Recommendations for Long-Range Financial and Strategic Planning for Western Connecticut State University

NCHEMS

December 5, 2022

Background

In summer 2021 as it became increasingly apparent to Western Connecticut State University (WCSU) and to the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities System (CSCU) that WCSU's financial conditions were rapidly deteriorating, CSCU contracted with the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) to assess the situation at WCSU and provide a report and recommendations. Specifically, NCHEMS' tasks were to:

1. Develop a short-term financial plan that would allow the institution to live within its means for FY 2023.
2. Conduct an analysis of WCSU's organizational structure and make recommendations that would better equip it to be supportive of the institution's mission.
3. Develop a long-term plan for the institution that places it on a fiscally sustainable path for the future.

The first two topics were addressed in a report submitted to WCSU on January 3, 2022. That report delved deeply into the financial situation facing the university and made the case for taking steps, as well as providing recommendations for what steps to take, to balance the budget in future years. Its principal findings established that WCSU had suffered substantial enrollment declines over the prior decade (Figure 1), declines that were not matched by equivalent contraction in the University's employee numbers (Figure 2). Given that higher education is very labor-intensive, the failure to contain personnel costs helps account for spending per student that rapidly outpaced spending levels at similar institutions across the country (Figure 3).[1] The net result of these patterns contributed to the rapid erosion of WCSU's financial reserves. While other CSUs' fortunes fluctuated over the past decade—for example, ECSU's reserves generally rose in spite of mounting enrollment challenges of their own—WCSU's reserves fell steadily from FY 2012 when they were valued at $23.6 million. By FY 2020, WCSU's reserves were almost totally depleted and, by the end of FY 2021, WCSU's reserves had gone negative by an estimated $2.3 million (Figure 4).

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[1] This is true whether or not the peer groups average includes WCSU's sister institutions, Central Connecticut State University, Eastern Connecticut State University, and Southern Connecticut State University. Spending per student at WCSU outpaced that at those institutions as well: on a per-student basis, these expenditures were between five and 14 percent higher at WCSU in FY2020 than at the other CSUs.

Figure 1.   Total Annual FTE Enrollments at WCSU, 2008-09 Through 2019-20


Note: Data for 2006-07 were excluded due to unrealistically large changes from preceding and succeeding years.
Source: NCES IPEDS.

Figure 2.   Change in the Number of Employees per 100 FTE Students, 2014–15 to 2019-20
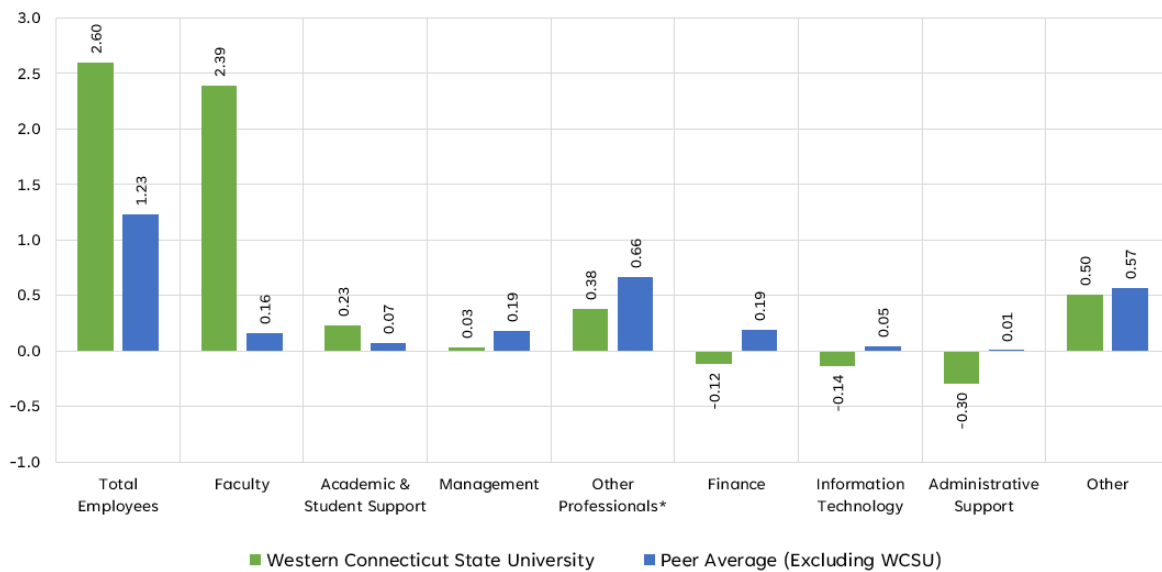

Source: NCES IPEDS.

Figure 3. Expenditures per FTE Student on Instruction + Academic Support + Student Support + Institutional Support, 2008-09 Through 2019-20
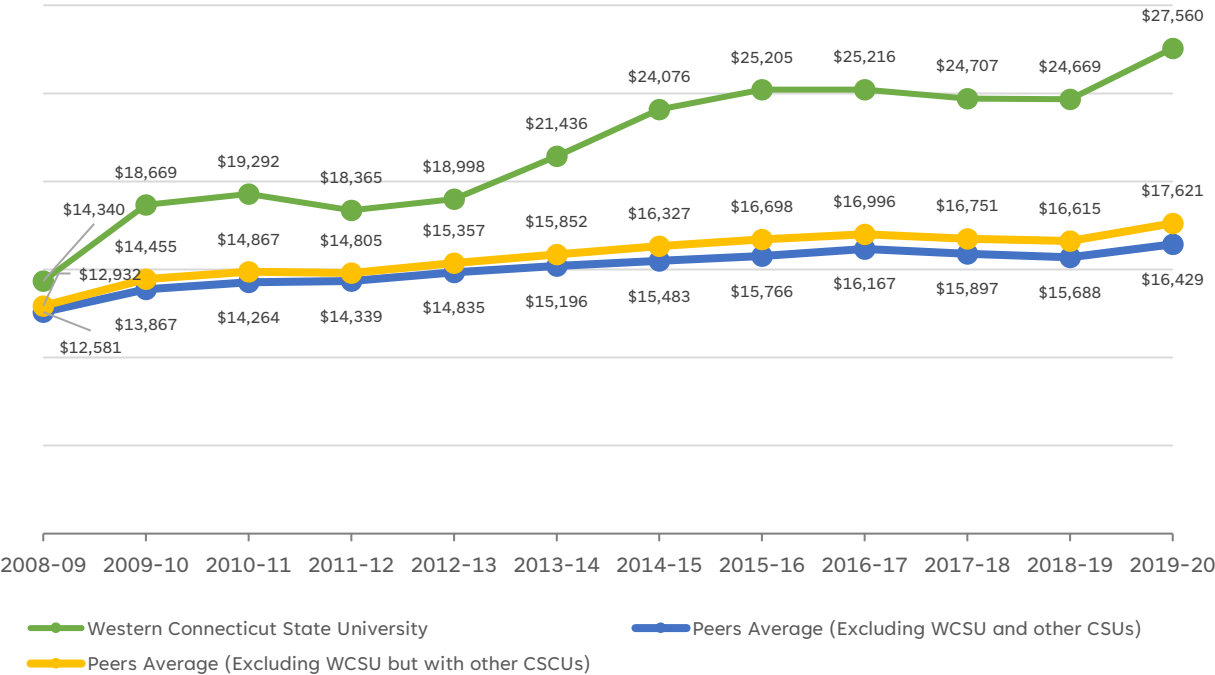
Note: Adjusted for inflation (2020 dollars) using CPI-U

Source: NCES, IPEDS 2008-09 through 2019-20 GASB Finance Files and Instructional Activity Files.

Figure 4. Unrestricted Net Position (Reserves) by Institution
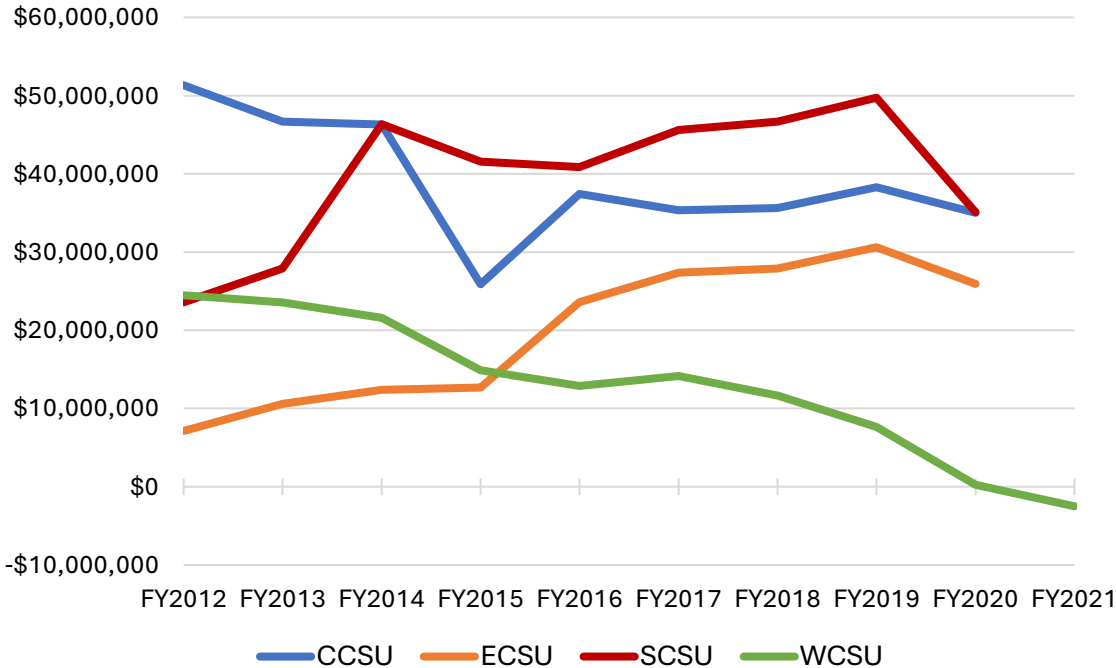
Source: WCSU.

