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**Testimony for Joint Senate Hearing - Role of Adult Education in the Workforce Development System**  
**Pennsylvania Senate Labor and Industry and Education Committees**  
**September 22, 2021**

Good morning, Chairwoman Bartolotta, Chairman Martin, Chairwoman Tartaglione, Chairwoman Williams, and distinguished members of these committees. My name is Mary Ellen Caro and I am the president & CEO of Peirce College, an independent, nonprofit regionally accredited college in Philadelphia. I want to thank both Committees for focusing on the importance of adult education. It is often overlooked and, particularly in the face of COVID-19 recovery, the need for training and education related to emerging job opportunities is most critical.

I am here today to testify on behalf of working adult students, and the institutions that serve them, and to advocate for an investment in programs that make a demonstrable difference in the future of the Commonwealth. For purposes of this discussion, education covers a broad spectrum of credit bearing and non-credit bearing programs, embedded industry credentials and other non-traditional paths of learning. There is no doubt that as higher education continues to become unbundled, the business models underpinning market driven educational options will require partnerships among constituents and providers to meet adult learner needs. I maintain that attention to these needs is not optional but essential to help improve access, lower cost and transform lives.

Why do I believe it is challenging but not impossible? Let's start with the context of Peirce College as an example. [Peirce College](#) was founded in 1865, to provide career-focused education for soldiers returning from the Civil War and was one of the country's first schools to embrace women as students. We have a long history of serving adults from across the Commonwealth and our mission is to empower adult learners to improve their lives by achieving career goals through academic offerings aligned with evolving workforce needs.

**Peirce is the only college or university in Pennsylvania that is dedicated exclusively to serving working adult students, and *U.S. News & World Report* recently ranked Peirce as having the highest percentage of adult students at any college or university in the country.**

We serve approximately 1600 undergraduate and graduate students, nearly 90% of whom are residents of the Commonwealth. Our student body is 73% female, and more than 70% of our students identify as persons of color. We are designated by the U.S. Department of Education as a Minority-Serving Institution. The average age of a Peirce student is 37, and more than half of Peirce students are considered low-income. We offer programs that directly correlate to high-demand occupations that pay family-sustaining wages. Our students demonstrate grit and determination in completing their programs despite the multitude of challenges facing them.

Peirce reflects the underserved segment of adult learners in search of a way to transform their lives and those of their families. I would now like to focus on the broader view of adult learners in general. According to the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), more than 40% of all students currently enrolled in a college or university are 25 or older. And while enrollment of traditional aged students (18-24) has been decreasing, the non-traditional and adult student segments of learners have continued to grow.

Adult students have very different needs than traditional aged college students. They need programs that allow them to advance their education and their careers without sacrificing their personal and professional responsibilities. They want shorter programs that prepare them for in-demand jobs a lot sooner than a typical two-year or four-year degree. They want the opportunity to earn credit for professional and military training and other college-level knowledge they already have. And they need guidance to understand which professional certifications employers are looking for and the support needed to earn those certifications. Supporting these students begins “Day 1” with career coaching and student services.

Adult learners typically do not have an educational journey that is linear. Many have started and stopped out of post-secondary education and have previous college credits. Peirce College and other adult focused institutions enable students to transfer those credits, thus accelerating their completion. Peirce welcomes transfer credit from accredited institutions. We accept at least 90 credits from community college partners.

Adult learners reflect a wide range of backgrounds and challenges, so it is important to consider the entire spectrum of needs of our citizens. This is why we are committed to working closely with all of the colleagues you see here today, to ensure that the ecosystem is represented.

As the Commonwealth continues to move toward recovery, after the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, I think it is important to highlight a few key statistics. The pandemic hammered Philadelphia’s labor market especially hard compared to other big cities, with about 100,000 jobs lost in March and April of 2020 and only half of them being recovered by the end of the year. A [report from Pew Charitable Trusts](#) examining the impact of COVID-19 in Philadelphia, including job losses, found that “Black and Hispanic residents of Philadelphia were two and three times more likely than white residents, respectively, to lose jobs and income, and to know someone who died from the coronavirus.”

