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Connecticut Community Colleges Spring 2009 Enrollment Jumps 7.2%
Well-prepared workforce is essential to future of economy

The highest spring semester enrollment in its history has been recorded in the Connecticut Community College System, with 50,385 students enrolled in spring 2009. This is the first spring semester to surpass the 50,000 mark, and follows fall 2008's record enrollment of 51,105. Record-breaking numbers are seen this spring in both head count and Full Time Equivalency (FTE), with 7.2% and 8.7% increases respectively over the prior spring semester.

Enrollment is significantly up at a time when budget cuts threaten the ability of colleges to serve growing numbers of students seeking higher education. "Connecticut's students need access to affordable higher education to acquire the skills demanded for employment, to remain current with changing technology, and to transfer to higher levels of education that will help them to advance to high-demand, high-wage jobs," said Marc S. Herzog, Chancellor of the Connecticut Community Colleges (CCCs).

Since 1998, head count has grown by 30% and FTE has grown by 54% in credit programs. The CCCs are serving over one-third more students than they were a decade ago. There has been a 104% increase in full-time enrollment since 1998, yet the majority of students (62%) still study part-time while also working to support themselves and their families.

"With the slowdown in the economy comes an even greater need for students to gain the education and skills they need to compete for jobs," according to Chancellor Herzog. "It is critical that more students enter fields essential to the state's economic growth," he said. "The Community Colleges are challenged to prepare increasing numbers of students to enter the workforce and keep the state competitive, while the budget to sustain academic programs and student support services is decreasing."

The Connecticut Community Colleges continue to offer the most affordable higher education tuition and fees in the state, at \$2,984 for 2008-2009 for a full year of study. Types of financial aid for eligible CCC students include federal government grants, college work-study, and loans; state grants; tuition set-aside programs; and scholarships. Financial need is the basis for 99% of the aid awarded. Grant aid was 90% of the financial aid awarded to CCC students in 2007-2008. Grants and scholarships awarded to eligible students do not require repayment.

Over 4,000 students graduate each year from the CCCs, many moving into high-demand fields that fuel economic growth in the state. "The community-college movement in the United States has been one of the most creative, productive and generally successful education initiatives anywhere on the planet," wrote Stephen Joel Trachtenberg in 2008. "They have succeeded in providing the types of academic and vocational experiences urgently needed by our economy." Trachtenberg served for 30 years as a university president and is now president emeritus and university professor at The George Washington University.

Approximately 40,000 additional students are enrolled in non-credit courses and programs, many geared to workforce development in growing fields important to the state's economy. Over 600 businesses, organizations, and state agencies partner each year with the Connecticut Community Colleges, their Continuing Education Departments and the Business & Industry Services Network, for customized training and workforce education.

Minority enrollments represent 34% of the Connecticut Community Colleges' student body reflecting an 85.6% increase at the 12 colleges since 1998. Thirty percent of total enrollments are African American and Hispanic students, and in 10 years there have been 63% and 96% increases in African American and Hispanic enrollments respectively.

According to the 2006 report by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, New England 2020, Connecticut is predicted to have notable declines in its working age population as a result of retirements and outmigration. At the same time, the minority component of the working-age population will continue to increase. By 2020, the report predicts that 28% of Connecticut's working-age population will be composed of minority populations. "The youngest workers...are even more likely to be minorities than the general working age population. By 2020, nearly half of the 25-29 year olds will be minorities in the three southern New England states." These are the groups that face significant academic achievement gaps and must overcome disadvantages to succeed in higher education.

"Nowhere is the importance of the community colleges better illustrated than in our skyrocketing enrollment during these economic times," said Gail O'Keefe, Director of Workforce Development at the CCCs. "For Connecticut to compete in the new economy, which is knowledge and information technology driven, it is increasingly important for the state to position itself with a well-prepared workforce."

According to Economic Modeling Specialists Inc. (EMSI) in its 2008 economic impact study, "An increase in skilled labor increases the productivity and income of existing capital, while encouraging additional capital investment." Each year, taxpayers see an increase of nine percent on their investments in the Connecticut Community Colleges, the study reports. The study further reports that regional economic benefits in the form of local job and income formation equate to \$5 billion in annual earnings.

Many CCC programs are developed especially for the state's growth industries in health care, information technology and precision manufacturing. The CCCs were recently awarded a fourth highly-competitive United States Department of Labor grant, making Connecticut the only state in the nation to be awarded all four grants in this series. The most recent grant, awarded in January 2009, will focus on developing and expanding educational programs in sustainable operations, which have the potential to make Connecticut a national and global leader in environmental technology, alternative and renewable energy industries. The earlier grants in the series focus on workforce development in the areas of nursing, allied health, financial services, and advanced manufacturing. Collaborative partnerships with related industries and Connecticut's workforce investment system are fostered through the CCCs' initiatives.

The soaring enrollment increase of 7.2% head count and 8.7% FTE is coming at a time when budget recommendations being considered in the General Assembly could reduce the Community Colleges' budget by 10% or more by 2010 and 2011. "The unprecedented growth makes the challenge to the community college system even greater to provide instructional and support services and financial aid to our students, so that they can succeed in the Knowledge Economy so important to the future of our state," said Chancellor Herzog. "At no time has the importance of affordable and accessible higher education been greater to the future of our state and our citizens."

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