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Virtual Public Hearing | Senate Education Committee

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The Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges appreciates the invitation to participate in this virtual public hearing regarding the impact of COVID-19 on higher education. The Commission is the voluntary membership organization that represents the interests of Pennsylvania's 14 community colleges established under Article XIX-A of the Pennsylvania Public School Code.

Community colleges are essential to Pennsylvania, offering a broad range of educational opportunities to all Pennsylvania residents. Collectively, the Commission's member institutions educate nearly 300,000 students annually and are the largest provider of public postsecondary and workforce education in the Commonwealth. Pennsylvania's community colleges serve more low-income and first-time college students than any other sector of higher education. In 2017-18, more than 56,000 community college students, or 40 percent, received nearly \$190 million in Pell grants. More than 65 percent of first-time, full-time credential-seeking community college students are from households earning less than the median household income level in Pennsylvania.

The economic impact of Pennsylvania's community colleges is also significant. In 2016-2017, the 14 Pennsylvania community colleges and their students added \$13.6 billion in income to the Commonwealth's economy, approximately two percent of the total gross state product. This impact is nearly as large as the Accommodation & Food Services industry. The colleges are also major employers, employing nearly 25,000 individuals statewide prior to the start of the pandemic.

Collectively, the colleges work with more than 1,800 workforce partners across the Commonwealth to identify gaps in skills training and develop programs that prepare workers for these in-demand, family-sustaining careers. In 2017-18, Pennsylvania community colleges awarded over 75 percent of the associate degrees earned in Nursing within the Commonwealth. In addition, community colleges train the Commonwealth's emergency services workforce, including fire, police, and other emergency services personnel.

For every \$1 a student invests in their education at a Pennsylvania community college, they see a return of \$3.50 in increased future earnings. This investment in their education yields students an average annual return of 13.8 percent, outpacing the 30-year average annual return on the S&P 500.

For transfer students pursuing a four-year degree, research indicates that community college graduates outperform students who began their higher education journey at a four-year college or university. The 30,000 annual transfer students save at least \$20,000 on the cost of higher education by starting at community college. More than 75 percent of these community college alumni transfer to a Pennsylvania institution, providing a consistent source of enrollment to baccalaureate-granting institutions.

Spring 2020 Summary

It has been more than two months since the first cases of COVID-19 were identified in the Commonwealth and the threat of contracting the coronavirus became real for Pennsylvanians. Since then, life has changed dramatically. Higher education institutions, including Pennsylvania's 14 community colleges, have been considerably impacted.

Community colleges are agile, built to respond quickly to local and regional needs. During this unprecedented global pandemic, Pennsylvania community colleges did what they have been doing for 50 years – they adapted instructional delivery methods, supported the communities they serve through donations, and launched newly-identified programs to meet workforce needs.

The community college student-centric model – which has always emphasized flexibility, particularly in course design, delivery and schedule – is well-suited to weather the current pandemic and help propel the Commonwealth into economic stability in a post-pandemic world.

Yet even before the virus required the colleges to operate remotely, Pennsylvania's community colleges were on the cutting edge of online learning. In the 2018-19 academic year, more than 85,000 students enrolled in at least one online course and community colleges collectively offered approximately 175 programs that could be completed entirely online.

As the pandemic spread, the colleges quickly expanded on this well-built infrastructure, transitioning to remote delivery of all possible instruction and services. Community college faculty and staff rose to the challenge by embracing change and transitioning course content to a remote format. They offered students a glimmer of normalcy and leadership, even as life became more turbulent. Colleges reached out to students individually to identify their needs, distribute laptops, internet hotspots and webcams to students without the resources to continue their education. Colleges developed tutorials to assist students in using new technology and continued to provide support services to help students succeed.

As most community college students are non-traditional learners and the rapid changes significantly impacted their careers, families and daily lives, many community colleges considered or proceeded with modifying grade systems in response. Partnering with other public institutions in Pennsylvania, the Commission and college staff worked to ensure that temporarily adopting a pass/fail model would not create complications for students who later attempt to transfer the credits for further study.