The recommendations made in the January 2022 report addressed the needs to improve campus communication about the nature and extent of the University's financial situation, adopt a framework to aid in taking a strategic approach to budgeting, inject discipline linked to that strategic budgeting approach in the development of a staffing plan for the University, reduce reliance on part-time faculty, conduct a comprehensive review of the University's programs and curricula, and to streamline the organizational structure at the highest levels.

The release of the initial report in the spring sparked considerable controversy and activity. Shortly after the report was made public, WCSU's president stepped down and was replaced by an interim president. Following multiple community-wide forums, WCSU's leadership formed six working groups to examine key aspects of the University's practices, policies, and processes over the summer months, and to make recommendations for potential changes. NCHEMS obtained and reviewed the final reports of each of the working groups. Throughout this period, NCHEMS continued to develop data analyses and engage in ongoing communication with WCSU's leadership, culminating with a visit to Danbury in September. During that visit, NCHEMS met with well over 100 members of the WCSU community, including its leadership, faculty, staff, alumni, and students. Among the stakeholders specifically engaged were the chairs of the summer working groups, members of the University's faculty senate, and union leaders. At these meetings, NCHEMS presented a carefully selected set of data as a way to draw out commentary from participants. Additionally, NCHEMS paid a visit to the CSCU system office and met with its leadership team.

The input provided at these meetings was foundational in helping to craft this final report and its recommendations. First, the report summarizes key findings from the data analyses, including new analyses conducted since the release of the initial report. Of particular importance are the results of analyses performed in an effort to articulate a clearer identity for WCSU. That is, this report outlines an "operational mission" for WCSU. An institution's mission statement is typically intentionally succinct while being inspirational—often aspirational and visionary—but which does not always carefully articulate important goals or characteristics that differentiate it from other institutions. In contrast, an operational mission more carefully describes an institution in terms of its program array and expectations for research and public service activities, the audience it serves (geographic origin, academic preparation levels, and other student characteristics), and special characteristics that are essential elements of the nature of the institution. Developing this operational mission draws heavily on additional analyses presented in this report and on conversations with members of the community. Recommendations that conclude the report identify strategies for moving forward that double-down on this operational mission.

Where appropriate, the report also references the work of the summer working groups; in multiple cases there are some important areas of alignment between the working groups' recommendations and the ones that emerge in this report. In many other respects, the reports of the summer working groups produced recommendations at a more tactical level than is the focus of this report.

Findings and Observations

At various points during NCHEMS' conversations with WCSU's stakeholders, someone would express their sense that the University lacks an identity. This sentiment was used generally to argue that decisions were not guided by a clear set of criteria grounded in a common understanding of the student populations that WCSU serves or of the workforce and other needs of the surrounding region. This section summarizes the important findings of NCHEMS' data analyses and observations from our visit to campus; these findings provide guidance for the development of the identity WCSU needs to better ensure its future viability and relevance.

WCSU's Market for Students

A first question is **who does WCSU really serve**? What is clear from the data sources is that current students attending the University are from within a tight radius—most students come from no more than about 30 miles of campus, including in nearby portions of New York (Figure 5).[2] Over the most recent decade for which data are available, WCSU attracted nearly 75 percent of its first-time students from the areas in orange on Figure 6. WCSU does seem to have generated interest among potential students in other parts of Connecticut, but it has not been nearly as successful at converting them from applicants into actual enrollments.

Yet, data indicate that enrollments from most of this primary service area have been sinking over the last several years among both undergraduates of traditional age and those aged 25 and older (Figure 7). Only students from New York have increased, a bit of good news but one that must be tempered by the recognition that New York—like Connecticut—faces a dismal demographic future of declining populations of high school graduates. A similar observation of steady decline can be made about the enrollment of graduate students relative to undergraduates (Figure 8). Graduate students who enroll at WCSU tend to come from the same places as undergraduates, not from further afield and, while their numbers have been more stable than undergraduates', they represent only a small proportion of overall enrollment. Moreover, WCSU's entering class has grown more racially/ethnically diverse in recent years, but that is largely due to the number of White, non-Hispanics dropping faster than other groups, not as a result of successfully attracting more students from a diversifying pool of students (Figure 9). According to the University, roughly three-quarters of its students commute to classes.

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[2] A map of three-digit zip codes is provided as reference for multiple figures in this report in Appendix A.

Figure 5.   Applicants, Acceptances, and Enrollments by Geography, 2012-21
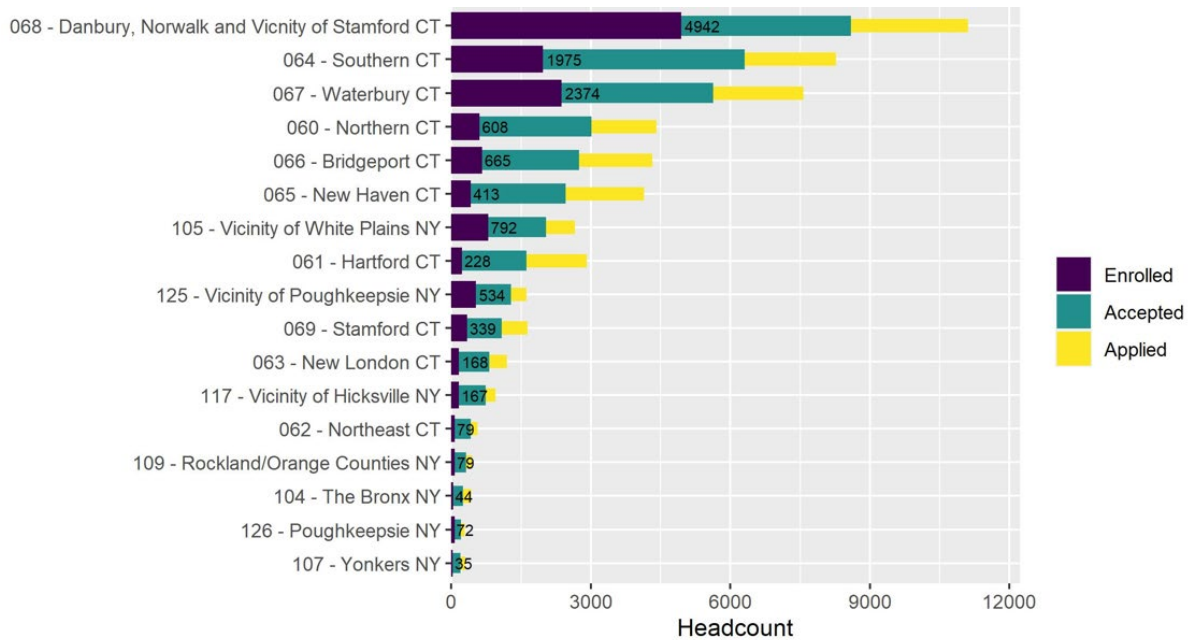
Source: WCSU.

