

Young workers needed

State must retain talent, attract more

Connecticut has long prided itself on having a highly skilled work force, a strong incentive in attracting new business to the state. But our work force is aging, and younger residents are leaving the state in large numbers to pursue job opportunities elsewhere.

John Beauregard, executive director of the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, was co-chairman of the Governor's Task Force on the Diversification of the Southeastern Connecticut Economy's Workforce subcommittee, and offers the following recommendations regarding how best to maintain a skilled work force for the future.

Living in the twilight years of our nation's greatest generation means we've benefited from unprecedented changes. Moving forward, however, our state's economic success requires a work force development vision that addresses the convergence of powerful factors such as:

■ Replacing the skills lost during Baby Boomer retirements. The median age of our work force continues to climb and Connecticut's population is the seventh-oldest in the nation. One out of four businesses report their top concern is the availability of skilled workers.



Beauregard

■ Attracting new workers and retaining young workers. Connecticut's population growth remains flat, and affordable housing issues where new workers live are not easily solved.

■ Keeping pace with technology. Most new and existing jobs require technology skills. For the generation in front of us, job knowledge held a half-life of 15 years before becoming obsolete. Technology dictates that today's worker skills have a half-life of about 30 months before requiring upgrading.

When it comes to the skills required to fuel our economic future, we will be challenged both in terms of quantity and quality. Unfortunately, we are losing our first line of defense to combat these issues — our young, home-grown talent. A recent study conducted between 1996-2006 tracked 170,000 Connecticut students from 10th grade to the work force, finding only 25 percent of our top math students (as measured by the CAPT test) remained a part of Connecticut's work force.

Should this finding surprise us? Not at all. The top five occupational growth areas from 2001-06 are jobs at the bottom of the compensation scale. Reversing this trend is critical if we are to retain more of our talent. Paying off college loans and barely making ends meet does not equate to the American Dream.

We have, at most, 15 years before feeling the full impact of talent loss because of huge retirement numbers. In Eastern Connecticut, we have sought to counterbalance this impact through four targeted work force investment strategies aimed at being ready:

Strategies needed

■ Upgrading the skills of our workers with (company-matched) training investments;

■ Developing talented young workers, especially in science, technology, engineering and math;

■ Educating workers about how their skill sets apply across different occupations or industries and about how to build a dynamic career path;

■ And supporting employers, particularly small business owners, in upgrading workers' skills through a Business Services unit consisting of both Chamber of Commerce and Department of Labor professionals.

The regional business, education and community leaders who volunteer their time on Eastern Connecticut's Workforce Investment Board and Elected Official Workforce Council have a reputation for innovation and performance, especially on projects supported by competitive grants. Funding talent development in our work force produces a significant return on investment for families, communities, employers and the state.

Pursue initiatives

Gov. M. Jodi Rell has placed priority for new spending on responsible economic development. In order to adjust our strategy to match the work force environment we face, the following priorities should be pursued:

