



Office of Higher Education

At a Glance

TIMOTHY D. LARSON, *Executive Director appointed in 2019*

Office of Higher Education established - 2011

Statutory authority – Conn. Gen. Statutes Section 10a-1d

Central Office – 450 Columbus Boulevard, Suite 707, Hartford, 06103-1841

Number of full-time employees – 27 total (23 filled - 4 vacancies)

2020-21 Recurring Operating Expenses - \$ 37.5 million

Organizational Structure: Division of Academic Affairs, Division of Programs and Student Services, and Division of Finance and Human Resources

Mission

The Office of Higher Education seeks to advance the promise of postsecondary education for all Connecticut citizens, and to advocate on behalf of students, taxpayers, and the postsecondary schools and colleges under its purview. The Office carries out its mission by assuring that students have access to postsecondary institutions which meet the highest standards of academic quality, by administering the state's student financial aid programs, by serving as an information and a consumer protection resource, and by fostering interaction and collaboration among postsecondary institutions and other entities.

Statutory Responsibility

The Office of Higher Education is charged by statute to uphold state standards of academic quality, to administer college financial aid, and to operate a variety of programs including the Alternate Route to Certification.

To maintain standards of quality, the Office licenses and accredits independent colleges and universities, licenses in-state programs offered by out-of-state institutions, and regulates the operations of Connecticut's postsecondary career schools which include occupational schools, hospital-based schools, and barber and hairdressing schools.

Among degree-granting private institutions, 18 non-profit, two for-profit and six from outside the state were approved by the agency to operate in Connecticut. Among non-degree schools, 57 occupational schools, three hospital-based schools, and 37 hairdresser and barber schools were approved to operate.

The agency's other major statutory responsibility is to administer state student financial aid funds which are disbursed through the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship Program. Other state programs managed by the agency include the Alternate Route to Certification and the Minority Advancement Program. Federal responsibilities include serving as the State Approval Agency for programs enrolling veterans, and as the state's lead agency for AmeriCorps, the national service program. The Office also administers the John R. Justice Grant Program; and serves as a clearinghouse for student complaints as stipulated in federal regulations.

Public Service

Building a highly-educated workforce to meet Connecticut's economic and societal needs serves as the framework for the Office of Higher Education's public service activities.

To prepare talented adults to become teachers, the Office conducted its Alternate Route to Certification (ARC) program. In existence for 35 years, ARC is operated through the Office of Higher Education and is approved by the Connecticut State Board of Education.

The ARC program offers subject-based methods classes and training in core areas of teaching including, but not limited to the Common Core State Standards, classroom management, differentiated instruction, lesson planning, assessment of student learning, special education and Section 504, English Language learners, and integrating technology in the classroom. ARC students observe classrooms and work with Connecticut TEAM trained cooperating teachers and ARC evaluators during an 8-week student practicum experience.

ARC's 2020-2021 program prepared 83 adults in business education, English language arts, family and consumer sciences, mathematics, sciences, technology education and world languages (Arabic, Chinese, French, German, and Spanish). In June 2021, 36% of the 2020-2021 class were from minority groups and 57% held master's and/or Ph.D. credentials.

An extension of the agency's public service role is carried out by the Connecticut Commission on Community Service (Serve Connecticut) which is administered by the OHE staff. The Commission is a governor-appointed entity that encourages engagement in service and volunteer efforts, and provides oversight to Connecticut's AmeriCorps state programming. With federal funds, the Commission sponsors AmeriCorps, by awarding nonprofit agencies to respond to local needs. In exchange for a service year, AmeriCorps members receive a Segal AmeriCorps Education Award of up to \$6,345 that can be used to pay for college or to pay back qualified student loans. Since 1994, more than 16,000 Connecticut residents have served approximately 22 million hours and earned education awards totaling more than \$56.1 million.