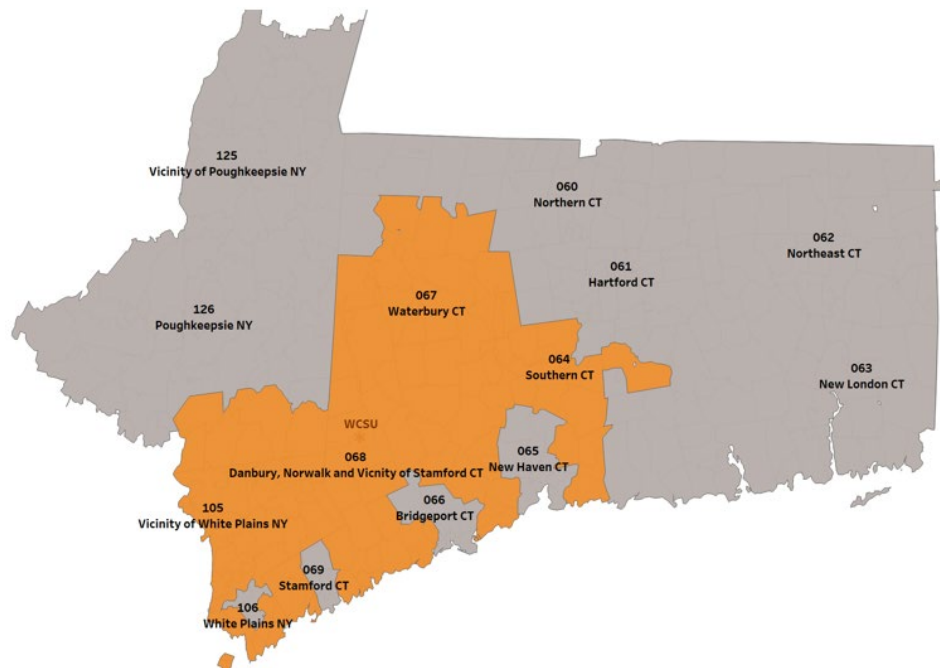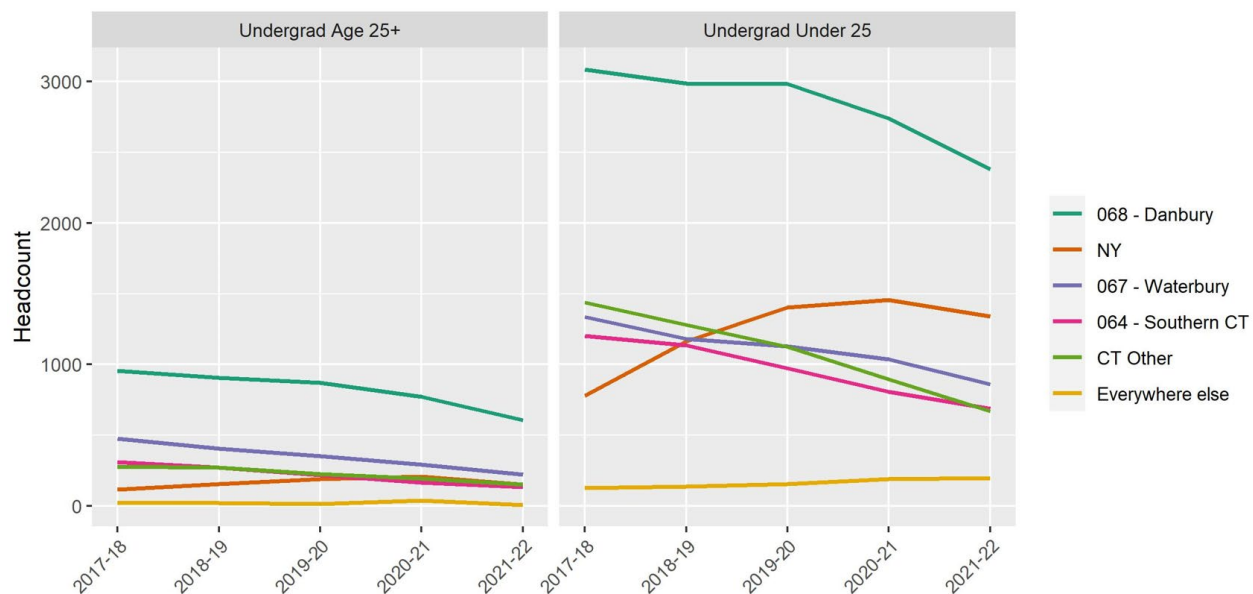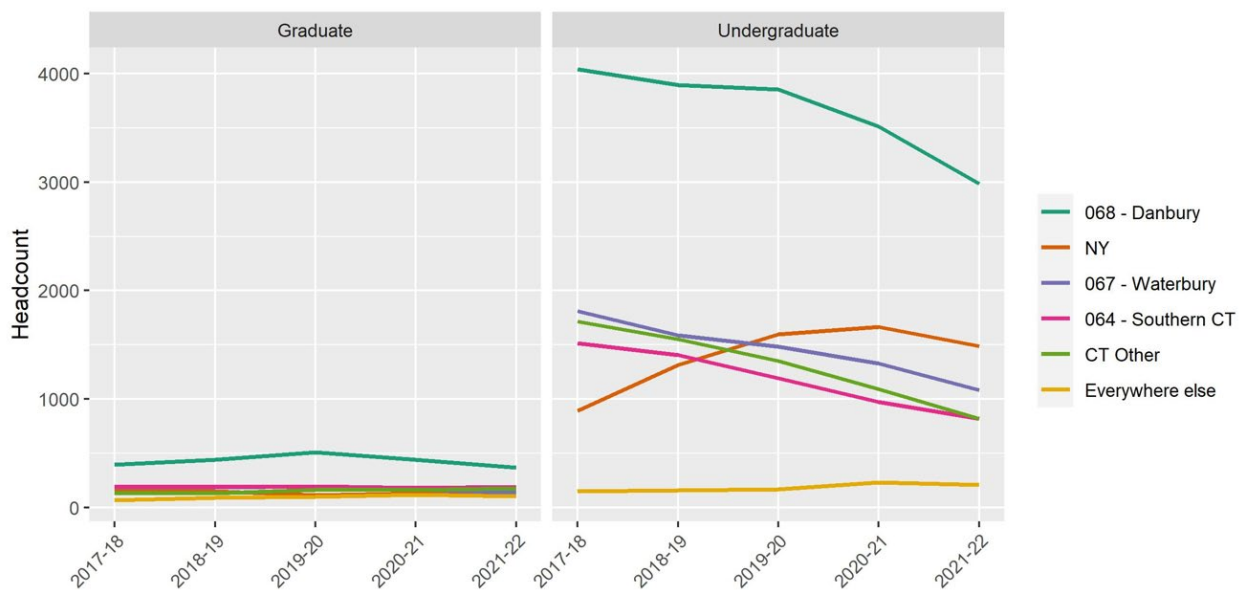**Figure 6.   WCSU Primary Service Area**

Figure 7.   WCSU Undergraduate Enrollment by Geography and Age, FY 2018-2022
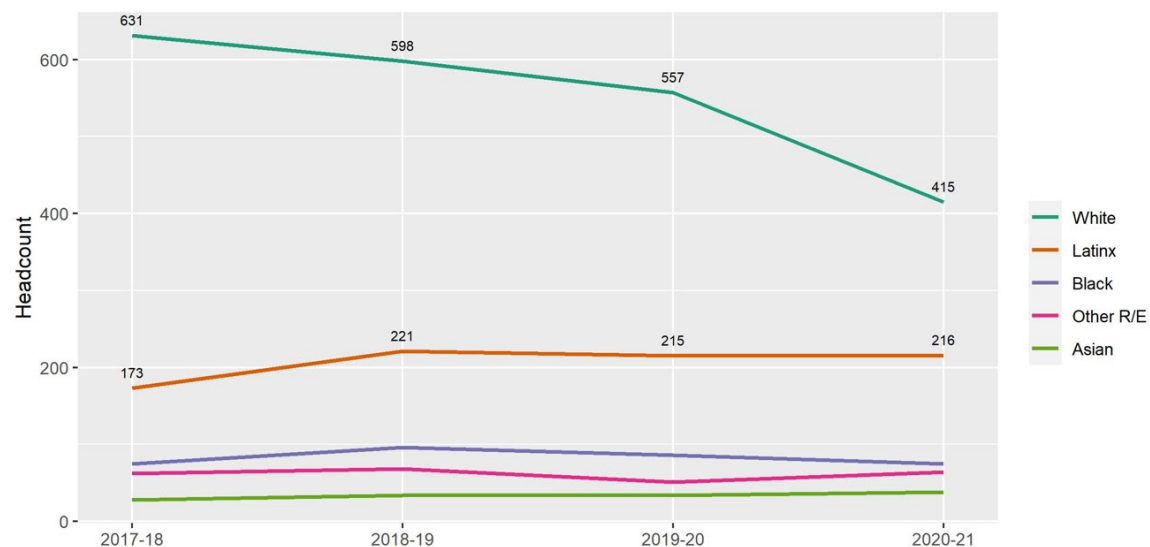

Source: WCSU.

Figure 8.   WCSU Undergraduate and Graduate Enrollment by Geography, FY 2018-2022


Source: WCSU.

Figure 9.   Enrollment of First-Time Recent High School Graduates by Race/Ethnicity

Source: WCSU.

These enrollment changes are occurring against a backdrop of rapid demographic change in the WCSU service region. Most troubling is the ageing of the population—recent trends extrapolated through the middle of the next decade suggest that any growth in the local population will be driven by residents of retirement age (Figure 10). The number of children is expected to fall while the number of traditionally college-aged residents and working age adults will decrease very slightly. Looking at the same projected estimates by race/ethnicity shows rapid diversification in the local area (Figure 11). Large drops in the number of White, non-Hispanics are likely to be offset by growth among Asians as well as most historically underrepresented population groups, especially Hispanics (with the possible exception of Black, non-Hispanics of traditional college age, whose projected number is negative). Given how localized WCSU's market for students has tended to be, these stark changes in the region's population will heavily impact the kind of students WCSU must serve in the future. Moreover, these are changes that are already well underway, the impact of which is partly responsible for the enrollment challenges the University is facing. Most notably, notwithstanding whatever efforts WCSU has proactively taken to adjust, WCSU has neither shifted to serving relatively more older students nor has it attracted more students of color to compensate for its difficulty in attracting college-aged White, non-Hispanic students and to provide better and more representative service to its community. Alarmingly, WCSU's "yield" rate—its ability to convert interested students, who have submitted an application for admission, into enrolled students—has been trending downward for its primary market in Connecticut (Figure 12), although the yield rate among nearby New York residents has been a bright spot.

