

**THE RURAL PA COMMUNITY COLLEGE CONSORTIUM:
A Proposal for Delivering Career and Technology Training Services
to Rural Pennsylvania**

A Concept from United States Representative John E. Peterson

INTRODUCTION

Pennsylvania, once among the world's leading producers of raw materials and manufactured goods, is in the latter stages of a decades-long decline in both economic activity and population growth. Compared to other states -- even many of our neighbors in the northeast -- Pennsylvania's growth is in negative territory.

This decline in economic and 'people power' is not theoretical: Each of the last four official U.S. Census counts (1970, 1980, 1990 and 2000) has cost the Commonwealth two congressional seats, reducing the size of our delegation in the House of Representatives -- and its impact on the national agenda -- by 30%. In just 3 decades Pennsylvania has dropped from having 27 U.S. House members to having only 19.

Unfortunately our growth, especially our job growth, continues to decline. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, we lost more than 177,000 jobs in the manufacturing sector alone between December 2000 and 2002. In the sixteen counties which I represent, we lost close to 17,000 manufacturing jobs during the same two-year period.

In addition, Pennsylvania's population is becoming skewed towards the upper age brackets. Our rural communities in particular are increasingly populated by senior citizens and retirees. Measured by the number of residents aged 65 and older, we are the second oldest state in the nation. Measured by the number of people living in communities of 12,000 and under, we are the most rural state.

Pennsylvania's economic stagnation tends to be regional. Between 1990 and 2000 our total population actually grew by 3.4% (compared to 13.1% growth for the rest of the country). That slight increase, however, was wholly due to moderate growth in the northeast corner of the state, and additional gains in our southeastern and southcentral counties. This modest eastern Pennsylvania population expansion counterbalanced significant population losses in the north and west.

Of the 16 counties that comprise the 5th Congressional District, for example, only four registered population increases above 5% between 1990 and 2000. Six counties had statistically insignificant gains (of less than 2%), and four lost population (with the worst decline at over 13%).

THE CAUSES

With the decline in heavy manufacturing in the 1970s and early 1980s, northern industrial states were derisively characterized as the "rust belt," and the out-migration of jobs and people to the "sun belt" seemed to be in the natural order of things -- unstoppable and irreversible. States like Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio and New York lost thousands of jobs and millions of people to places like Georgia, Florida, the Carolinas and Texas.

Conventional wisdom held that the south's gains were due to climate, lower wage rates, right-to-work laws, etc. But another factor is often overlooked: The south -- most notably Georgia and the Carolinas -- had in place relatively new, responsive, un-bureaucratic systems for training new workers. Their efficient and effective employee training programs have contributed to a growth rate that has been phenomenal. In fact, you could make the case that Georgia alone has appropriated Pennsylvania's eight congressional seats.

However, some big "rust belt" states appear to be on the comeback trail. You don't hear that epithet used much anymore in connection with Michigan, Wisconsin or Ohio, for example. Compared to Pennsylvania, these states rebounded faster and farther from the declines of the '70s and '80s. An important reason for this difference, in my view, is the greater emphasis and resources they have applied to technology, career and skills training -- and to the re-training of displaced workers.

These states have made a strong commitment to training their people for 21st Century jobs, and they are beating Pennsylvania in the economic arena. Michigan's vocational education system is ranked #3 in the country, and Wisconsin is in the top ten. Ohio has recently converted its entire community college system to "colleges of technology," with attendant changes in course work and curriculum structure. Each of these states spends about 10 times more on technology and career skills training than does Pennsylvania.

THE DEFICIENCIES

Pennsylvania is a national leader in four-year and post-graduate academic education. We have 143 private institutions of higher learning, plus 14 state-owned universities, 4 "state-related" universities and 14 community colleges (5 in the southwest and 9 in the east). Together, these fine schools produce a volume of degreed professionals that puts us in the top 10% among all 50 states. And our rank is third in the production of graduates with masters and doctoral degrees.

Pennsylvania, indeed, educates the people who "run the world" -- but they unfortunately vacate Pennsylvania to do so.

It is also unfortunate that in Pennsylvania's educational process, many are left behind.

Consider some facts: This Fall, about 60% of our high-school graduates will enroll in a 4-year academic program. One-half of them will leave college by the end of their freshman year. Of those still in school at the beginning of their sophomore year, only one-half will graduate.

When you add the two-thirds of college enrollees who never graduate to the 40% who never start college in the first place, you arrive at a staggering number of young people whose educational -- and employment -- options have been foreclosed. Where do these kids find their futures?

In past times, the answer might have been to learn a skill or trade during a short stint in the military -- lifetime military careers were more rare then. And there was always the possibility of getting your skills training "on the job." In 1953, 68% of entry-level positions were open to unskilled workers; a high school diploma was more than enough. By the year 2000, that percentage had dropped to 8% -- and continues to fall.

In my view, these facts show that Pennsylvania's educational ladder -- outstanding though it may be -- does not reach all the way to the ground. For the future of our youth, who are the future of this Commonwealth, we must do everything in our power to repair the shortfall.

