



NEW JERSEY

Association of State Colleges and Universities

150 West State Street, Trenton NJ 08608

Phone (609) 989-1100

QuickTakes!

Kudos to Mercer County Leaders on Educational Attainment

January 20, 2017

The leadership of the Mercer County Executive Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce and members of the Blue Ribbon Commission on a Mercer County Partnership for Educational Attainment are commended for recent recommendations to place higher educational opportunity at the center of the county's long-term economic prosperity. As senior fellow at the Higher Education Strategic Information and Governance (HESIG) Project at Stockton University's William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy, I would like to add my perspective based on extensive HESIG research and make a few suggestions for achieving the commission's goals.

Mercer County is privileged to have five of the best colleges and universities of their kind, nationally, in Mercer County Community College, Thomas Edison State University, The College of New Jersey, Rider University and Princeton University. These institutions enroll collectively over 50,000 students, with about 3,000 employees, generating hundreds of millions of dollars in payroll and local business revenue. More importantly, they add tremendous intellectual value to the county and state. Thanks to their principal missions of educational service, the schools provide the means of better and more productive lives for fellow citizens. In effect, working with businesses, labor and government they are a very good bet for creating sustainable prosperity in the county.

Whereas extending college opportunity to students making the transition from high school to college continues to be a major policy concern, the Blue Ribbon Commission makes a significant added contribution by its focus on helping adults already in the workforce who aspire to attend or return to college to gain knowledge and improve skills needed for long-term success. Specifically, the Commission makes three recommendations: Increase educational attainment through stronger organizational partnerships; by more innovative practices; and through better coordination of resources and public communication.

In its analysis, the panel points out some troublesome disconnects that need to be addressed in order to reach these goals. While businesses report high demand for highly skilled employees, too few are able to leverage more educational opportunity for employees already on the job. The Commission finds that nearly 75 percent of businesses surveyed believe that education is important to achieving their goals, yet only about one-third provide financial support for employees, and of those that do so, only about one-half of educational benefits provided are used. The survey suggests that this is the case simply because employees are unaware of the benefit, or most likely do not have the time away from work to take advantage of these. Still businesses

www.njascu.org

*The College of New Jersey
Kean University
Montclair State University*

*New Jersey City University
Ramapo College of New Jersey
Rowan University*

*Stockton University
Thomas Edison State University
William Paterson University*

report that they are eager to partner with colleges and universities to remedy this mismatch of need and opportunity. Five years of research by HESIG suggest concrete directions for the county to take to achieve the goals of the commission.

First, to assist businesses with findings and keeping highly skilled employees, the county in partnership with colleges and others should create a Mercer County **college internship center** to help employers and colleges create, coordinate and certify paid internships for college credit. While many internships for students already exist, more need to be created and coordinated centrally to benefit students, institutions and businesses. Many employers lack the resources to reach out to colleges to match students and workforce needs. Through a county coordinated system, institutions can do more to help identify internships, and to track and certify college course credits. State government, non-profit agencies and alumni might help to pay for the center. HESIG research supports this approach as a promising one leading to college completion and success in the workforce.

Next, greater partnerships can be created to help thousands of citizens who have attended but not completed college, **finish a college degree** or needed certificate programs. Through credit-by-examination certification to gain degree credit for knowledge and skills learned outside of the classroom, the five county institutions each have special relationships to assist on this effort. Businesses, who want to assist staff with college completion, can provide employees with the opportunity to study while working, thereby leveraging educational attainment for those already achieving in the workplace.

Finally, HESIG studies indicate that a major disconnect for traditional college students is appropriate **academic advising and career counseling**. About one-third of New Jersey college students report advising and counseling as unimportant to college completion and job attainment, largely because they failed to seek it out. It is more likely that employees lack access to adequate educational advising and counseling services, including for financial aid, because: many businesses have inadequate resources to provide this service; employees lack the time to seek out information; and colleges lack resources to reach employees. Accordingly, a coordinated effort led by the chamber and its partners to use more effectively current resources, might be the catalyst for better communication about both college opportunity and means of achieving it.

The commission is on the right track with its suggestions for securing a bright economic future for the county through educational attainment. Many of the resources are already here, but there is more work to be done through the partnerships recommended by the commission.

Darryl G. Greer, PhD
Senior Fellow
Higher Education Strategic Information and Governance
<http://www.stockton.edu/hughescenter/hesig>