Figure 10.   Projected Population Change by Age Group in the WCSU Service Region, 2021-35
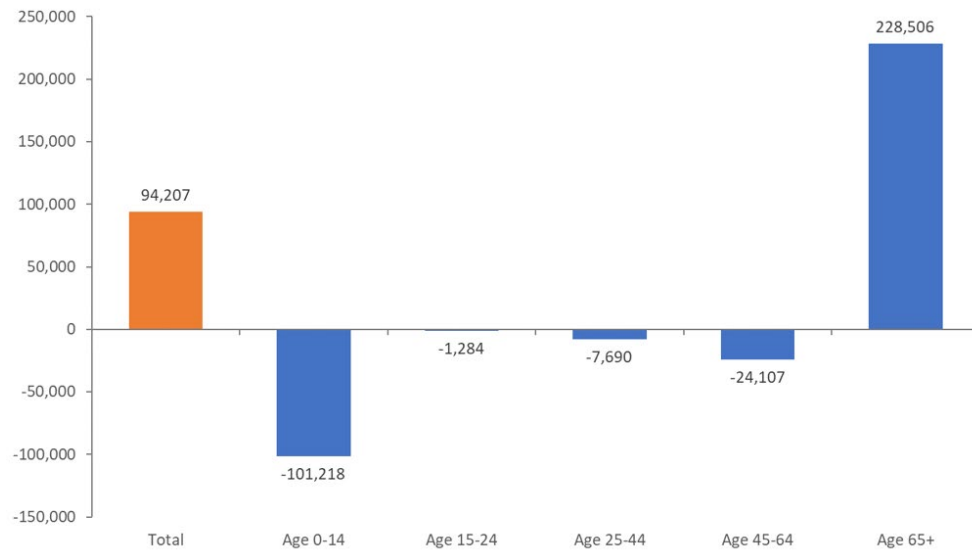
Note: Projections are based on extrapolating from a linear regression of data covering 2010-21. WCSU service region includes Fairfield, Litchfield, Middlesex, and New Haven counties in Connecticut and Putnam, Westchester, Dutchess, Columbia, Ulster, and Orange counties in New York. These counties approximate the areas represented by three-digit zip codes, 064, 067, 068, 105, 106, 125, and 126.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates.

Figure 11.   Projected Change in Population by Race/Ethnicity and Age Group in the WCSU Service Region, 2021-35
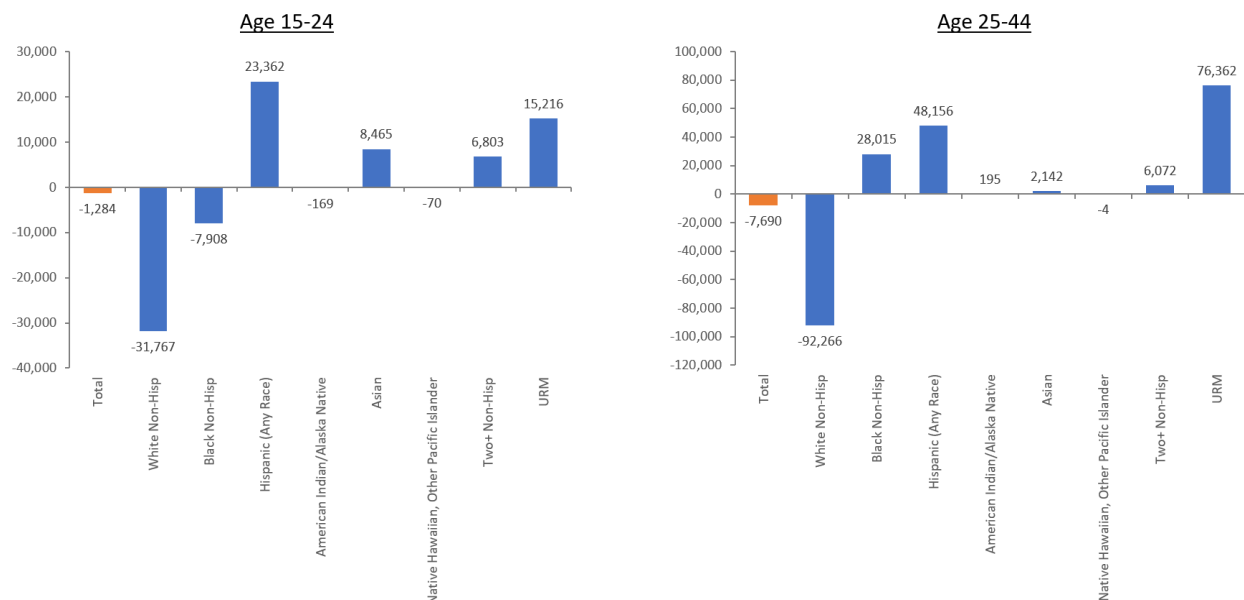
Note: Projections are based on extrapolating from a linear regression of data covering 2010-21. WCSU service region includes Fairfield, Litchfield, Middlesex, and New Haven counties in Connecticut and Putnam, Westchester, Dutchess, Columbia, Ulster, and Orange counties in New York. These counties approximate the areas represented by three-digit zip codes, 064, 067, 068, 105, 106, 125, and 126. "URM" includes Black, non-Hispanic, Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
Source: U.S. Census Bureau Population Estimates.

Figure 12. WCSU Yield Rates by Students' Geographic Origin, 2012-2021
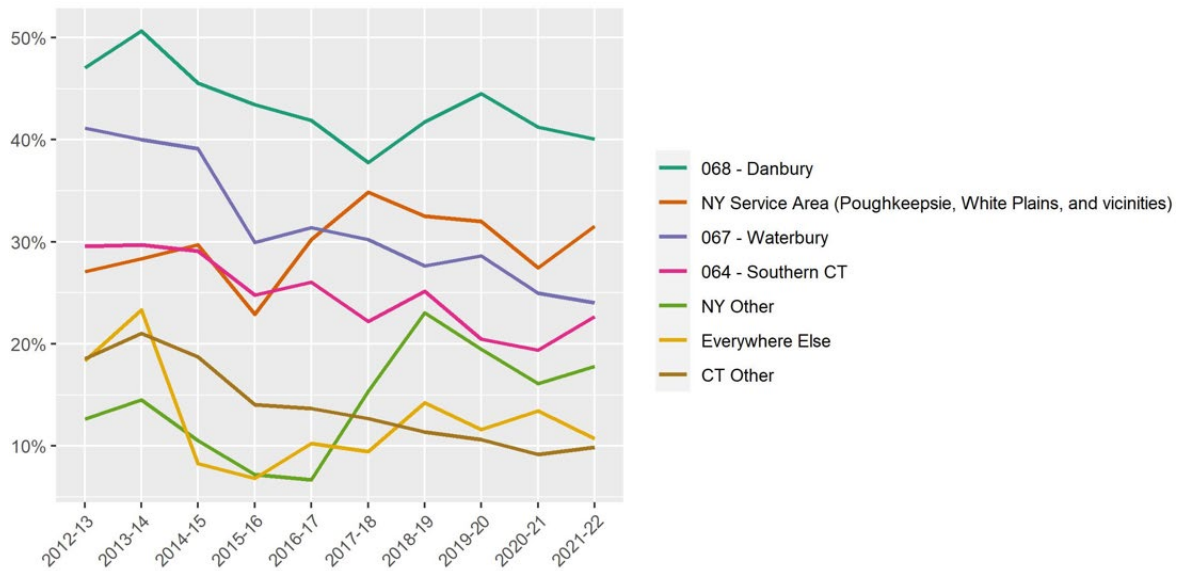
Source: WCSU.

In addition to first-time students, WCSU has historically been a logical destination for incoming transfer students. Over the past decade, a vast majority of WCSU's inbound transfer students came from nearby community colleges, especially Naugatuck Valley, Norwalk, and Dutchess in New York (Figure 13). But recent years have witnessed a dramatic decline in the number of transfer students WCSU has been attracting (Figure 14). A decline in incoming transfers is understandable in an era in which community college enrollments are generally down, and in fact the other CSUs have seen their transfer numbers drop as well. But, together with the equally substantial drop in adult learners, these data suggest that WCSU has room to improve in serving the local market for students with some college but no bachelor's degree. A closer look suggests that much of the decline in transfer-in students appears to be driven by programs that have historically enrolled the majority of WCSU's transfer students, providing a hint for where to seek a better understanding of these losses in enrollment (Figure 15).