Additionally, according to a [McKinsey report](#), as much as 10.1% of the U.S. workforce may need to transition to new occupations by 2030 because of changes accelerated by the pandemic. They found this would be particularly true for “workers with less than a college degree, members of ethnic minority groups, and women.”

Given Peirce’s 156 years of experience helping adult learners transition and advance in their careers, we as an institution knew that we could help in these recovery efforts. In direct response to the need for a strong COVID-19 recovery plan, Peirce College developed a new program called Career Bridge, to assist those in our region and throughout the Commonwealth with shorter, credential embedded and credit bearing courses that stand alone or can be transferred into degree programs.

Modeled after a formerly successful program for opportunity youth, the Career Bridge program uses proven methodology applied to today’s unique circumstances to provide upskilling opportunities for people who lost jobs, primarily due to COVID-19, and many of whom will return to a workforce where their jobs are no longer in demand or even exist. Career Bridge directly translates Peirce’s mission into action. In a matter of months, graduates will be qualified for high-demand, high-growth occupations that pay family-sustaining wages, including:

- Medical Coding
- IT User Support
- IT Network Support
- Cybersecurity
- Project Management
- Financial and Business Operations

Career Bridge is designed to accelerate Pennsylvania's equitable recovery by leveraging the current skill sets of unemployed and low-wage workers and providing the additional training, certifications, and credentials needed for them to access careers that support both the individual student and their family.

The mission of Career Bridge is to leverage skills that students already have and add new ones that will most efficiently lead students to a new career path that pays a family sustaining wage. For example, a bank teller may have years of experience and a good skill set but struggles to find work after the pandemic. Since bank tellers already possess a large percentage of the technical and power skills for quality customer service and service management roles, Career Bridge would help connect this bank teller to a new career track that builds on these existing skills. Current career tracks for Career Bridge that have similar competencies to bank tellers but include the need for a short upskilling component include IT User Support, Project Management, and Financial and Business Operations.

I highlight this program to illustrate what a solution could look like for all Pennsylvanians who have been displaced by the pandemic, and who could benefit from investment by the Commonwealth. As I mentioned previously, adult students need to be treated differently. Traditional models do not meet their needs or fit into their lives. We need to invest in programs that work around the unique needs of adults and prepare them for in-demand jobs. As you evaluate the types of programs you will consider for investment, there are a number of things I urge you to remember for this unique population:

- **Stackability is critical for adults.** Being able to earn credit for transfer credits, professional and military training and other college-level knowledge saves them time and money.
- **Time-to-completion is also critical for adults – and employers.** Adults often do not have two or four years to prepare for a new job. With the right type of programs, we can get people back to work in one year or sooner.
- **Programs should be able to apply across industries.** For example, our Career Bridge track in project management is directly applicable to applied manufacturing, agricultural businesses, and more.
- **Employer participation is critical for all parties.** When adults enter a training program, they need to see results. A credential is one success indicator, but the most important one is connection to a career that pays a family-sustaining wage. At Peirce, our Career Bridge program is working with employers across the Commonwealth to provide interview opportunities and internships for all participants. Our program curriculums have also been developed with direct employer assistance, so we know that we're preparing graduates with the knowledge employers are actually looking for.
- **Academic credentials and industry certifications should be combined to demonstrate real value.** Academic certificates and degree programs are essential to illustrating skills mastery and competency attainment. However, to complement these credentials and to further demonstrate value to employers, we have tied each of our Career Bridge tracks to an industry-recognized credential that takes it a step further. For instance, in our Medical Coding track, students earn a Certificate of Proficiency in Medical Coding, and are also prepared to sit for the American Health Information Management Association (AHIMA) Certified Coding Specialist (CCS®) exam and Certified Coding Specialist- Physician-based (CCS-P®) exam, as well as the American Academy of Professional Coders™ (AAPC) Certified Professional Coder CPC® exam. We also pay for students to sit for these exams, to remove additional obstacles that may prevent them from advancement and increased earnings. For reference:
  - [Medical coders who hold CCS® certification and have one year of experience earn an average annual salary of \\$60,160.](#)

- [Medical coders who hold the CPC® certification earn an average annual salary of \\$55,100.00 in Pennsylvania.](#)

As you explore strategies for the Commonwealth's recovery, I urge you to invest in adult students. This pandemic disproportionately affected low-income individuals and forever changed industries and our economy. We must help our fellow Pennsylvanians find a bridge to their next career and help them to cross. Investing in programs that help adults prepare for family-sustaining careers is essential to Pennsylvania's recovery and growth.

