

Institute for Emerging Issues Business Committee on Higher Education

Call to Action for North Carolina's Institutions of Higher Education and the Business Community

Preamble

While there are numerous customers of our system of higher education, one key customer is the business community. IEI's Business Committee on Higher Education (BCHE) calls for a sustained partnership between North Carolina's business community and North Carolina's system of higher education with a focus on collaboration at the academic department level. Dedicated to addressing a series of priorities critical to our state's future prosperity, this will be an institutionalized, long-term partnership to which all parties will be visibly and continuously committed.

The BCHE considered many options during its deliberations including those offered from its members' own experiences, suggestions from leaders in business, government and the higher education community, and insights from national and state experts. These many options reflected the breadth of the challenges facing institutions of higher education. In response, the BCHE ultimately decided to structure its responsive strategies around five primary recommendations that focus on creating the human and social capital necessary to preserve the competitiveness of North Carolina's workforce. The BCHE also offers action steps for reaching the goals set forth in the recommendations. Some of the action steps will require significant investments of funding; others will require similar investments of time; and all will create new responsibilities for both the business and higher education communities. Given the importance of education to the state's future prosperity, the BCHE believes that such investments are modest relative to the magnitude of the return North Carolina can expect.

Priority must be assigned to the following aspirations and actions. All must be subjected to continuing evaluation and refinement as they are implemented.

THE BCHE CALLS FOR BUSINESS AND HIGHER EDUCATION TO PARTNER TO:

- 1.) Produce graduates with an appropriate mix of soft and hard skills essential for success in the workforce, both in established businesses and in entrepreneurial ventures.**

North Carolina needs more institutionalized communication vehicles, both regionally and statewide, between higher education and the business community. These vehicles will provide opportunities to exchange information on a periodic basis, including allowing business to offer input

into academic program development, modification and elimination. Active engagement from higher education extends beyond high-level administrators to include representatives from academic departments. In this way, business representatives and faculty will benefit from direct communication channels. This engagement will focus on current and projected skill needs, considerations for how higher education institutions and the business community can work together to provide a workforce with these skills, and metrics for measuring the success of these efforts.

The following are components for consideration:

- A.) Ensure that higher education graduates possess the following *soft skills*, which are a critical component of lifelong learning:
1. Character- demonstrates ethical behavior, personal responsibility and accountability;
 2. Communication Skills- communicates effectively (both in writing and orally) and listens well; has the ability to communicate effectively and respectfully across cultures;
 3. Intellectual Agility- effectively identifies and solves problems both analytically and creatively and is capable of critical decision-making; and
 4. Inter- and Intrapersonal Skills- demonstrates a high level of self-awareness and initiative; works across differences by exercising objectivity and an understanding of other cultures and backgrounds; demonstrates knowledge of own skills, strengths and limitations; and works effectively and efficiently in a team.
- B.) Ensure that graduates generally possess *hard skills* that are relevant to the global economy and to dynamic business needs. These hard skills include adequate levels of expertise in science, mathematics and technology.
- 2.) **Build awareness among all higher education students — with a particular focus on minority and at-risk populations — as well as their faculty and counselors about ever-changing workforce demands and the flexibility needed for lifetime employability and success in the 21st century economy. Students must be aware of the requirements for continued success in the workforce over time.**

The following are suggested ways to increase awareness:

- Offer additional ways for students to learn of possible professional opportunities early in a student's academic career – specifically before majors are declared – so as to expose them to the needs of prospective future employers and to entrepreneurial opportunities.
- Establish an enduring forum through which employers can meet directly with faculty to discuss classroom relevancy and business needs.

- Make explicit the connections between curricula and particular careers and encourage faculty to share these with students early in the course.
- Encourage new pedagogical techniques – such as more active and experiential learning and less traditional lectures – to better fit the learning styles of today’s students.
- Organize a business speaker program by which business representatives, both seasoned and new, commit to speaking to and engaging with students and faculty on campuses statewide on a regular basis. Generally, seasoned professionals provide substantial industry experience while younger professionals, closer in age to the students, offer a contemporary bridge between academia and the workplace. Employers must take a proactive approach to making their employees available on an ongoing basis to interact with higher education.
- Incentivize and encourage business internships and job shadowing lasting for a semester or for the academic year for higher education faculty and students *across all disciplines* in order to help them gain increased awareness of skill requirements within different industries.
- Provide subsidized work-study programs that offer internships off-campus with local businesses, large and small, as a way to fulfill the “work” component of the work-study program.
- Create a program by which business representatives serve as personal mentors to students, with particular attention placed on the need for mentors for minority and at-risk students.
- Maximize use of all relevant campus resources — especially career centers — and available technologies to implement the above connections between business and higher education.

3.) Expand the development and use of alternative delivery mechanisms, including distance learning, to reach adult and life-long learners as well as those unable to participate in traditional classes for any reason. Alternative delivery methods must provide students with the appropriate mix of hard and soft skills highlighted in the first recommendation. Methods of delivery will be different in the varied regions statewide and should be adapted to best serve the needs of the communities in each region.