Figure 13.   Incoming Transfers to WCSU by Sending Institution and Application Status, 2012-2021
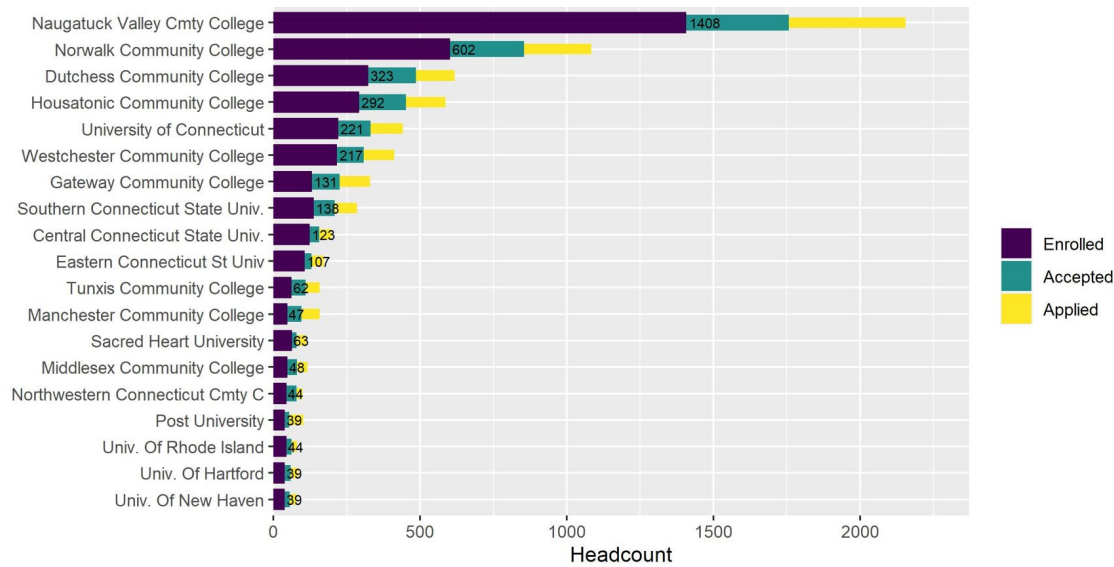
Note: Sending institutions with fewer than 35 enrolled students are excluded.
Source: WCSU.

Figure 14.   First-Time In-State Undergraduates in the Fall at WCSU
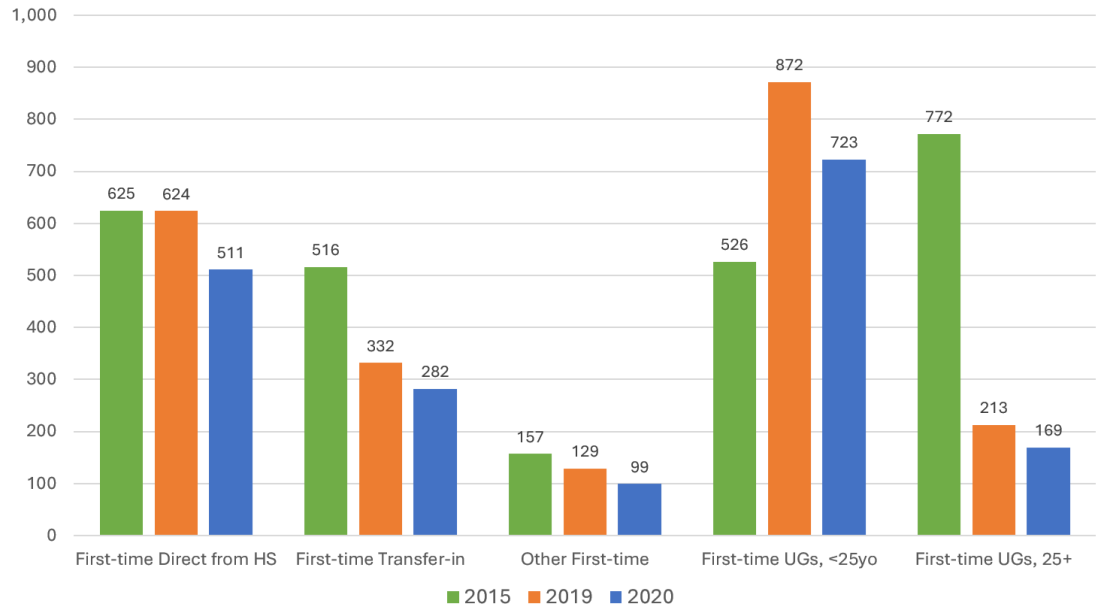
Source: WCSU.

Figure 15. Transfers into the Top 5 Program Areas at WCSU from CSCU Community Colleges

Note: Includes only community college students who were not retained at the same institution in the subsequent fall term. Includes all exiters, not just completers. Dual enrollment and non-credit students are excluded. Program areas are defined by two-digit CIP code.
Source: CSCU System Office.
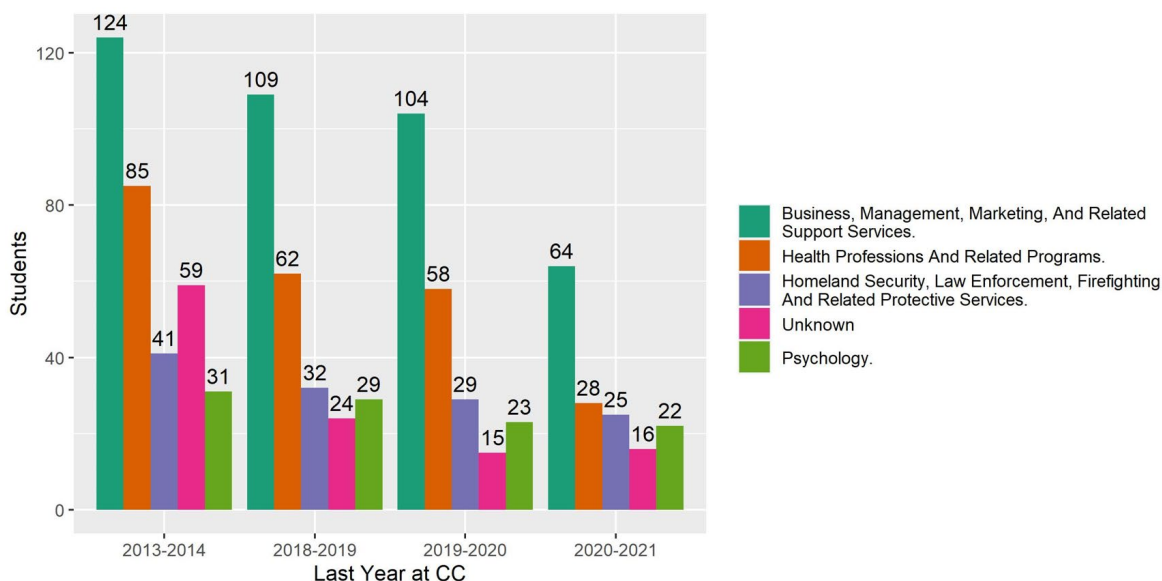
Another important facet is the degree to which WCSU employees reflect the student population. A comparison of the racial/ethnic composition of faculty (instructional staff), professional staff, and other staff (Figure 16) with that of its student body (Figure 17) shows stark differences. With the exception of service, support, and maintenance staff, WCSU's employees are substantially more likely to be White, non-Hispanic than the students they are serving. This is especially true of faculty. At WCSU (and everywhere else we encounter this pattern), stakeholders expressed concern that students from under-represented racial/ethnic backgrounds struggle to find role models or mentors among the faculty and staff at the institution who can understand and appreciate the challenges they face, and that this can be a barrier to student success for those populations. Institutions have to be especially focused on helping students overcome these barriers by tailoring support services to these populations, engaging them deeply in the process, committing to addressing the imbalances through hiring and retention strategies, eliminating obstacles in getting access to and succeeding in classes. In addition, WCSU stakeholders identified gaps to be addressed, particularly in developing a more welcoming environment for the rapidly diversifying student populations at Danbury High School (by addressing language gaps, for example) and in improving the retention of faculty and staff who are of under-represented backgrounds.

Figure 16. Racial/Ethnic Composition of WCSU Employees, Fall 2020
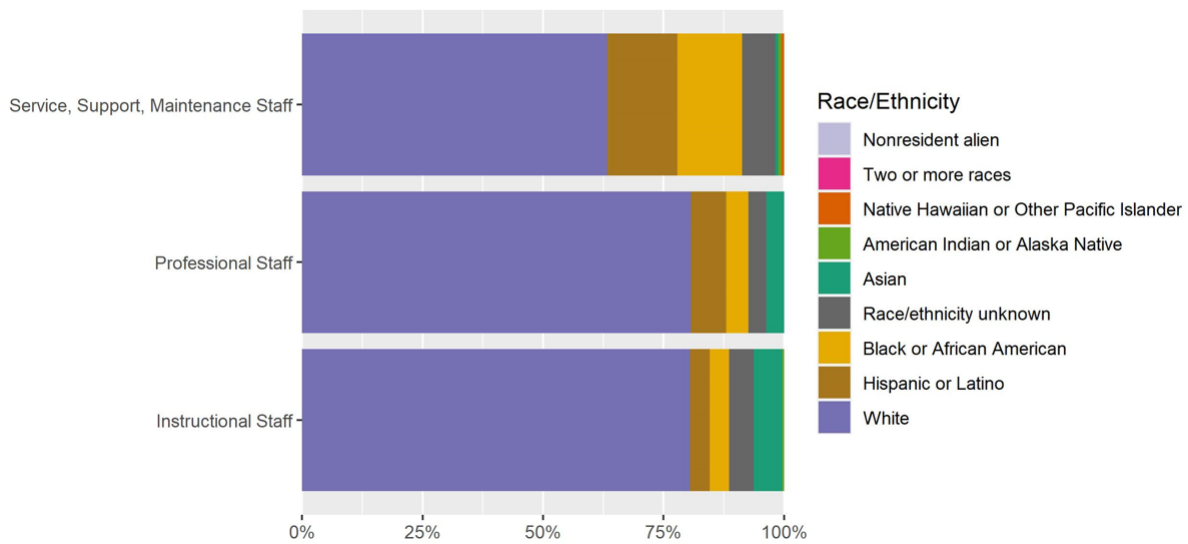
Notes: Each category includes both full- and part-time employees. Service, Support, Maintenance staff include Service
Occupations, Office and Administrative Support, and Natural Resources, Construction, and Maintenance.
Professional staff includes all other categories except for instructional staff.
Source: NCES IPEDS.