In closing, I would like to make a few recommendations for next steps.

1. Use funding from the American Rescue Plan Act to create opportunities for adults throughout the Commonwealth to upskill and reskill, especially displaced workers, veterans and those in low-wage jobs who have the will to advance their lives but who may need additional support. Opportunities for investment are possible through programs like Career Bridge, and the myriad other programs from distinguished institutions across Pennsylvania. This investment would include Chairwomen Bartolotta's SB 766, which we strongly support.
2. Continue to invest in our adult students in general – make sure they are included in PHEAA funding discussions, future grant opportunities, and as part of the Public Higher Education Funding Commission.
3. As you determine the investments that prepare residents of the Commonwealth for the future of work, consider the needs of adult students, as well as those who are traditional aged. Help them prepare for in-demand jobs, including those aligned with select professional certifications, and help them realize results quickly.

Thank you for your attention and your consideration of this very important subject. If I can answer any questions, I will be happy to do so.



## Who We Serve

Peirce College is one of the only institutions in the country with a sole focus on adults that serves a mostly minority population.

- Approximately 73% of students at Peirce College are women
- More than 80% of students at Peirce College are people of color
- Approximately 66% of Peirce's student body live in the City of Philadelphia
- Approximately 53% of students at Peirce College are Pell-eligible

## What Makes Us Unique

What sets Peirce College apart from every other institution in Pennsylvania? The students we serve and how we serve them.

**We serve our students in ways that fit their lives, not the other way around.**

We know that adults cannot sacrifice their personal and professional responsibilities to go back to college, so at Peirce, they don't have to. We've created a new model that delivers affordability, flexibility, academic integrity, and career relevancy for adult learners.

Our model is built on a network of collaborative partners dedicated to leveraging diverse credit-earning options that are aligned with stackable, market-driven academic programs that meet the unique needs of adult students and employers.

This model maximizes transfer credits and leverages prior learning assessment to lower costs, expand access, and increase flexibility for adults who need it the most in the Greater Philadelphia Region.

## Our Students: At a Glance

### Enrollment

Total students: 1,526

*Undergraduate: 1,382*

*Graduate: 144*

### Gender

73% female

27% male

### Ethnicity

58% Black/African American

19.9% White

10.5% Hispanic/Latino

2.8% Asian

5.9% Unknown

1.4% Two or more races

0.7% Non-citizen/Non-resident

0.5% Native American/Alaskan

0.3% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

### Average Age

37 years old

### Location

66% Philadelphia

87% Pennsylvania

### Financial Aid

53% Pell-eligible

82% Some form of financial aid

## Accreditations & Approvals

- American Bar Association (ABA)
- Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs (ACBSP)
- Commission on Accreditation for Health Informatics and Information Management (CAHIIM)
- Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)
- Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) alignment

Career Bridge is designed to accelerate Pennsylvania's equitable recovery by leveraging the current skill sets of unemployed and low-wage workers and providing the additional training, certifications and credentials needed for them to access family-sustaining careers.

Peirce College intends to offer this program at no cost for up to 50 participants through partner funding. In a matter of months, graduates will be qualified for high-demand occupations, including:

- Medical Coding
- IT User Support
- IT Network Support
- Cybersecurity
- Project Management
- Financial and Business Operations

Career Bridge builds on Peirce College's mission to empower adult learners to improve their lives through academic offerings aligned with evolving workforce needs.

## How It Works: 5 Steps

Students will work one-on-one with Peirce counselors to complete the Career Bridge program in 6-to-9 months and navigate unexpected career change.

**Step 1:** Explore and navigate sustainable employment opportunities.

**Step 2:** Determine how existing skills, training and prior learning map to skills required for sustainable occupations.

