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Connecticut is home to top universities that graduate thousands of students each year who are in high demand among employers.

Job One

For universities, colleges and even high schools, future employment is a key focus

By Cara McDonough

When it comes to the innovative workforce development initiatives at institutes of higher learning across the state, Rhona Free believes it is important to note that while these programs are always evolving, connecting students to career opportunities isn't a new idea in Connecticut.

At the University of Saint Joseph in West Hartford, where Free is president, they've been pushing the idea since the institution's founding in 1932.

"At most of the public universities, this has always been part of their tradition: figuring out what the local employers need, and how we can have students working with them while they're still students, and beyond," said Free, who also chairs the Hartford Consortium for Higher Education. "We've had those types of relationships for decades, but they've evolved."

The idea is to prepare students by equipping them with the skills they'll need for the state's job sector, allowing them to attain a job and live here post-graduation, while ensuring local companies have the employees they need to thrive: a win-win.

The leadership at the University of Saint Joseph has fostered many partnerships with local businesses over the years, from healthcare to tech to nonprofits, and also keenly observes upcoming career trends in the state, then offers appropriate classes and training.

"We constantly survey the regional economy and look at where there are growing sectors," Free said.

An example? When the university heard that FinTech company Ideanomics was planning to build a \$283 million development in West Hartford – slated to be completed this year and adding more than 300 jobs to the region – the university added a blockchain certification course to its roster, one of the company's featured technologies.

The university also maintains dedicated partnerships with healthcare organizations, including Middlesex, Hartford and Saint Francis hospitals, placing nursing and other students in rotations and internships that could turn into full-time jobs post-graduation.

"It's a way of making sure, first of all, that our faculty is well-acquainted with the hospital setting and that they can ensure our students are being prepared in the way that meets the needs of those employers," said Free.

Efforts like these are happening at institutions of higher learning across the state. "Connecticut employers have had a huge input in our curriculum," said Philip Moore, director of marketing and communications at Goodwin College, a career-focused East Hartford-based college that trains students in business, nursing, social work, and much more.

A few years ago, when the college realized there was a shortage of skilled employers in the manufacturing sector, it reached out to businesses, asking, "what are you looking for?"

"So we aren't just putting courses together; we are giving people marketable skills," said Moore. The focus is always changing to meet the needs of the community, and their programming includes taking their education off-campus, too, conducting specialized training with businesses and reaching out to local middle and high school students.

Goodwin's community-minded focus goes beyond job prep; in

recent years, it has concentrated on raising funds not only for student scholarships but for local revitalization, making the campus something downtown East Hartford could celebrate after years of suffering job losses and other challenges.

Established in 1999, Goodwin not only reclaimed and repurposed brownfields to build its riverside campus in a formerly blighted area of town, but is laser-focused on boosting the economic well-being and educational prospects of both the broader community and area residents who otherwise might not have had the opportunity to go to college. Having grown its campus to include its main academic building, two magnet high schools, an elementary school, and a business and manufacturing center, Goodwin is now the second largest taxpayer in East Hartford.

Its innovative programs include initiatives that connect economically challenged students to supportive social programs; healthcare and other programs that benefit disadvantaged community members; and a sustainability-themed magnet high school that allows high school students to earn up to 30 tuition-free credits and enroll at Goodwin with their freshman year essentially completed, at no cost to their families.

In a 2017 blog post on the subject, the college's president, Mark Scheinberg, wrote about that goal, stating: "I believe it's in our DNA to do things differently at Goodwin." He wrote that they purposefully developed Goodwin into "an educational institution that sought to be an economic contributor to Connecticut, graduating well-trained professionals ready to enter the workforce."

Added Todd Andrews, Goodwin's vice president for economic and strategic development, "we believe we are offering proof that all of us – our employees and the town residents – are part of something exciting and new. We're bringing back a thriving town, we're bettering the lives of our students through career-focused degrees, and we're improving area businesses with better prepared employees."

At the University of Connecticut, meanwhile, strong partnerships with businesses – organized through the university's School of Business as well as its Office for Diversity and Inclusion – are a mainstay, providing students with opportunities across the state, and the nation. UConn works with Travelers insurance company, aerospace manufacturer Pratt & Whitney and other major employers to create meaningful apprenticeships, training sessions, and a bridge to full-time employment.

"These relationships help define and highlight dynamic opportunities for our students," said Kathy Hendrickson, assistant director of the Undergraduate Career Development Office at UConn's School of Business.

"Creating college-to-career pipeline programs provides innovative opportunities for our students and corporate stakeholders to determine if there is a mutual fit," added Seanice Austin, director of diversity initiatives at the school. "The college experience and career exploration process can no longer operate as separate entities."

Dr. Salvatore Menzo, superintendent of the Wallingford School District, is an enthusiastic fan and talented organizer of career



Goodwin College students get hands-on advanced-manufacturing training.

development initiatives – and thinks they should come sooner than college. In his role, Menzo has been passionately involved in bringing workforce initiatives to students in K-12, working towards changing the way even the youngest students think.

"Usually when kids say what they want to be when they grow up, they say something they know," Menzo said, noting that it's never too early to start introducing young children to some of the career opportunities right here in Connecticut. "We want to make sure our businesses have the workforce to be able to grow, or at least sustain themselves, so we need to open children's eyes to that."

Programs for high school students in Wallingford include apprenticeships with local businesses – including many in the medical and manufacturing sectors, mirroring the expanding job fields in the state. Beyond just securing job training, the programs include a six-week course each spring that allows students to work with working HR directors on résumés and interview skills, as well as getting advice for next steps. Whether it's heading right into a job after high school, going to a technical or community college, or getting a four-year degree, there are so many options for students looking to attain good work and make a living right here in Connecticut, Menzo said, and those relationships help to ensure a flourishing local economy.

Partnering with a local nonprofit, the district also reached out to underemployed or unemployed parents last year, offering a new training course that helped with interview skills, writing résumés and making connections with local employers looking for skilled workers. At the course's end, all 13 participants received job offers, and Wallingford is ready for even bigger numbers in the program this year.

Menzo has his eye on the global market, as well, forging partnerships and creating student exchange programs with countries including Australia, Argentina and Germany, allowing Wallingford students to learn of workforce opportunities in the global sphere – and about how Connecticut fits into the bigger picture.

"The key thing is, that we are trying to have students become familiar with the many professions that exist in the Connecticut economy," Menzo said. "We are giving them the exposure and authentic experiences, and opening their eyes to the opportunities that lie ahead of them." ●