



Testimony Before the New York State Assembly Committee on Higher Education Regarding the Higher Education Commission's Preliminary Report - February 8, 2008

Statement of Rebecca Brown, Deputy Director,
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Good afternoon Assemblymember Glick and members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify about the New York State Commission on Higher Education's *Preliminary Report of Findings and Recommendations*.

My name is Rebecca Brown and I am Deputy Director of the NYC Employment and Training Coalition (NYCETC). NYCETC is an association of over 200 community-based organizations, community colleges, labor unions and educational entities that provide education, training and employment services to over 600,000 New Yorkers annually. The Coalition envisions a city where every resident has opportunities and access to gain the skills they need to become employable, and every business can attract and retain highly skilled workers.

We commend the work of the Higher Education Commission. The preliminary report sheds light on several critical challenges facing New York's higher education system and offers recommendations for addressing those challenges. However, I would like to focus my remarks today on an area in which we believe the Commission's report should place greater emphasis – building a competitive New York workforce.

New York's ability to meet the workforce needs of today's businesses is fundamental to our economic development and competitiveness. As the Commission's preliminary report duly notes, "When a sector of the economy surges, members of the workforce must be trained, or re-trained, to perform the jobs created as a result."

What's interesting is that nearly half (47%) of the jobs in New York State today are "middle skill" jobs -- jobs that require *more* than a high school diploma, but *less* than a bachelor's degree, according to the NYS Department of Labor. Many of these are in such key industries as health care, hospitality management, construction, transportation and others. So, it is important that New York enable both its current, as well as its emerging workforce, to obtain at least two years of education and/or training past high school in order to fill these positions. We also need to ensure that New Yorkers have the

basic skills necessary to ultimately access the additional training that is required for middle skill jobs.

New York currently faces a serious skills gap. According to the Fiscal Policy Institute's 2007 State of Working New York report, about one-half (46%) of New Yorkers age 25 or older who were in the labor force in 2004 had no education beyond high school. And, with the impending surge in Baby Boomers retiring in the next few years, this skills gap is likely to widen even further.

It is not too late, however, and New York can act now to close this skills gap and put itself on more solid competitive footing.

As an association of community colleges, and other education and training providers who work daily to prepare adults and youth for New York's high-demand occupations, NYCETC sees firsthand the skills and talent employers need to be competitive. We hope that both the Assembly and Commission will take our unique perspective into account as they work to further craft higher education and workforce development policy and programs.

The Commission's preliminary report included several recommendations related to "Developing a Diverse Workforce" that can help our members provide education and training programs that meet employer needs. However, we would like to see a few of these recommendations strengthened and fleshed out in more detail. Specifically, we ask that the Assembly and Commission keep the following principles in mind as they develop further recommendations and policy proposals in this area:

- **Ease the transition for working adults, especially those currently enrolled in adult and vocational education, to postsecondary education that can enable them to obtain jobs in high-demand occupations.**

One way to do this is by providing funding for Career Pathway programs that link basic education to occupational training, enabling students to work and advance over time to higher levels of education and living wage jobs. Career pathway programs typically involve partnerships between community and technical colleges, other training providers (such as community-based organizations, labor-affiliated programs or apprenticeships), local Workforce Investment Boards or One-Stop Centers, employer or industry associations, social service agencies and other relevant partners. The state of Arkansas uses a combination of TANF dollars, state general funds and private monies to support Career Pathway programs based at 22 of its community colleges.

- **Ensure that policies and programs give community colleges adequate flexibility to respond quickly to the changing needs of New York's employers.**

As we know, the only constant is change. And, the workforce needs of businesses change rapidly and constantly in this technology-driven world. Community

colleges need the ability to adapt their programs and curricula to this change in a timely manner.

- **Make part-time college more affordable and accessible for students who, due to work and family responsibilities, cannot attend college on a full-time basis.**

Attending college full-time is not an option for many adults with work and family obligations. New York's higher education system should provide financial aid for the part-time student who wishes to obtain the skills that community college can offer, but who cannot pursue it on a full-time basis.

Finally, I want to reiterate the importance of the Commission's recommendation to increase collaboration among related workforce agencies in order to guide investment and leverage scarce resources among programs, including those at community colleges.

In his FY09 budget request released earlier this week, President Bush proposed a 17% cut to Department of Labor job training and workforce development programs, and a 69% cut to vocational and adult education programs within the Department of Education. These cuts come on top of the already 40% decrease in federal workforce funding over the last 20 years. And, though the budget debates in Washington have only just begun, now is not the time to be *de-investing* in America's and New York's workforce.

Since we cannot depend on leadership at the federal level on these issues, state leadership is essential. Whatever we can do to guarantee a public and private financial commitment to workforce training at the city, state and federal levels, we must do it.

New York's economic competitiveness depends on it!

Thank you again for this opportunity and we look forward to working with you further in building a skilled New York workforce that meets employer needs.