Last year more than 1100 Americans of all ages and backgrounds united to meet local needs, strengthen communities, and expand opportunity through national service in Connecticut. AmeriCorps invested more than \$8.2 million in federal funding to support cost-effective community solutions, working hand in hand with local partners to empower individuals to help communities tackle their toughest challenges. AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers in Connecticut are preparing

today's students for tomorrow's jobs, helping communities and families impacted by COVID-19, reducing crime and reviving cities, connecting veterans to services, fighting the opioid epidemic, helping seniors live independently, and rebuilding communities after disasters. AmeriCorps members and AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers served at more than 300 locations across Connecticut, including schools, food banks, homeless shelters, health clinics, youth centers, veterans' facilities, and other nonprofit and faith-based organizations. Through a unique public-private partnership, AmeriCorps and its partners generated more than \$4.8 million in outside resources from businesses, foundations, public agencies, and other sources in Connecticut in the last year. This local support strengthened community impact and increased the return on taxpayer dollars.

ConnectiCorps, a governor's initiative, was developed in direct response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on critical nonprofit infrastructure in the state. Since Connecticut first enacted its "Stay Home, Stay Safe" COVID-19 response emergency orders in March 2020, Connecticut nonprofits that provide essential services in the areas of food security, housing, anti-poverty assistance, and more experienced reductions in capacity and critical resources even as the demand for their services has increased. ConnectiCorps AmeriCorps members provide capacity-building support around volunteer generation to a wide variety of Connecticut safety net nonprofits demonstrating diverse needs. ConnectiCorps service sites include a community health center, a food pantry, a child guidance clinic, and a disability services provider among others. Their efforts to date have resulted in creative strategies like a unique partnership with a state college to create a student club around volunteering at a food distribution organization, addition of a volunteer-managed food security program at a child guidance clinic, expansion of a disability services organization's delivery to a wider regional territory to reach more rural settings, and more.

The Office of Higher Education continued to operate the Minority Advancement Program (MAP), which gives middle and high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds the skills, knowledge and academic support they need to succeed in college. MAP provides funds, on a competitive review basis, to Connecticut colleges and universities to support activities that strengthen student readiness for college as well as retention and graduation. In FY21, MAP focused its funding on the Promoting Academically Successful Students (PASS) initiative to address those students of color who are placed on academic probation and need additional support to redress their academic standing. A successful student of the PASS program will develop sustainable college acumen skills to remain on track to graduation and be removed from academic probation.

System-wide decreased enrollment in Connecticut colleges and universities have posed a pressing impact on budget planning. Declining enrollment coupled with financial turbulence has created a laser focus on prioritizing retention and implementing targeted interventions to support student success. PASS bridges this gap by tracking persistence data, to ensure campuses are providing an environment that supports student success and has the safeguards in place to keep students on track. Two persistence data strategies the PASS initiative incorporates in implementation are academic milestones and on-track indicators. Establishing milestones give students clear, measurable academic checkpoints to achieve, while on-track indicators outline enrollment and behavior patterns for students to follow. Milestones are step-by-step, academic goals for students to complete in order to graduate.

Incorporating these milestones into retention strategies has yielded strong results for institutions. A key milestone monitored, is the return for subsequent semesters. In the 2020-2021 academic year, 92% of identified PASS students returned for the following spring semester, after completing their fall semester coursework. Equally important for supporting students is keeping abreast of on-track indicators. On-track indicators keep students progressing toward their degrees, and have been shown to increase a student's chances of graduating. The first level of tracking is remediation. At this stage, students are provided consultation and encouragement to begin remedial or early college-level coursework to get in front of any significant learning gaps that may present itself in subsequent semesters. In the most recent completed academic year, nearly 60% of PASS participants improved their grades from fall semester to spring semester and were able to be removed from academic probation.

Improvements/Achievements FY 2022-2021

During the year, the Office of Higher Education continued to administer the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship Program, and review and approve new academic programs proposed by Connecticut independent colleges and universities.

Working with college financial aid officers, the Office of Higher Education distributed \$33.4 million to 11,404 undergraduates enrolled in Connecticut's public and private colleges and universities through the two components of the Roberta B. Willis Scholarship Program: 1) a need-based merit scholarship administered directly by the Office of Higher Education, 2) a need-based grant program administered by participating colleges.

Additionally, the agency administered the scholarship component of the state's Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP). GEAR UP is a federally funded college access grant program. The Office of Higher Education disbursed \$2,486,537 in GEAR UP scholarship funds to 852 students attending 140 colleges and universities throughout the country.

In addition, the agency administered a variety of other aid programs designed to encourage students to prepare for specific careers. The federal John R. Justice Grant Program is a loan reimbursement program for public defenders and prosecutors who commit to working in their current jobs for at least three years. Connecticut received \$37,298 for 2019 which was distributed to 60 grantees.