Even as community colleges pivoted nearly every facet of their institutions, they extended vital emergency assistance funds for students who were struggling with food and housing insecurity, job loss or other crises. This emergency assistance was especially critical for students whose income had been disrupted by COVID-19, threatening their ability to continue their education. The Community College Research Center at Columbia University indicates that, nationally, 80 percent of community college students are also active members of the workforce, with almost 40 percent working full-time; many of these students depend on part-time employment at their community college or within the service industry for income. When campuses, hotels and restaurants closed to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, the emergency assistance offered by their college was a godsend that allowed them to stay afloat financially and continue their education.

Also recognizing that more than half of community college students are considered low-income, the colleges maintained access to food pantries, expanded student services and increased access to mental health resources. Administrators trained faculty on available services and initiated outreach that informed students of the new assistance.

Upon passage of the federal CARES Act and receipt of federal funds, the colleges began to distribute the \$34 million in federal CARES funding allocated to eligible community college students who experienced disruption in their education due to the pandemic. The funds were used by students for critical expenses such as food, housing, course materials, technology, healthcare and childcare.

However, the resources offered by community colleges during these uncertain weeks extended well beyond their student recipients to the regions they have enriched for decades. In response to the critical shortage of personal protective equipment (PPE), community colleges across the Commonwealth supported Pennsylvania healthcare professionals – many of whom are community college alumni – with the donation of medical supplies. The nursing, allied health and other relevant programs loaned ventilators, contributed supplies of gloves and lab coats, and used on-site equipment to produce much-needed N95 and other masks based on guidelines provided by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The spring semester has concluded at all Pennsylvania community colleges. Graduation ceremonies were held virtually or postponed indefinitely. Spring 2020 community college graduates are now launching careers in essential and in-demand industries across Pennsylvania. Many of these newly minted alumni will serve on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic as nurses, allied health professionals, paramedics and EMTs; while others will ensure the delivery of vital goods, maintain power distribution, or provide essential law enforcement or fire services. These individuals are the pillars of our economy.

The colleges have reviewed data from multiple sources to understand state and local labor market trends and workforce needs in their communities and across the Commonwealth. According to data by EMSI, several of the top 10 occupations in Pennsylvania with increased job posting activity through May 2020 include nursing and industrial truck and tractor operators. Accordingly, the colleges petitioned the Wolf Administration to allow them to resume training in these essential occupations.

The data has also led to the development and launch of new programs that align with emerging and traditional workforce needs. These programs include training, certificates or degrees in Contact Tracing, Electrician, Assistive Technology, Actuary Science and Data Analytics, Diagnostic Medical Sonography, Business Analytics, Data Science and Microsoft Office and Customer Service Certificate to name a few. As they have for the past 50 years, the colleges will continue to monitor labor demands and adjust course offerings based on industry need.

Summer 2020 Status

Community Colleges are year-round institutions, even in the face of a worldwide pandemic. For summer 2020 coursework, community colleges continued to offer primarily remote instruction. As the Commonwealth began a phased reopening, and where limited face-to-face instruction is permitted by CDC guidelines and other limitations imposed by accreditors and other authorities, the colleges are prioritizing instruction and assessment for students whose education was disrupted and need to complete coursework in order to enter the workforce. Furthermore, the colleges have focused on opportunities for face-to-face instruction in programs such as Nursing, CDL, Allied Health, Emergency Services, Fire and Emergency Services and other essential industries.

Fall 2020 Plans

Committed to their role as community anchors and economic engines, community colleges are planning to continue their long-held tradition of offering affordable, accessible, high-quality education and workforce development programs. While educational delivery will continue to evolve, the core mission of community colleges will remain unchanged. These accessible institutions of higher learning will continue to provide quality, affordable educational opportunities, relevant workforce training for family-sustaining careers and holistic supports to students. Community colleges will further leverage technology to build quality programs and engage learners, while being responsive and adaptable to additional change.

Community colleges have sought advice from experts, consulted guidance from the state and federal government and surveyed faculty, staff and students to develop plans for fall 2020 and beyond. Although plans vary by institution, they prioritize health and safety and include contingency plans in the event of a resurgence or a positive case of COVID-19 among students, faculty, staff or another individual on campus.

Some colleges will primarily offer remote instruction for the fall 2020 semester, with limited face-to-face instruction in programs that require it. Others are planning to resume face-to-face instruction in compliance with CDC guidelines. Every college is committed to mitigating the risk of exposure and spread of COVID-19 to all individuals who come to a community college campus. Plans are continually reviewed to ensure they are aligned with the most recent information available and consistent with best practices.