**Step 3:** Determine if students can earn credit for those skills via Peirce's Prior Learning Assessment program.

**Step 4:** Identify and provide the training, certification and credentials still needed for the occupation.

**Step 5:** Connect students with employment opportunities in the region, and help them apply for jobs, prepare for interviews and leverage the College's alumni network.

**Peirce College is designated as a Minority Serving Institution (MSI) by the U.S. Department of Education, and is the only college or university in Pennsylvania dedicated specifically to serving adults.**

### Enrollment

Approximately 1,526

### Gender

73% female

27% male

### Ethnicity

58% Black/African American

19.9% Caucasian

10.5% Hispanic/Latino

2.8% Asian

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1.4% Two or more races

0.5% Native American/Alaskan

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### Average Age

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### Financial Aid

53% Pell-eligible

### Proof Points

Our model is built on the structure of a tested program previously offered at Peirce College with the following outcomes:

- 75% program retention
- 87% graduate success rate (gainfully employed, enrolled in college, or both within 4 months)
- 74% employed full time
- 40% earnings growth over peers who did not complete

# Current Career Tracks

Peirce College has developed the following Career Tracks for Career Bridge that focus on high-growth occupations that pay family sustaining wages, and gaining the skills and employer-recognized certifications needed for those jobs.

## MEDICAL CODING with CCS® or CPC® certification

- 25 credits via an undergraduate Certificate of Proficiency that apply to undergraduate degrees at Peirce, and AHIMA's CCS® or AAPC's CPC® certification.
- Focuses on standards of information management, classification systems, and the revenue cycle process.

Jobs with similar competencies:

- Home Health Aides
- Medical Assistants
- Fitness Trainers
- Receptionists

## IT USER SUPPORT with A+ certification

- 19 credits via an undergraduate Certificate of Proficiency and CompTIA A+ certification that apply to undergraduate degrees at Peirce.
- Blends baseline competencies in hardware, software, operating systems, networking, security, and basic IT infrastructure with soft skills and customer experience fundamentals.

Jobs with similar competencies:

- Cashiers
- Service Workers
- Retail Workers
- Bank Tellers

## IT NETWORK SUPPORT with Network+ certification

- 19 credits via an undergraduate Certificate of Proficiency and CompTIA Network+ certification that apply to undergraduate degrees at Peirce.
- Blends foundational competencies in the design, implementation and administration of networks, network operations and security, and infrastructure and troubleshooting with soft skills and customer experience fundamentals.

Jobs with similar competencies:

- Entry-level IT workers
- IT User Support specialists

## CYBERSECURITY with Security+ certification

- 19 credits via an undergraduate Certificate of Proficiency and CompTIA Security+ certification that apply to undergraduate degrees at Peirce.
- Blends foundational competencies in identifying attacks, threats and vulnerabilities, architecture and implementation of security, response, and governance, risk and compliance with soft skills and customer experience fundamentals.

Jobs with similar competencies:

- IT User Support Specialists
- IT Network Support Specialists

## PROJECT MANAGEMENT with CAPM® certification

- 19 credits via an undergraduate Certificate of Proficiency and the Project Management Institute's CAPM® certification that apply to undergraduate degrees at Peirce.
- Blends foundational competencies in initiating, developing, managing, and running large-scale projects with soft skills and customer experience fundamentals.

Jobs with similar competencies:

- Cashiers
- Service Workers
- Retail Workers
- Bank Tellers

## FINANCIAL OPS with SIE certification

- 19 credits via an undergraduate Certificate of Proficiency and FINRA SIE certification that apply to undergraduate degrees at Peirce.
- Blends financial market fundamentals, industry tools and engagement strategies with soft skills and customer experience fundamentals.

Jobs with similar competencies:

- Cashiers
- Retail Workers
- Product Promoters
- Bank Tellers
- Travel Agents
- Rental Clerks

## SALES/CLIENT SERVICE

- 16 credits via an undergraduate Certificate of Proficiency that applies to undergraduate degrees at Peirce.
- Students gain soft skills and learn customer experience fundamentals and effective process management skills.

Jobs with similar competencies:

- Cashiers
- Service Workers
- Parking Lot Attendants
- Bank Tellers
- Concierges & Hotel Desk Clerks
- Retail Workers