

Butler Eagle

Why isn't Pa. investing in more community colleges?

June 3, 2017 Our Opinion

Butler County is exceedingly fortunate to have a thriving educational institution in Butler County Community College.

But other areas — many of them rural — across Pennsylvania aren't so fortunate. The reason behind that is simple: Pennsylvania has only 14 community colleges — the fewest of any state in America.

By comparison, the states with comparable populations — Illinois, Ohio, Georgia and North Carolina — have 40, 23, 24 and 58, respectively.

The case for community colleges as vital progenitors of economic and social advancement and workforce training is compelling. As of 2014, enrollment at these institutions (7.3 million students) accounted for 45 percent of all undergraduate college enrollment in the United States.

But it's not just the number of students these colleges enroll that matters. It's who exactly benefits. Community colleges enroll more than two-thirds of all U.S. military veterans still in school, according to the American Association of Community Colleges. Nearly half of all students with children who are enrolled in school attend a community college, 51 percent of college students with disabilities attend a community college, and more than a third of community college students are the first in their family to attend post-secondary school.

In a national economy that is projected to require a post-secondary degree or certificate for 30 percent of jobs by 2020, that represents an incredible opportunity for students and families.

Building a more technologically-advanced and versatile workforce that actually wants to stay in Pennsylvania should be at or near the top of this state's list of priorities. Yet establishing two-year institutions in areas where they are most needed — i.e. more rural, less affluent communities that either aren't capable of or willing to provide the one-third of revenue the state requires such colleges get from local sources — has been poorly coordinated at best and more often than not, simply nonexistent.

In the place of real investments in post-secondary infrastructure and two-year institutions, state officials have instead approved initiatives like the Rural Regional College of Northern Pennsylvania. The RRCNA is a noble endeavor, but it is poorly-defined — “What this college is not is simpler to explain than what it is,” according to the group's informational flyer from 2016

— and overextended, with a stated goal of providing services to people in nine counties that aren't served by a community college.

In a state where employers and public officials routinely grouse about a lack of reliable, skilled workers to fill more sophisticated, blue collar job openings, it buggars belief that these institutions — which awarded 494,995 professional certificates in 2014 — aren't receiving more consideration during the state's budget process.