

# CONNECTION

NEW ENGLAND'S JOURNAL

OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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The New England Board of Higher Education is a nonprofit, congressionally authorized, interstate agency whose mission is to foster cooperation and the efficient use of resources among New England's approximately 280 colleges and universities. NEBHE was established by the New England Higher Education Compact, a 1955 agreement among the states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Vermont. NEBHE operates a variety of programs for New England students, including the tuition-saving Regional Student Program, and advances regional discussion of critical issues through a conference series and the quarterly journal, CONNECTION.

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## EDITOR'S MEMO

It's one of the curses of the New Economy. New England companies complain that they can't find workers, especially in technology fields, while high school dropouts and older workers from New Haven to Madawaska are shut out of good jobs for lack of skills.

Workforce training would seem to offer one solution. But even as a study by the American Society for Training and Development confirms that investing in training improves a company's financial performance, plenty of employers find the investment too risky.

Journalist Ralph Whitehead captured their skepticism at a New England Board of Higher Education workforce conference last spring where all the buzz was about the soaring cost of Boston's Central Artery project. "Say what you want about the Big Dig," quipped Whitehead, "but it's not going to move to North Carolina as an investment in training people might."

Training also gets short shrift in policy circles. As a matter of policy, several New England states do not reimburse community colleges for worker training. And in refusing to fully fund President Clinton's budget request for job training, Congress this year will effectively deny training and job search assistance to 100,000 dislocated workers and 50,000 youths.

Higher education's role in preparing the New Economy workforce, meanwhile, is anything but clear. At the NEBHE conference, University of Southern Maine economist Charlie Colgan explained that his Maine workforce assessment project is finding that a lot of people with low levels of education, say eighth grade, are quite content with their current skill levels and have no intention of continuing their education.

And though the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education and the University of Massachusetts, among others, have launched programs to better prepare students for information technology jobs, New Economy employers offer a moving target. Indeed, New Hampshire state Rep. Bill Belvin displayed a chart revealing that just 30 percent of the people who earn six figures at one Route 128 high-tech firm hold degrees in any science or engineering field, while more than 60 percent have degrees in "non-IT" humanities or social sciences fields, and 10 percent have no college degree at all.

Former Connecticut Higher Education Commissioner Andrew De Rocco warned further that technology is changing so rapidly that employees who take time away from the workplace to earn a new degree may be hopelessly behind their colleagues when they return.

"There isn't a workforce problem," Colgan concluded. "There are many workforce problems."

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George McCully, the foundation trustee whose *Generosity Index* compares a state's wealth with its charitable giving, notes that discussions of the labor shortage too often ignore quality of life and, more specifically, philanthropy's role in ensuring it.

McCully's index shows that Connecticut ranks 45th; Rhode Island, 46th; New Hampshire, 49th; and Massachusetts 50th among the states in generosity. (Maine and Vermont rank 29th and 30th, respectively.)

Says McCully, "The regions with whom we compete for high-tech human resources—the San Francisco Bay Area and Seattle, for example—are not only investing much more than we do in quality of life through philanthropy, but quality of life is a big issue for them, high on their list of priorities, consciously on the screen of public concerns.

"There is a whole different spirit in those regions favoring creating the good society and the good life," adds McCully. "And you see that in philanthropic investments by the high-tech sector, which relies particularly heavily on quality of life to attract and retain talented people. We need to do the same."

*John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.*