I am totally convinced that a major factor driving the outflow of jobs and people from northwest and north central Pennsylvania is our near total deficiency in providing one-year certificates and two-year associate degrees in technology-based disciplines.

In the medical field alone, the lack of skilled workers has reached crisis proportions. Rural hospitals find it nearly impossible to fill entry-level positions in areas such as lab technician or radiologist. I hear similar complaints from employers all across the business spectrum. More and more jobs require people with high technical skills, and in rural Pennsylvania, fewer and fewer such people are available.

THE OFFERINGS

Pennsylvania has 14 community colleges which do their best to address this problem with limited resources. They have been increasing the scope of their offerings of technical certificates and associate degrees. However, (and many people do not realize this) there is not a single community college located in my 16-county congressional district! In fact, there is only one community college in Pennsylvania north of Interstate 80 (Luzerne County Community College, near Wilkes-Barre).

The only public-funded, technology-based, post-secondary institution we have in the 5th District is Penn College of Technology, near Williamsport. It does an exemplary job, offering a wide range of technical subjects. But it is only one, where many are needed. Even with annual student fees approaching \$15,000, "Penn Tech" enjoys full enrollment and provides much needed services.

The 5th District also boasts some fine secondary-level vocational schools, which I have been privileged to help with federal grants over the past few years. From Venango Technology Center, to Jeff-Tech, to Keystone Central, to the Central Pennsylvania Institute, these schools are working hard to upgrade their infrastructure and expand their offerings. As part of the secondary school system, these "Vo Tech" facilities sit idle on most evenings and weekends, and are underutilized during the summer months.

It is imperative that we find a way to more fully take advantage of these expensive facilities.

And cost is one of the main challenges we face as Pennsylvania endeavors to compete with states such as Ohio and Michigan. Technology and career skills education is extremely expensive. It demands much more than four walls, some textbooks and a few desks. Initial infrastructure costs are further increased by the fact that technology changes rapidly, equipment becomes quickly out-of-date, and the need to invest in new infrastructure is never ending.

While matching the programs of the Ohios, Wisconsin, Michigan and Georgia of this world should be Pennsylvania's long-term goal, the immediacy of our crisis dictates the development of a near-term goal -- a First Phase, if you will. The objective for this First Phase should be simple: To deliver affordable technology-based education to rural Pennsylvania in a matter of months... not years.

Reaching this goal will require some creative thinking and demand that some institutions learn to work together in new ways. The challenges will be great. But the need is acute. And the time to act is now!

THE CONCEPT

Currently, the institutions in the best position to swiftly advance enhanced technology training for the residents of northwestern and northcentral Pennsylvania are the community colleges of western and central Pennsylvania. These five community colleges should be encouraged and empowered to expand their course offerings -- in partnership with existing secondary-level vocational technical schools -- throughout rural Pennsylvania.

This proposed consortium of community colleges would include:

Community College of Allegheny County - Pittsburgh
Community College of Beaver County - Monaca
Butler County Community College - Butler
Cambria County Area Community College - Johnstown
Westmoreland County Community College - Youngwood

Harrisburg Area Community College and Luzerne County Community College are also well positioned to serve rural areas and might be logically included in the consortium.

This "Rural PA Consortium of Community Colleges" will partner with (in addition to the Vo Tech schools) the five Higher Education Councils in the northwest and north central region. These 'Higher Ed Councils' offer no courses, but are in the business of matching students with available curricula. They will be able to help the RPCCC to more efficiently organize, administer, recruit and market their expanded services.

The Higher Education Councils are strategically located throughout the underserved area:

Cameron-Elk Higher Education Council - St. Marys
Corry Higher Education Council - Corry
Clarion/Venango Educational Resources Alliance - Seneca
Warren-Forest Higher Education Council - Warren
Potter Higher Education Council - Coudersport

These Higher Education Councils are well placed to help link both business and student clients with the most appropriate technology and career skills training options that will become available through the RPCCC.

Because, at least in the beginning, these expanded, technology-based training opportunities would depend on the existing, underused facilities of our Vocational Technical schools, the investment by the taxpayers of Pennsylvania will be minimized.

In fact, the concept of a Rural Pennsylvania College Consortium offers two distinct advantages in terms of cost and efficiency:

1) The community colleges and the Higher Ed Councils have the basic organizational and administrative infrastructure already in place to carry out the mission.

2) Community college financing includes large, local (county) matching funds provided by the participating counties served. The commonwealth would only be required to augment this local match as the RPCCC enables our community colleges to expand their service area into new counties.

If well planned and designed, the RPCCC concept can be accomplished both quickly and cost-effectively.

I urge everyone -- business, educational, political, and community leaders -- who is concerned about the future of Pennsylvania to join me in exploring this RPCCC concept. Or to work together to devise a solution that may be even better! As I stated earlier in this paper: The need is acute. The time to act is now.

Thank you for your time and consideration

Questions and comments on this concept are most welcome. Please address them to my Titusville District Office at:

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