The following are suggested ways to extend access:

- Offer on-site educational and training opportunities at the business location so that employees can upgrade skills as business needs change.
- Deliver programs in partnership with others such as trade associations, economic development groups and state/local government in order to reach broader numbers of students and target specific educational needs within industries.
- Examine and partner with corporate universities to take full advantage of their expertise in the area of alternative delivery mechanisms.

- 4.) Assist the K-12 system in exposing all students — with a particular focus on minority and at-risk populations — as well as their parents, teachers and counselors to ever-changing workforce demands and the flexibility needed for lifetime employability and success in the 21st century economy. Exposure should be focused on students in middle and high school.**

The following are suggested ways to increase exposure:

- Incentivize higher education to reach out to middle and high school students to inform them of opportunities within higher education that align with their interests.
- Offer more job shadowing opportunities for middle and high school students, teachers and counselors.
- Expand on-campus outreach programs (both during the academic year and shorter programs taking place during the summer) that engage middle and high school students and their parents, teachers and counselors and that build connections between them and students and faculty in higher education and business representatives. Specifically target those students who are not at the top of their class or who may be at-risk. Businesses should be engaged in program creation.
- Engage students in middle and high school to understand their learning styles so as to adapt pedagogical techniques in higher education to be most effective.
- Organize opportunities for parents of middle and high school students through which they can learn from higher education and business representatives about the future opportunities available to their children.
- Organize a business speaker program by which leaders in business, both seasoned and new, commit to speaking to and engaging with students, parents, teachers and counselors on a regular basis. Employers must take a proactive approach to making their employees available, on an ongoing basis, to be engaged in middle and high schools in particular. Employers should work with schools to ensure age-appropriate presentations.

- 5.) Work with the K-12 system to align K-12 curricula with higher education entrance requirements and curricula. Misalignments are particularly apparent in science, mathematics and various soft skills. As higher education increases its emphasis on soft skills, so too should the K-12 system in order to foster alignment throughout the curricula.**

The following are suggested ways to achieve the above goal:

- Offer higher education placement exams to high school students to identify gaps in competencies and to begin a conversation with high school teachers about how to close the gaps and eliminate the need for remediation upon entering higher education.

- Incorporate high school capstone work (e.g. The Diploma Project) as a factor for college admissions decisions.
- Enhance training within higher education for future K-12 teachers using direct input from business as to the needed workforce skills in order to increase relevancy within K-12 curricula.

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Statements of Principle

During meetings of IEI's Business Committee on Higher Education (BCHE), members raised a variety of issues that are crucial to the future of the state but which fell beyond the purview of the committee. The BCHE was mindful that there are other arenas dedicated to pursuing solutions to these questions and respectfully requests the attention of North Carolina's executive and legislative leadership to the following issues, in the hope that they will be addressed expeditiously by the appropriate agencies and that these statements of principle will add impetus to their work.

➤ **Need for a Single Entity Charged with Offering the Perspectives of Business to K-20**

As seamlessness between the K-12 system and higher education becomes evermore critical and as competitiveness in the dynamic 21st century economy increasingly depends on relevant educational attainment, North Carolina must establish a permanent business committee for education that addresses both K-12 and higher education. An expansion of the established N.C. Business Committee for Education (NCBCE) to incorporate considerations of a seamless pipeline between K-12 and the system of higher education would effectively address this challenge.

➤ **Need for Further Alignment between K-12 Education and Workforce Needs**

A sound K-12 education is our state's most pressing need. Preparation to succeed in the 21st century economy must begin well before higher education. K-12 education must provide students with versatile soft skills in addition to basic competencies in reading, writing and math. Vital soft skills such as the ability to think critically and creatively, the ability to work well in teams and effective written and oral communication are essential for success in today's workforce. We are aware that NCBCE has been considering the importance of alignment between K-12 education and workforce needs and we enthusiastically support those efforts.

➤ **Need to Increase Access to Higher Education for All**

North Carolina must do more to provide access to higher education for all who are academically eligible. Today, six out of ten jobs require at least some postsecondary education and training. To remain competitive in the global economy, the state must enable a greater percentage of our population to graduate from high school and enroll in

postsecondary education. Access must be increased for every student, but particularly for groups that tend to experience significant barriers (financial or otherwise) to higher education, for example: minorities, working adults, undocumented students and the indigent. As a way of addressing this challenge, we strongly encourage the expansion of Learn and Earn programs across the state.

➤ **Need to Increase Access to Higher Education for Undocumented Students**

The growth rate of North Carolina's Latino community is among the highest in the nation. Latino school-aged enrollment has grown almost 50 percent in just five years. Many of these students receive all of their formal education in the North Carolina public school system. They excel in the classroom and obtain a high school diploma but are unable to gain affordable access to our state's colleges and universities because of their undocumented status. North Carolina must make higher education accessible for all academically qualified students regardless of their immigration status.

➤ **Need to Create Vehicles for a Cabinet-level Focus on Minority Affairs**

North Carolina's significant and growing minority population has the potential to become one of our state's strongest economic assets. Unfortunately, minority populations have been unfairly marginalized in the past, both in our educational system and in the workforce. The creation of vehicles for focus at the cabinet level would establish within the executive branch a core mission to enhance opportunities for minorities, both in school and the workplace, and to measure the success of these efforts on a regular basis.