Figure 17. Race/Ethnicity of WCSU Students, 2020
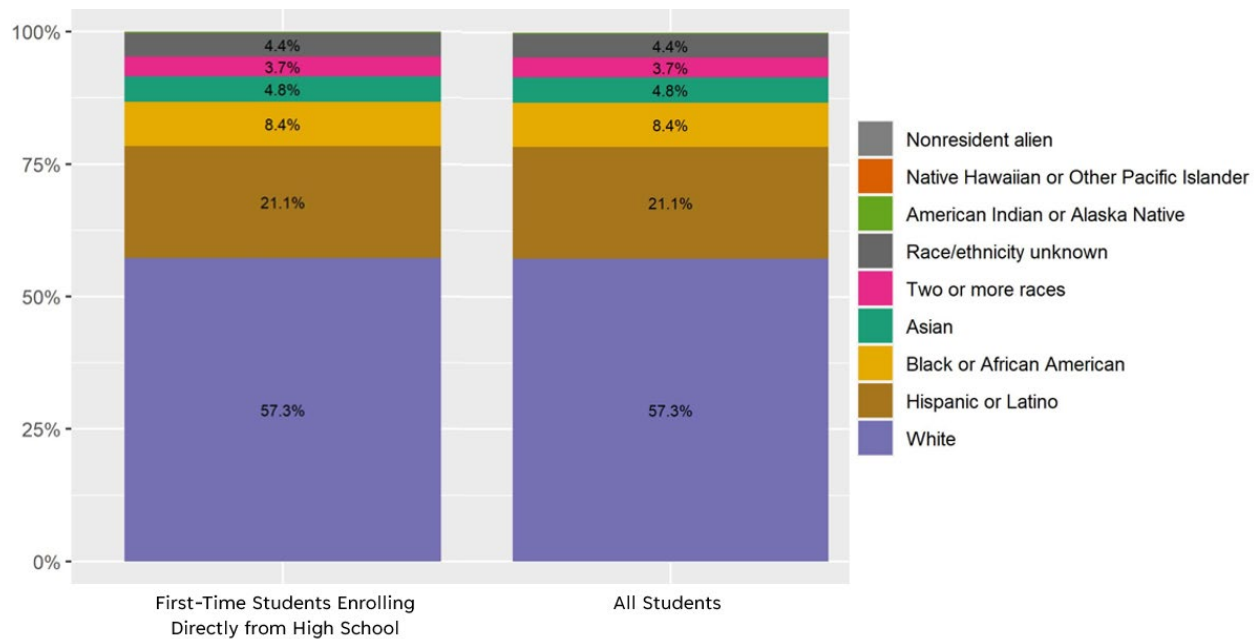
Notes: First-Time Recent High School students includes annual headcount for 2020-21 from 3-digit zip codes 064, 067,
068, 125, 125, 105, 106.
Source: WCSU.

Since the overall decrease in enrollments are outpacing the decline in population in WCSU's
primary service areas, measures of market penetration for WCSU show troubling signs of slippage.

They also reveal that WCSU has had greater success recruiting students from Waterbury than it has from its own hometown of Danbury, though the extent to which WCSU is attracting residents from Waterbury is declining fastest for both traditionally aged college students (Figure 18) and adults (Figure 19).

Figure 18.   Undergraduates Aged 18-24 per 1,000 Residents Aged 18-24 for WCSU Primary Service Area by Three-Digit Zip Code
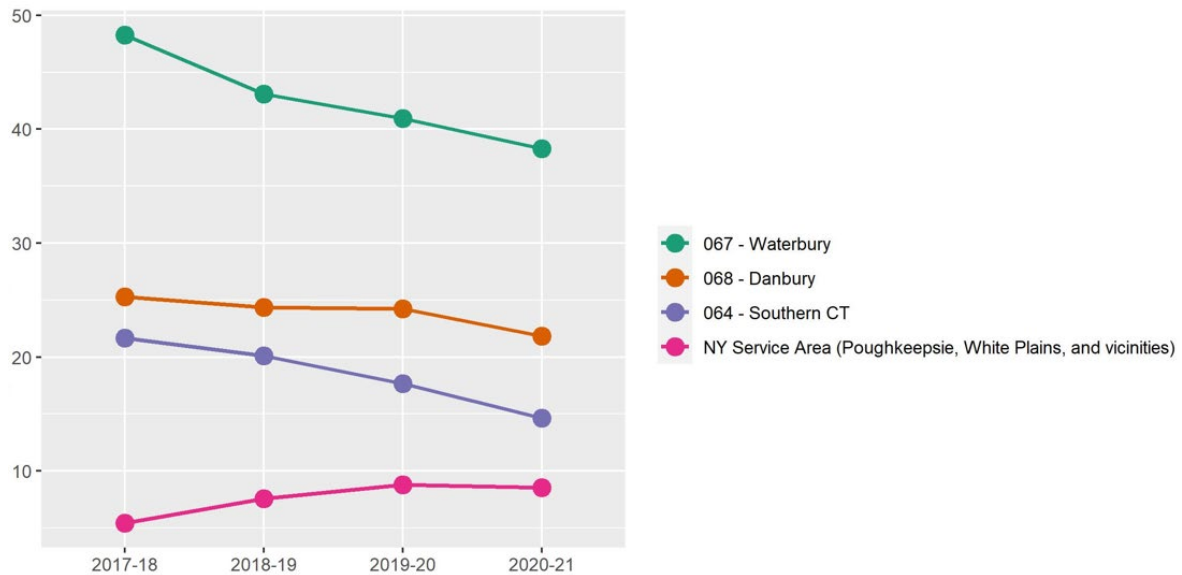
Source: WCSU, U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2017-22 5-Year Estimates, Table S0101.

Figure 19.   Undergraduates 25+ Years Old per 1,000 Residents Aged 25-44 for WCSU Primary Service Area by Three-Digit Zip Code
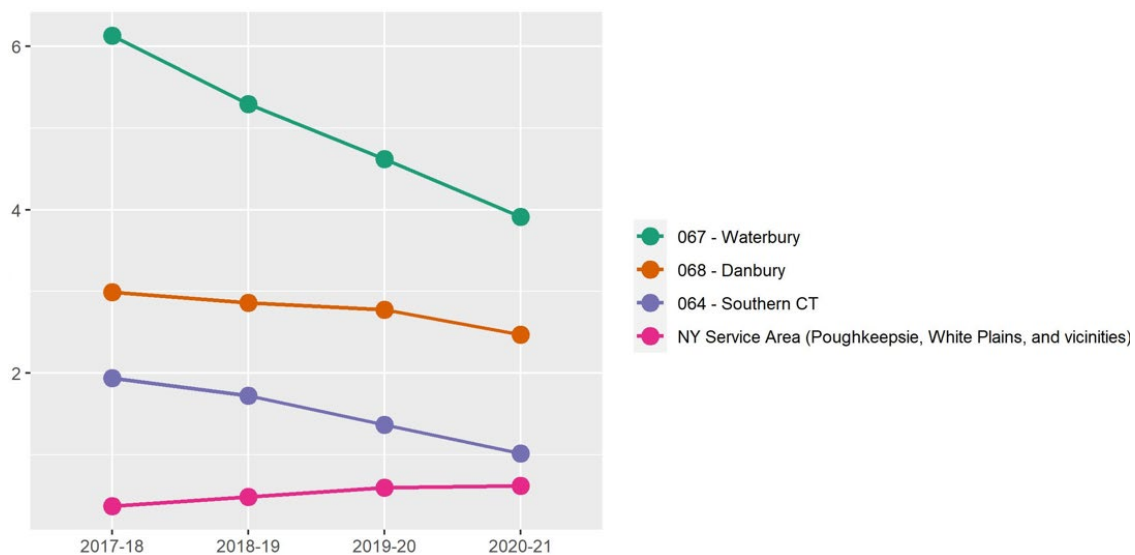
Source: WCSU; U.S. Census Bureau, ACS 2017-2020 5-Year Estimates, Table S0101.

The next question to be answered is **how does WCSU really serve** its students? Since the single most common reason that individuals seek a postsecondary education is to improve their career prospects and earning potential, WCSU should maintain a healthy understanding of the kinds of jobs that are in demand in the State of Connecticut broadly and within its local service area. This is particularly true given that the region is home to a population that boasts an above-average educational attainment rate, which suggests that WCSU graduates will emerge into a highly competitive labor market. Occupational projections for the Northwest and Southwest regions of Connecticut indicate a need for talent in areas related to information technology, health care, and business and financial services.

