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Higher-education consortium advocates for area colleges

BY DAN AMMER
dnamer@bizjournals | 716-541-1616

Local colleges have 32,000 employees who pay \$122 million a year in taxes.

They enroll about 110,500 students annually who contribute to the roughly \$3.2 billion economic impact of higher education.

They are important drivers of the economy, said Steven Harvey, executive director of WNY College Connection, a decades-old but recently reinvigorated consortium of higher-education administrators.

And yet more can be done, such as routing students toward growing fields of advanced

manufacturing and health care and turning more innovative ideas on campus into healthy local businesses.

"Buffalo is so well-positioned," said Harvey, referring to the number and diversity of higher education institutions.

"There are better ways to create a path to that kind of job," he said.

College Connection recently finished a three-year cycle with \$500,000 in funding from the John R. Oishei Foundation. It's starting a new, four-year cycle of funding for \$700,000. Seventy percent of that comes from the Oishei Foundation, while the consortium itself is putting up the rest.

The group has begun meetings and coordinated programs such as the P-16 Consortium, which brings together leaders from kindergarten to college to examine how students are educated.

Plans include a slate of meetings, collaborations and ideas—all toward the established goals of student achievement, economic development and collaboration.

The group developed a website (wnycollegeconnection.com) to be a destination for those interested in higher education. Content is supplied by the regions' 21 colleges. So far this year, the website attracted 15,295 visitors from 93 countries.

The organization has sent out 465 marketing packages to high school counselors in Central and Western New York. Though local colleges are competitors, the various presidents participating in the College Connection see the value in collaborating for a healthier system overall.

The presidents are working to link HR personnel from local corporations to academic programs, said John Hurley, Canisius College president. From those personnel, the colleges have heard the desire for critical-thinking and communication skills, and Hurley said they're working to respond to that challenge.