

Legislative Budget and Finance Committee
Report on the Establishment of the
Northern Pennsylvania Regional College
Conducted Pursuant to Act 2014-126
and Act 2016-86
Report Presentation by Anne Witkonis
December 20, 2022

Good morning. Act 126 of 2014, and subsequently Act 86 of 2016, provides for the establishment, operation, administration, and funding of a rural regional college (RRC) in a multicounty rural area that was underserved in terms of comprehensive community college education and workforce development. These acts also directed the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee (LBFC) to review the success of the college in satisfying the goals set forth in its plan, as well as the needs of the multicounty area the college was established to serve, to identify the services provided by the College, and to provide demographic and program data. An interim report was submitted to the General Assembly in June 2018, and today we are releasing our final report.

As the Northern Pennsylvania Regional College (NPRC) plan was only approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) in May 2017, the data required for the interim report was not available and instead we prepared a brief report updating the General Assembly on the progress that has been made through June 2018. Similarly, the college did not become independent until January 2020, and that, along with the impact

of Covid-19 on the delivery of service, limited our analysis for this final report. Therefore, we are not able to assess success in meeting the overall goals of its plan but do report on the progress of the college in key areas since academic year 2017. Our review period covered primarily fall 2017 through fall 2021.

The NPRC initially partnered with Gannon University to provide education to rural students in the nine contiguous counties of northcentral and northwestern Pennsylvania—Cameron, Crawford, Elk, Erie, Forest, McKean, Potter, Venango, and Warren. The college offers courses at 25 instructional locations throughout the region by combining traditional classroom instruction with synchronous delivery of instruction to remote classrooms through the use of live interactive television technology. One change of note in the geographic area is the establishment of Erie County Community College which opened in July 2021.

Since our last report, the NPRC, in addition to establishing its independence, continues its progress toward accreditation. In September 2021, NPRC's Accreditation Readiness Report was submitted for review by an assigned peer review team. NPRC's initial timelines and goals, however, have not been met as the initial plan was delayed, along with funding, as detailed in our 2018 report. For example, PDE approved the college plan

two months after originally anticipated, and NPRC began operating independently of Gannon about a year and a half after its planned date of summer 2018.

From fall 2017 through fall 2019 when NPRC and Gannon were in partnership, the school served 510 degree-seeking and non-degree seeking students. From spring 2020 through fall 2021, 379 students were attending NPRC. Although actual enrollment exceeded projected enrollment in academic years (AY) 2018-19 and 2019-20, enrollment in AY 2020-21 was about two-thirds of projections. We found NPRC has a retention rate of 62 percent, defined as a student who attends any term in an academic year and then returns any term in the following academic year.

Of the academic students, during academic year 2020-21:

- 75 percent of students were female;
- 62 percent of students were 29 years of age or younger;
- 87 percent of students were white;
- 64 percent were first-generation college students; and
- 62 percent were from Elk, Erie, and Warren Counties.

NPRC offers dual enrollment to high school students to take courses at both the high school and college levels at the same time. It does so through agreements with seven

school districts; however, we found dual enrollment declined in recent academic terms. This has been attributed, in part, to the lack of accreditation.

The college also has Articulation Agreements with the Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania (CU) (the integrated universities of Bloomsburg, Lock Haven, and Mansfield). This provides transferability of NPRC credits to CU universities and guarantees transfer opportunities for certain associate degrees. NPRC has a similar arrangement with the University of Pittsburgh-Titusville, for nursing students.

NPRC has graduated 41 (20 from Gannon University/NPRC and 21 from NPRC) students since 2014 through fall 2021. According to NPRC graduate survey responses from the 21 graduates, five are pursuing nursing degrees at the University of Pittsburgh – Titusville, and one is pursuing a four-year degree at another institution. Students have also earned various certifications at NPRC.

In addition, based on the survey responses, about half of the graduates were employed within three months of graduation, or pursuing a degree at another institution. About the same number were employed a year after graduation or pursuing a degree at another institution. The majority of graduates responding to a follow-up survey from

NPRC indicated that the college met their academic and employment development needs.

Another goal for establishing the NPRC was to provide workforce development (WFD) training to enable individuals to prepare for employment or for ongoing training for current employees. NPRC offers both sponsored and customized workforce development courses. A workforce development course is considered sponsored when the employer enrolls and pays for its employees to participate in the course. These courses are also open to the public to self-pay. Twenty-nine employers have paid for 75 employees to attend courses in, for example, blueprint reading, metallurgy, and medical technician training; 283 enrollees were self-paid. In addition, 266 employees completed 7 customized courses that were developed for individual employers. Courses included precision machining, machining and metal fabrication, and supervisory skills training.

Although the workforce development training is offered to companies throughout Pennsylvania, the majority of the participants were from Erie, Elk, Warren, Clearfield, and Crawford Counties. We spoke with several employers who have used the workforce development services and all stated that they found the courses useful, the cost reasonable, and the flexibility both in scheduling the sessions, as well as in the components of the sessions, as influencing the companies' use of the services.

Of the students enrolled in non-credit bearing workforce development courses, during academic year 2020-21:

- 65 percent were female;
- 38 percent were 29 years of age or younger; and
- 69 percent were white.

Overall, we found that NPRC provides services to the nine-county area by offering opportunities for two-year degrees, certifications, and workforce development and training as presented in its approved plan. The agreements with other institutions have allowed students to transfer to those institutions to complete their academic studies. In addition, both students and employers are generally satisfied with the workforce development services through NPRC. As I stated earlier, however, due to the short time NPRC has operated as an independent college, we cannot offer an opinion on whether, at this time, NPRC is successful in meeting the goals of its plan. Therefore, we recommend the General Assembly consider directing the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee to conduct a study of the Northern Pennsylvania Regional College in five years to determine whether the college has met its plan goals and become an accredited college.

Finally, I would like to thank the Northern Pennsylvania Regional College President, Susan Snelick, Vice President of Academic and Student Affairs Melinda Saunders, Registrar Lori McNeal, and other staff for their excellent cooperation with this report.

Thank you.