

Mr. Chairman, my name is George Pruitt and I am president of Thomas Edison State College. I also currently serve as chair of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. I'd like to state that the views that I express today are my own and should not be construed as the views of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

Thomas Edison State College is one of 11 senior public colleges and universities in New Jersey. We are a specialized institution. We were founded in 1972 with the mission of providing flexible, high-quality, collegiate learning opportunities for self-directed adults. We are not a classroom-based college. The average age of our student body is approximately 40 and, while there are exceptions, we do not normally admit students under the age of 21. We begin a new semester every month. Our students come to us when they are ready and they graduate when they have completed all degree requirements. They satisfy our degree requirements by choosing from a menu of high-quality credit-earning options that include independent study, distance education, prior learning assessment, transferring credit earned at other colleges, and courses taken through the military and with other non-collegiate providers.

We offer over one hundred areas of study in the 27 different degrees we confer at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. We offer over five hundred online graduate and undergraduate courses. These courses have been developed by some of the finest course designers in the world. On average, our students transfer in approximately 57 credits. The average time to degree completion is 3.2 years for a bachelor's degree and 2.9 years for a master's degree.

Traditional metrics, such as graduation rates, retention, and time-to-completion, are not relevant to this model. Our college assumes that given their age, maturity, and circumstances, our students stop in and out as their lives are affected by their careers and family circumstances.

Almost all of our students come to us with previous college experience and credits. For example, one of our students started taking college courses in high school. After one year of college, he left school to pursue a career and eventually started his own music company. Over the years, he took classes at numerous colleges and universities, but never stayed long enough at any institution to satisfy their residency requirements. He enrolled at Thomas Edison State College and transferred in 120 credit hours from eight colleges. When we finished the evaluation of his transfer credit, he had satisfied our graduation requirement and was awarded his degree. This student was enrolled with us for approximately 30 days. So how does one calculate this retention rate or time-to-degree completion? Was it the 30 days he was enrolled with us, or the full 27 years that he spent pursuing his college education? While we can calculate and report metrics such as these, they are totally meaningless as an assessment of institutional quality or educational attainment.

However, our model of education is not suitable for *all* adult students. While we have an extensive system of student advisement and support, Thomas Edison State College students must have the skills needed to do college-level work, be self-directed, self-disciplined, and goal-oriented if they are to succeed. We do not offer remediation. Students who come to us with skills deficiencies are counseled to attend other colleges and universities that can offer more “hands on” assistance. While graduation rates, retention rates and time-to-degree are not relevant metrics, other metrics to assess accountability are. Our commitment to measuring quality through metrics is demonstrable. For example, at Thomas Edison State College, we have determined that when a student leaves before earning a degree, we need to know why, so that we can see if there is some aspect of institutional performance that we should correct. We also want to know if those who have left plan to return. For example, we know that of our students who

leave, only 5.6 percent of them do so for academic reasons. We also know that 33 percent of our graduates “stopped out” at some point during their enrollment with us and then came back to finish. There are other metrics that are important, including those related to student satisfaction, course completion, and, in the case of undergraduates, acceptance rates to graduate schools. On a survey of student satisfaction administered in 2013, 95 percent of our graduates gave the College a “good” or “excellent” rating, 94.1 percent gave our academic programs a “good” or “excellent” rating, and 97 percent said they have, or would, recommend the College to others. Of all the colleges and universities participating in the Navy College program, students enrolled at Thomas Edison State College have the highest course-completion rate of any institution in the program. Additionally, in 2013, 92.4 percent of our undergraduates who applied to graduate school were accepted.

With an enrollment in excess of 20,000 students, we are the second-largest college or university in New Jersey. While the majority of our students are in-state, the remainder can be found in every state in the union and scores of countries around the world. We are a military-friendly institution that enrolls more veterans than the rest of the senior public institutions in New Jersey combined. Our total annual in-state tuition is \$5,700, which makes us one of the most affordable senior public colleges or universities in the country.

From our very beginning as an innovative, nontraditional college, we have been obsessive about quality. We are constantly looking for objective third-party confirmation of the quality of the work we do. For example, for two out of the past three years, our undergraduates had the highest pass rate on the CPA exam of any college or university in the state. Graduates from our school of nursing, one of the state’s largest, perform in the top tier, when compared to their peers, on the state board exams.

We believe that as an exemplar of innovation, quality and affordability, we, along with some of our public-sector peers, Empire State College, in New York; University of Maryland University College; Colorado State University Global Campus; Charter Oak State College, in Connecticut; and Granite State College, in New Hampshire, as well as two private institutions that were created by public entities, Excelsior College and Western Governors University, have pioneered strategies that many other institutions are now emulating. I believe that this is a good thing.

However, I must advise you that the biggest impediment we face in adapting higher education to the contemporary needs of our nation is the current regulatory culture of the Department of Education. During my 31-year presidency, I have served in an advisory capacity to five secretaries of education, under three presidents of both parties, and I have never before seen such a predisposition for overreaching, intrusive and, sometimes, destructive use of regulatory authority. Such initiatives as “credit-hour definition,” state authorization, and the proposed federal ratings system, while well-intentioned, are ill-conceived and actually harmful. They stifle innovation, undermine sound academic judgment, and drive up costs. We need a regulatory framework that supports accountability and innovation. However, what we have now supports compliance over quality, conformity over diversity, and attempts to federalize and bureaucratize judgments that should be left to the academy, the accreditors, and the states.

It is a culture that assumes that higher education is the exclusive purview of 18-22 year olds, going to college full time. But this has not been true for a generation. The majority of college students today are over 25 and studying part time. The Federal IPEDS system only counts first-time, full-time freshman, treats transfer students as drop outs, and excludes 40 percent of the students enrolled in our colleges. It is dangerous to rely on data from this system

to make policy judgments. I would certainly acknowledge that there have been abuses around the margins, but I would urge you not to impose remedies that inflict more harm than the maladies they are attempting to cure.

My best advice to you, collectively and individually, is that when you return to your districts, meet with the presidents of your colleges and universities and get their counsel about the issues that concern you. I think you will find that we all share the same objectives. Right now, we are headed in the wrong direction.

Thank you.