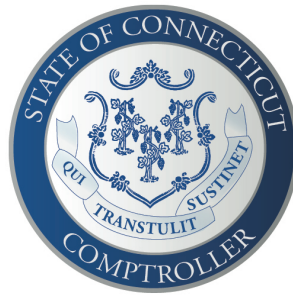


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**Written Testimony
Comptroller Kevin Lembo
March 9, 2018**

Concerning

S.B. 370: AN ACT CONCERNING HIGHER EDUCATION FUNDING

Good afternoon, Sen. Osten, Sen. Formica, Rep. Walker, Rep. Ziobron, and Members of the Appropriations Committee.

I want to thank you for this opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 370, An Act Concerning Higher Education Funding. As the Committee evaluates the best approach to funding and prioritizing higher education, I urge you to consider not only the value of investments in our state's four-year institutions – but to think more critically about the role of Connecticut's technical training schools and community colleges.

For so long, the four-year university has lived high on a pedestal, hailed as the best way to gain economic opportunity in America. It can be — but it isn't the only way.

It certainly wasn't the path I knew growing up when I became the first in my family to go to a four-year college. I was raised in a home where everything we had — our food, clothing and the roof over our heads — was made possible by skilled manufacturing. It was a life where my stepfather took showers after work, not before — necessary after long days in the shop he built behind our house where he would turn raw pieces of nothing into something much more.

Four-year universities still have great value, but there are other educational opportunities that deserve Connecticut's attention at this pivotal economic moment: our technical training schools and community colleges. Though long treated as the alternative path, they are essential to a growing number of Connecticut students of all ages and to Connecticut's collective economic future. It's time to treat them that way.

It's time for Connecticut to strategically position its technical workforce, training schools and community colleges to meet the needs of a diverse and growing body of students, from recent high school graduates, to workers looking for help up the economic ladder, for single moms needing training for jobs that will support a family, and for businesses that can't find the skilled workers they need.

Our unemployment rate remains above the national rate, yet a manufacturing company I visited last year had nine openings and they couldn't find anyone in Connecticut with the skills to fill them. How could this happen when there are so many people hurting for work, and so many companies in need of skilled workers?

The fact is, there is a place for everyone in Connecticut's economy — we just need to make it happen.

It's time to re-order Connecticut's economic investments. Instead of shoveling millions to pay off the wealthiest hedge funds in the world, it's time to invest those resources to add value to the greater economy and to help rebuild our middle class, and that includes our vocational technical and community colleges.

These schools are an essential part of our efforts to train workers for today's and tomorrow's jobs. Too many workers are now in low-paying jobs or have left the labor force completely. Connecticut's labor force participation rate has plummeted — which means that approximately 60,000 people who are currently unable to acquire the skills demanded by today's employers have simply stopped seeking work. That's got to change.

We've got to engage workers eager to leave low-skill jobs and who can and want to develop new skills through vocational-technical and community college programs. We can connect Connecticut workers to Connecticut industries and that's vital to economic growth.

This is also essential to breaking one of our greatest drags: income inequality. Our vocational-technical and community college system provides a pathway for people who are disenfranchised, struggling at the bottom of the economy, to join the workforce, and through a good job, move into a middle class made stronger by their presence.

To do this, Connecticut must ensure that the curriculum of our vocational-technical schools and community colleges is consistent with the emerging job skill requirements in our state. According to the Q1 2017 Survey of Connecticut Manufacturing Workforce Needs, 98 percent of the 157 manufacturing companies that participated said they were seeking full-time workers, but did not believe there were enough trained workers in state to fill these positions quickly.

Consider these average salaries: \$21,000 for a full-time minimum wage worker in Connecticut, which jumps to \$35,720 for a technical and trade school graduate and then \$46,900 for someone with a bachelor's degree. In Connecticut, the average manufacturing salary is more than \$50,000. Meanwhile, while that four-year degree costs an average of \$127,000 — the average trade school degree costs \$33,000.

Our vocational-technical schools and community colleges must be maximized. There really is a place for every single person in Connecticut's economy, so let's make room. Their future, and our state's, depend on it.

I thank the Committee for re-evaluating the best way to fund our higher education system, and for the opportunity to express my support for focusing greater attention on our state's technical training schools and community colleges.