Figure 20.   Occupations Typically Requiring a Postsecondary Education with the Largest Projected Growth, 2018 to 2028

North Central
- Software Developers and Software Quality Assurance Analysts and Testers
- Financial Managers
- General and Operations Managers
- Computer and Information Systems Managers
- Nursing Assistants
- Medical and Health Services Managers
- Nurse Practitioners

Northwest
- Software Developers and Software Quality Assurance Analysts and Testers
- Medical and Health Services Managers
- Registered Nurses
- Financial Managers
- Manicurists and Pedicurists
- General and Operations Managers
- Substance Abuse, Behavioral Disorder, and Mental Health Counselors

Eastern
- Marine Engineers and Naval Architects
- Software Developers and Software Quality Assurance Analysts and Testers
- Electronics Engineers, Except Computer
- Mechanical Engineers
- Medical and Health Services Managers
- Industrial Engineers
- Electrical Engineers

Southwest
- Financial Managers
- Manicurists and Pedicurists
- Market Research Analysts and Marketing Specialists
- General and Operations Managers
- Medical and Health Services Managers
- Accountants and Auditors
- Nurse Practitioners

South Central
- General and Operations Managers
- Registered Nurses
- Medical and Health Services Managers
- Software Developers and Software Quality Assurance Analysts and Testers
- Nursing Assistants
- Human Resources Specialists
- Medical Assistants

Note: Results are based on four-digit Standard Occupational Codes. Data are for the most projected growth in terms of the number of jobs.
Source: Connecticut Department of Labor.

Figure 21. Occupations Typically Requiring a Postsecondary Education with the Fastest Projected Growth, 2018 to 2028

North Central
- Nurse Practitioners
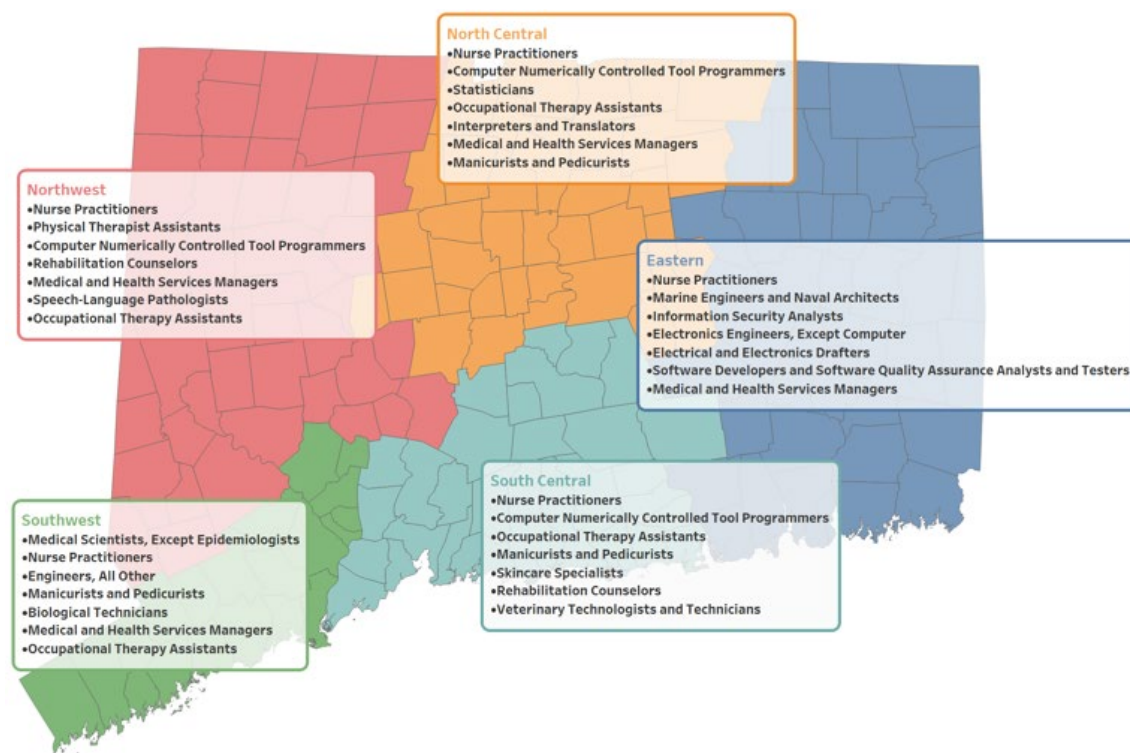- Computer Numerically Controlled Tool Programmers
- Statisticians
- Occupational Therapy Assistants
- Interpreters and Translators
- Medical and Health Services Managers
- Manicurists and Pedicurists

Northwest
- Nurse Practitioners
- Physical Therapist Assistants
- Computer Numerically Controlled Tool Programmers
- Rehabilitation Counselors
- Medical and Health Services Managers
- Speech-Language Pathologists
- Occupational Therapy Assistants

Eastern
- Nurse Practitioners
- Marine Engineers and Naval Architects
- Information Security Analysts
- Electronics Engineers, Except Computer
- Electrical and Electronics Drafters
- Software Developers and Software Quality Assurance Analysts and Testers
- Medical and Health Services Managers

Southwest
- Medical Scientists, Except Epidemiologists
- Nurse Practitioners
- Engineers, All Other
- Manicurists and Pedicurists
- Biological Technicians
- Medical and Health Services Managers
- Occupational Therapy Assistants

South Central
- Nurse Practitioners
- Computer Numerically Controlled Tool Programmers
- Occupational Therapy Assistants
- Manicurists and Pedicurists
- Skincare Specialists
- Rehabilitation Counselors
- Veterinary Technologists and Technicians

Note: Results are based on four-digit Standard Occupational Codes. Data are for occupations with the most projected growth in percentage terms.
Source: Connecticut Department of Labor.

It is instructive to compare this information about the type of talent demanded with data about enrollments and degrees awarded at WCSU. Enrollment in the largest programs at WCSU has shifted in relative proportions over the past decade, with growth only evident in nursing (Figure 22). The Justice and Law Administration program has seen the largest decline—mirroring overall enrollment declines—while enrollment in business programs has fallen more modestly. Also notable is the large decline in undeclared student enrollment, as well as the extreme volatility between fall and spring semesters.

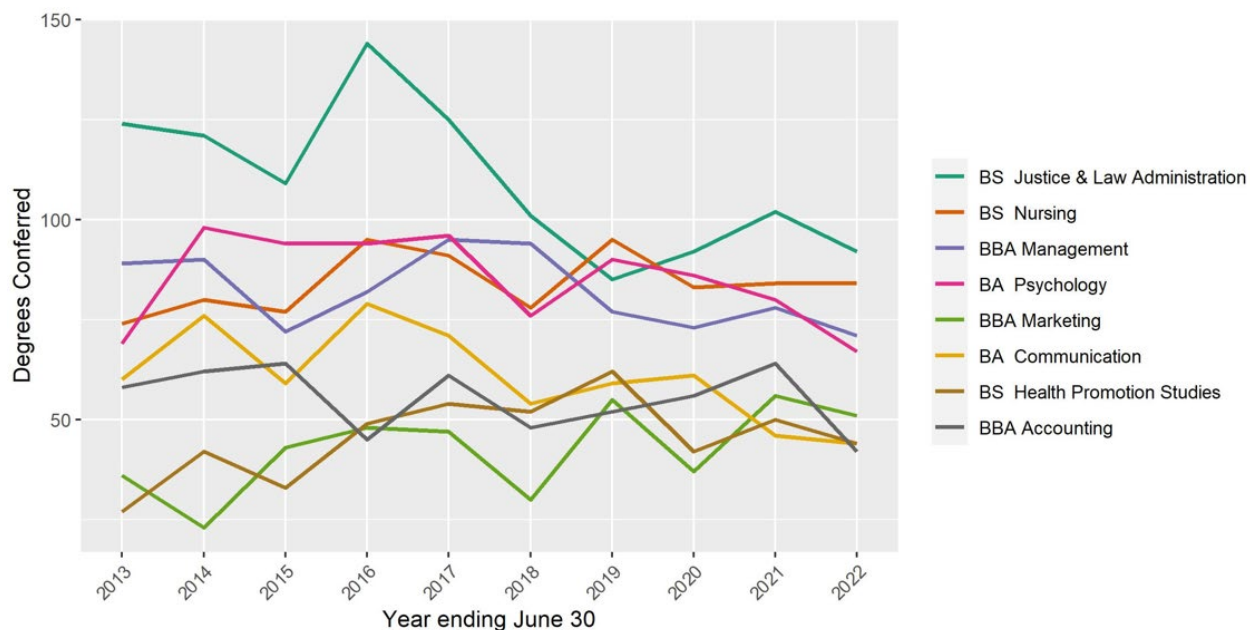**Figure 22.   WCSU Enrollment by Academic Program**
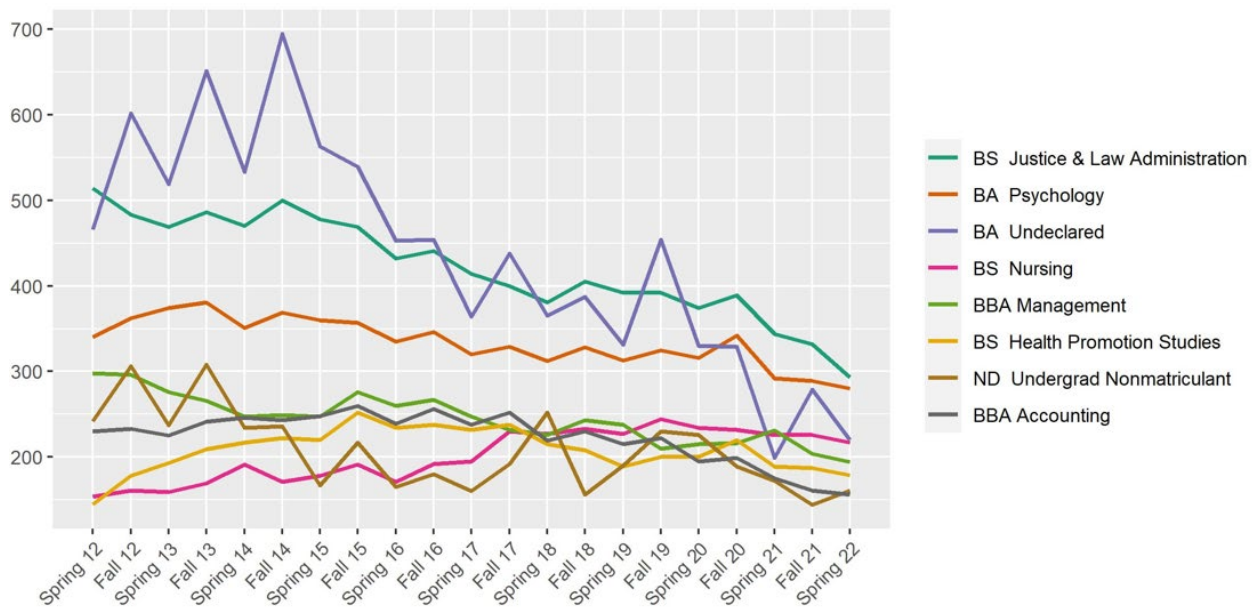
Note: Includes all programs that were among the top 5 in headcount enrollment in any term over the past decade.
Source: WCSU.

