



**Joint Committee on Higher Education – September 22, 2005**

**S.780 – An Act To Support Access and Excellence in Public Higher Education in the Commonwealth**

***Testimony submitted by: Alan Macdonald, Executive Director***

Chairman O’Leary, Chairman Murphy, members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today on S.780, An Act to Support Access and Excellence in Public Higher Education in the Commonwealth. The Massachusetts Business Roundtable (MBR) urges passage of this legislation, and is participating in a campaign coordinated by the higher education community to support it. For the first time in recent memory, the three segments of public higher education - UMass, and the state and community colleges – are working together to educate the general public and the legislature to the needs of public higher education and have joined together in support of a proposal to address those needs. MBR is happy to be a part of this effort.

This is an opportune time for business and higher education to work together, because more and more job vacancies require certificates, associate degrees or full degrees. As employers look to fill today’s jobs and ensure a pipeline of workers for the future, it is imperative that our public higher education institutions are provided the tools necessary to meet those demands. S.780 – by proposing investments in operating funds, expansion of capital funds and changes in general law that allow public higher education to become more entrepreneurial – provides just those tools.

MBR has been directly involved in public education issues for the past 25 years: in mentoring through school/business partnerships in the early 1980’s; in system management changes through school/business partnerships in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s; in K-12 education reform in the 1990’s; in teacher support programs through all these years; and more recently in higher education efforts to emphasize science, technology, engineering and math in both teacher and student training.

We have worked closely in the past two years with Chancellor of Higher Education Judith Gill and Director of Workforce Development Jane Edmonds through the Commonwealth’s “Reach Higher” program to draw the curriculum of community colleges closer to matching the workforce skills needed in today’s market place. The experience we offer in job training, as discussed in Reach Higher, dates back to the beginning of the 1980’s, when we were involved with the start-up of the Bay State Skills Corporation, and has grown through our work with the Commonwealth Corporation since then.

Through our work with the Reach Higher program, we learned that there are over 1,000,000 adults in Massachusetts in need of education to perform in the workplace. With some overlapping in the following statistics: between 180,000 and 200,000 adults are categorically unemployed in Massachusetts; over 750,000 adults do not have the requisite reading skills; another 150,000 are without basic English speaking skills, and at least 10% to 20% of the workforce, perhaps up to 700,000 workers, lack the basic skills that would allow them to move up a career ladder.

The Economic Stimulus bill currently before the Legislature will help in this area, but we need a longer-term strategy that does not depend on a “from-time-to-time” effort in education.

For today’s hearing, which focuses on Community Colleges, I will refer specifically to five areas where the Roundtable sees the need for the state to show greater support for higher education:

- First, there needs to be a clear message about the link between higher education and workforce development. Higher education is about more than workforce development, yes; but it needs to include a strong recognition of its link to workforce skills. Both the Commonwealth and the students are making a big investment in the system, and they both need to see that their investments have a tangible return.
- Second, the clear message must be backed by consistency in funding for higher education programs. Colleges, especially at the community college level with non-traditional higher education students, need to develop the infrastructure of mentoring, guidance and curriculum development that keeps students in school. Retention of students to complete their course of education is a big issue, and past programs have shown that non-traditional students need good coaching to help them through the process. This is something that community colleges cannot build into the system when the funding goes in and out over the years, and it has gone out so substantially in the past few years, as it has in other times of difficult budget cycles.
- Third, financial aid needs to be better tailored to non-traditional students, those with jobs, families and other demands that require them to be part-time, evening or weekend students. We need a grant program that meets their needs, because they do not qualify under the traditional formulas we have used for financial help, and these are the students that probably need our help the most.
- Fourth, the Commonwealth is realizing a return on its investments in this area, so accountability must be built into the system in a way that does not exist at this time. Accountability is a business mantra, of course, but it has to be for the state

as well, especially in this instance. We need to know if the certificates and degrees offered are achieving the enrollment, retention, graduation and career development patterns that the students are seeking. This is a recommendation that comes from the joint Mass Business Roundtable/AFL-CIO State Labor Council task force of 1998 on this issue. Representative Steve LeDuc and then-Senator Steve Lynch served on that task force with leaders from business and labor.

- Fifth, we need to encourage private/public partnerships in certificate programs that bring new workers into the workforce and help current workers advance on a career ladder. Bay State Skills Corporation did this well in the 1980's, and we can do it again, not as a public assistance need-based program, but as an education needs-based program.

Finally, there are two specific items that come to mind from prior testimony to legislative committees on this subject: 1) we need to allow community colleges to be reimbursed for funding evening, weekend and summer classes, which I understand is not currently allowed under MGL Chap.15A Sec. 26; and 2) we need to allow course credits for the occupational training that leads to a certificate, so that the those credits can lead to academic degrees that will help workers advance on career ladders.

As the Massachusetts Business Roundtable has testified before, using the lessons from the Crozier Report written in 1990, the Commonwealth must continue to invest in the future, even in the most difficult economic times. It is so difficult, if not impossible, to catch up with lost opportunity if we neglect to make necessary investments in the state's education and infrastructure.

Speaking just to the bill before this committee today, the investment proposed in S.780 is enlightened self-interest for those of us who care deeply about the future of Massachusetts. We urge enactment of the bill, and we urge consistent support in the years ahead.