However, implementing social distancing and risk mitigation on a college campus is challenging. College campuses are designed for collaboration and teamwork led by faculty and staff who regularly

interact with each other, students, and visitors to campus. Current protocols require these activities to take place in a remote format and/or while adhering to social distancing. Therefore, the colleges need to reconfigure everything on campus, including work schedules, traffic flow, student schedules, student services and course delivery.

The colleges are also mindful that some students, faculty and staff may have concerns about returning to campus, pre-existing medical conditions that puts them at greater risk, or have family members that are in an at-risk population. Accommodating these needs is a priority for the colleges, even as it complicates the resumption of face-to-face services and programs at the colleges.

Challenges

While community colleges are eager to continue serving students, regions and the Commonwealth, significant challenges remain, including substantial financial uncertainty caused by:

Enrollment Disruptions

Enrollment for the 2020-2021 academic year will be difficult to predict. For some students who attend or planned to attend community college, financial instability may delay their enrollment. Others may no longer be able to afford tuition due to recent unemployment. Although history indicates community college enrollment trends positive during difficult economic times, enrollment at some Pennsylvania community colleges could decline dramatically. Regardless of whether enrollment ultimately surges or plunges, both scenarios produce major financial strain for community colleges as they struggle to maintain affordable tuition rates and provide support to students who need it.

Unexpected Costs

In mid-March when the pandemic first forced the closure of businesses, venues and schools across the Commonwealth, community colleges spent millions to transition to remote learning. Expenses from upgrades to learning management systems, support and training for faculty and new software were unexpected and considerable. Within six weeks of the national emergency declaration the community colleges spent more than \$6 million to help students and staff transition to remote instruction, reduce the financial impact on students and begin the cleaning protocols recommended by state and national agencies.

The colleges are working diligently to develop comprehensive re-engagement plans for upcoming semesters. Redesigning classrooms and other college spaces to adhere to social distancing guidelines; securing and distributing PPE to students, faculty and staff; regular site disinfection; revamping or adding campus signage; and student, faculty and staff temperature monitoring or COVID-19 testing will all require substantial investment. These plans are being developed to align with CDC and other guidelines and mitigate exposure risk for all individuals who visit community college campuses.

Because 60 percent of the counties with a community college campus are considered at least a

medium-high COVID-19 Health Risk, proper measures to mitigate the virus spread are paramount. However, many of these costs are recurring. To adhere to CDC guidelines community colleges will have to follow new and evolving protocols for the foreseeable future at considerable cost to their institutions.

✦ **Lost Revenue**

The financial costs endured by the community colleges pale in comparison to the damage they will sustain from lost revenue. The pandemic has forced colleges to cancel cultural arts performances, campus events, fundraising opportunities and non-credit programming. The closure of dining areas and bookstores, plus the loss of other anticipated auxiliary revenue, will exacerbate the budgetary strain. However, the most significant injury will be lost revenue due to enrollment disruptions. Community college leadership estimates that \$5 million in revenue has already been lost. Additional projected lost revenue from all sources collectively totals approximately \$55 million through the end of the calendar year.

✦ **Legal Risk**

The colleges are developing extensive plans to foster the health and safety of their campus communities. However, even as the Commonwealth proceeds with its phased reopening, concerns remain about potential liability that could result from resuming on-campus operations. Temporary and targeted legal protections to insulate the colleges from lawsuits related to COVID-19 exposure would be extremely helpful and offer some reassurance to leaders.

Conclusion

In just 50 years, community colleges have transformed Pennsylvania's higher education landscape and are now proud to be the largest provider of public postsecondary education and training in the Commonwealth. In the post-pandemic world, the responsive, quality education and training offered by community colleges will be more important than ever. The affordable transfer programs and career-focused courses that community colleges offer will be essential to Pennsylvania's economic recovery. Community colleges are key to retraining and upskilling the 1.9 million individuals who filed for unemployment since March 15, 2020.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony. We hope that the Senate Education Committee and all members of the General Assembly recognize the importance of supporting community colleges as they navigate these turbulent, uncharted waters. As one of the keys to economic recovery in Pennsylvania, an investment in community colleges is an investment in Pennsylvania's long-term fiscal vitality and strength. The Pennsylvania Commission for Community Colleges and its member institutions look forward to working with the Chairmen, and Members of the Committee to chart a course towards the Commonwealth's prosperous future.