program that year. The Commonwealth could alleviate this with state funding that supports flexibility for WIOA-ineligible and Pell-ineligible, credential programs - developed through workforce boards in partnership with higher education - that allow workers to upskill or reskill and re-enter the labor force quickly.

Too often, people portray higher education and workforce development as in conflict with each other. In Central PA, that couldn't be further from the truth, as I have regular meetings on my calendar with several of our higher education partners and participate on various advisory boards because we know the value of working together. With some simple policy changes and incentivizing partnerships, our schools and training programs can work in concert to make sure that Pennsylvania's workforce is the strongest in the nation.

Thank you for your time and all the work you do on behalf of workers, job seekers, and employers in our Commonwealth.