To strengthen diversity in the state's teacher workforce, the Office of Higher Education awarded Minority Teacher Incentive Grants to 85 minority students totaling \$392,500, and loan reimbursement stipends to 32 former grant recipients totaling \$61,627 who are now teaching in Connecticut.

Apart from financial aid, the agency's other major focus centered on licensing and accrediting academic programs. P.A. 19-26, allows certain non-profit, private institutions of higher education to be exempt from the Office of Higher Education's program approval process. Among the exempt institutions, there were 66 programs approved without undergoing the approval process. Among the 66 programs, 3 was an associate degree program, 22 were bachelor's degree programs, 13 certificates, 25 were master's degree program and no doctoral degree programs. For the non-exempt institutions, which are still required to go through the Office of Higher Education's program approval process, nine programs were licensed.

At the institutional level, the Office of Higher Education reviewed and re-licensed one institution.

Regarding the state's postsecondary career schools, the Office of Higher Education approved four new occupational schools, re-approved 18 existing schools, investigated 5 formal complaints, and worked with nine schools that closed in compliance with state statutes. There were no hospital-based re-approval for FY20.

Carrying out its oversight of hairdresser and barber schools, the Office of Higher Education re-approved 8 existing schools, and closed 3 schools in compliance with state statutes. There were 5 new schools approved and 4 complaints investigated for hairdresser and barber schools.

As the Connecticut State Approving Agency (SAA) for veterans' education benefits, the Office of Higher Education processed 56 initial, revised and updated approval actions for institutions and training facilities eligible to enroll veterans; conducted 12 inspection visits, one technical assistance visit, and 9 compliance survey visits to schools, colleges and training facilities; and provided information to active duty service members and veterans regarding their educational benefits at outreach events. Staff approved 2,176 programs and disapproved 150 programs for degree- and non-degree-granting institutions and training organizations at approved facilities.

Information Reported as Required by State Statute

The Office of Higher Education provides information on trends in postsecondary education, and in June published a comprehensive report covering enrollment, admissions, graduation rates, tuition and fees, endowments, state funding, instructional expenses, faculty and staffing, and student financial aid.

Earlier in the year, the Office reported that fall 2019 enrollment at Connecticut colleges and universities fell 0.3 percent to 194,792 students compared to the previous fall. The decline was due mostly to losses in full-time enrollment at the undergraduate level. More specifically, the numbers of full-time undergraduates fell by 2.5 percent while overall part-time undergraduate enrollment was down 5.3 percent.

The latest graduation statistics show that Connecticut colleges and universities awarded 46,336 degrees in 2019-20, down 2.7 percent from the previous year, after rebounding from a down year the previous year.

Just over half of all awards (51.1 percent) were bachelor's degrees, 24.9 percent were masters and 13.3 percent were associates. The largest annual decrease was in undergraduate certificates with 613 fewer awarded in 2020. The number of associates' and undergraduate degrees and also declined. Connecticut's public colleges and universities produced 79 percent of all associate's degrees, 51 percent of all bachelor's degrees, and 30 percent of all master's degrees.

Women earned 59.7 percent of all degrees, a slight increase over 2019. Women earned more degrees than men at every degree level, and slightly less than half of all the degrees earned by women were earned at public colleges.

A total of 13,743 degrees and certificates were earned by individuals from minority groups in 2020, representing 29.7 percent of award recipients, up from 29.3 percent in 2019. Black students earned 8.9 percent of awards compared to 8.9 percent in 2019; Hispanic students earned 11.4 percent of awards compared to 11.4 percent in 2019; Asian or Pacific Islander students earned 5.8 percent of awards compared to 5.7 percent in 2019; and white students earned 58.1 percent of awards compared to 58.0 percent in 2019. Award recipients whose race and ethnicity is unknown earned 3.8% of awards as compared to 4.6 percent in 2019.

The proportion of degrees earned in the social sciences and health & fitness outpaced growth in all other fields over the previous year. Conversely, all other disciplines declined year over year. Over the last 10 years, the largest growth in degrees conferred has been in the fields of science, technology, engineering, mathematics, health & fitness, criminal justice & protective services, and technicians & trades.