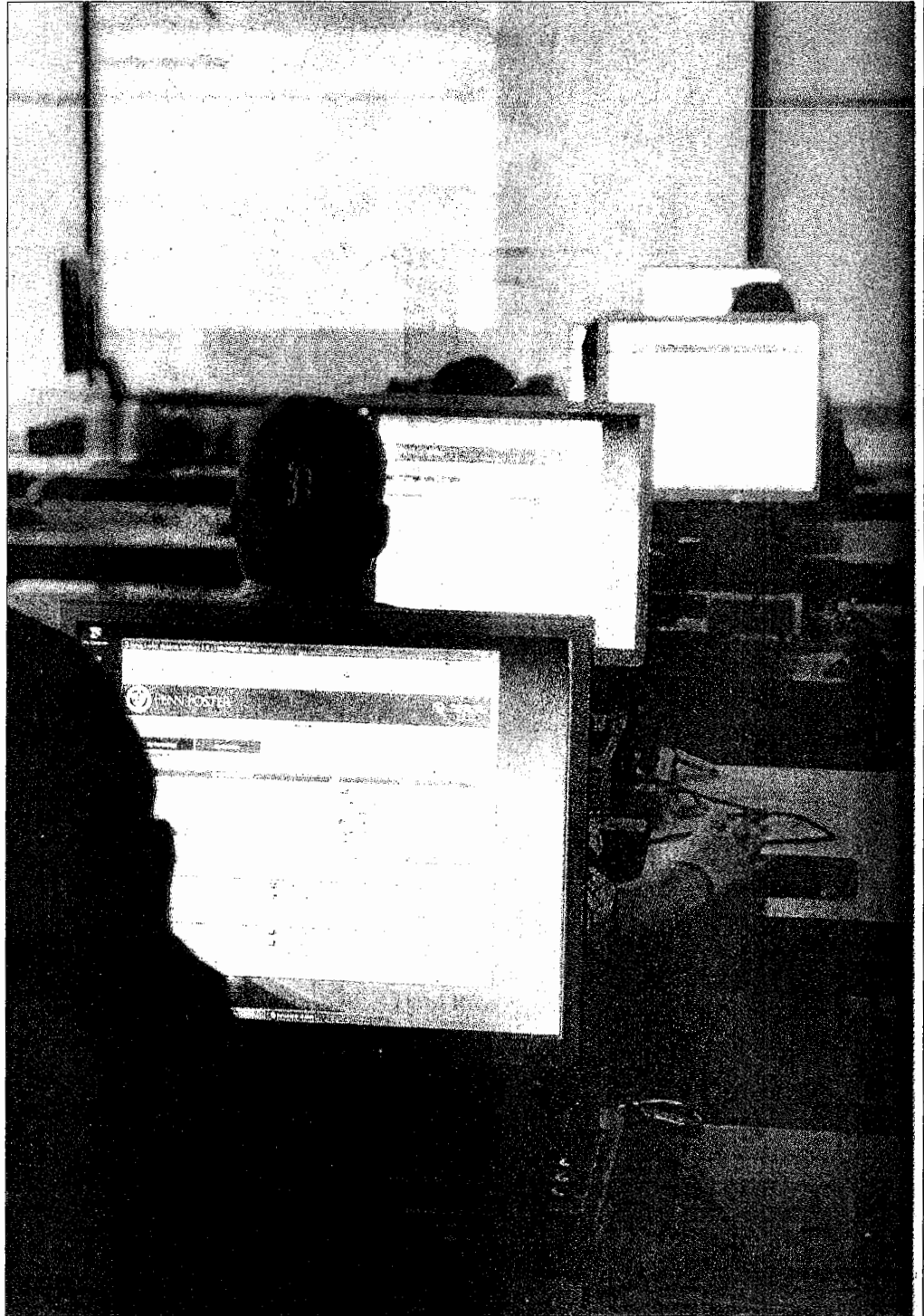
- Support the creation of a \$3 million training pool that matches training investments made by Connecticut employers to worker skills. The stakes are too high for Connecticut to be ranked at the bottom in terms of our incumbent worker training investment.

- Fund \$2 million to accelerate and expand efforts under way in the state's five work force investment areas to build viable career paths for Connecticut's youth.

- Support funding increases for the Community College System — which plays a pivotal role in low-cost alternatives that “expand the talent pipeline” — especially for our younger workers who balance work and school through a commitment to lifelong learning.

- Support the Campaign for a Working Connecticut promoting economic competitiveness through worker skill enhancements and self-sufficiency strategies.

Our window of opportunity closes more with each passing day as more individuals retire and a few more talented young workers leave. The solutions, strategic partnerships and service infrastructure exist. The aforementioned investment strategy in the context of a \$16 billion state budget will produce a significant return on investment in the short-term — and prove critical to the success of future generations.



Khôi Tôn/Norwich Bulletin
An online drafting course for Electric Boat is conducted Jan. 17 at the Three Rivers Community College Thames River campus. Those who complete the course may be hired by Electric Boat.