Looking at degrees conferred shows relative stability for most programs, with year-to-year differences making it difficult to see if there is a long-term improvement or decline in most of WCSU's largest undergraduate programs (Figure 23). The exception is the Justice and Law Administration program, which has shown large swings in the number of degrees but is overall experiencing a downward trend, as is the bachelor's degree in Communication. Nursing has been relatively flat, despite the previously noted increase in enrollment.

A broader look at the degrees conferred by school shows perhaps the clearest shift in student interest (Figure 24). Whereas there has been an overall downward trend in degrees conferred by the Macricostas School of Arts and Sciences and a slightly less obvious reduction in degrees awarded by the Ancell School of Business, awards are up in the School of Professional Studies (primarily nursing, other health care, and education programs) and the School of Visual and Performing Arts. When viewed in light of the overall enrollment decreases that WCSU has been experiencing, these data suggest that the students attracted to WCSU have been showing a preference for programs with a close alignment to the workforce, especially those programs that will prepare them for occupations in demand in the surrounding area. This reinforces the observation that students who come to WCSU are looking for a curriculum that is focused on professions.

Finally, the number of undergraduate degrees awarded by WCSU has varied over the past decade, although they have only once surpassed 1,000 awards in the last five years (Figure 25). Likely the pandemic has contributed to the sudden drop in undergraduate degrees in 2022. By contrast, graduate degrees have risen in number over the past several years, though they remain only about one-sixth of degrees awarded at WCSU in any given year.

Figure 23.   WCSU Undergraduate Degrees Conferred

Note: Includes all programs that were among the top 5 in headcount enrollment in any term over the past decade.
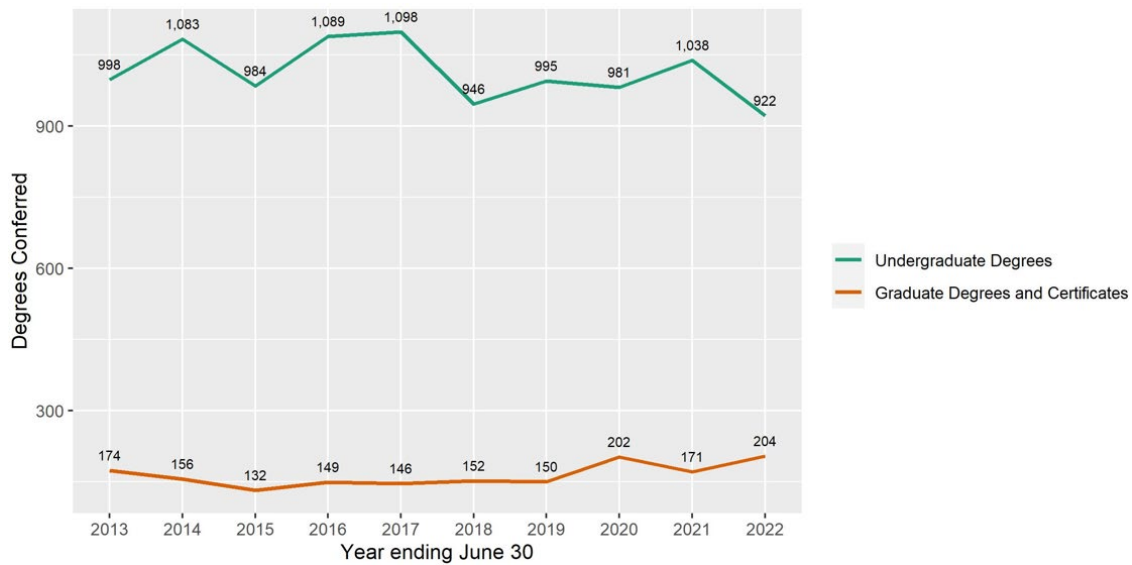Source: WCSU.

Figure 24.   WCSU Undergraduate Degrees Conferred by School
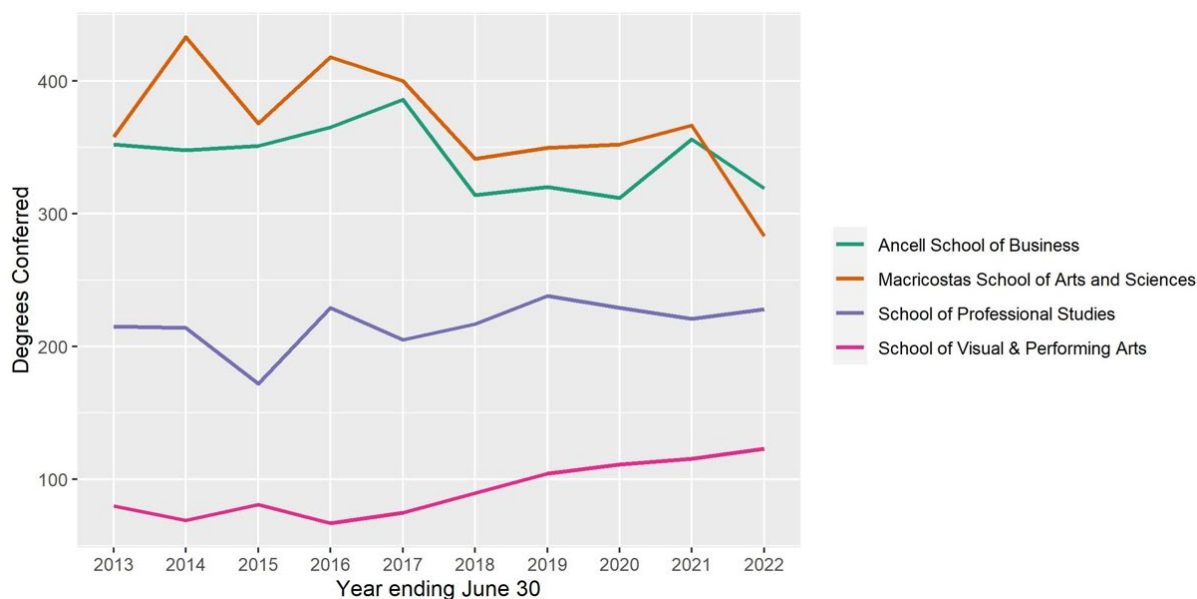
Note: The number of interdisciplinary B.A.s in Digital Interactive Media Arts, a degree that is jointly conferred by the
   Macricostas School of Arts and Sciences and the School of Visual and Performing Arts, was divided equally between
   those two schools. In 2022, 16 of these degrees were awarded.
Source: WCSU.

Figure 25.   WCSU Degrees Conferred by Level

Source: WCSU.

Retention and Outcomes

A third question to be addressed is **how well does WCSU serve** its students? One can examine this question by reviewing data on student retention and graduation, and at first glance, WCSU performs admirably against similar institutions nationally. WCSU's first-to-second-year retention rates have been competitive for the most recent years for which data are available, although they have slipped slightly for both WCSU and its peers (Figure 26).

Figure 26.   Fall-to-Fall Retention Rates, Fall 2015 to Fall 2019
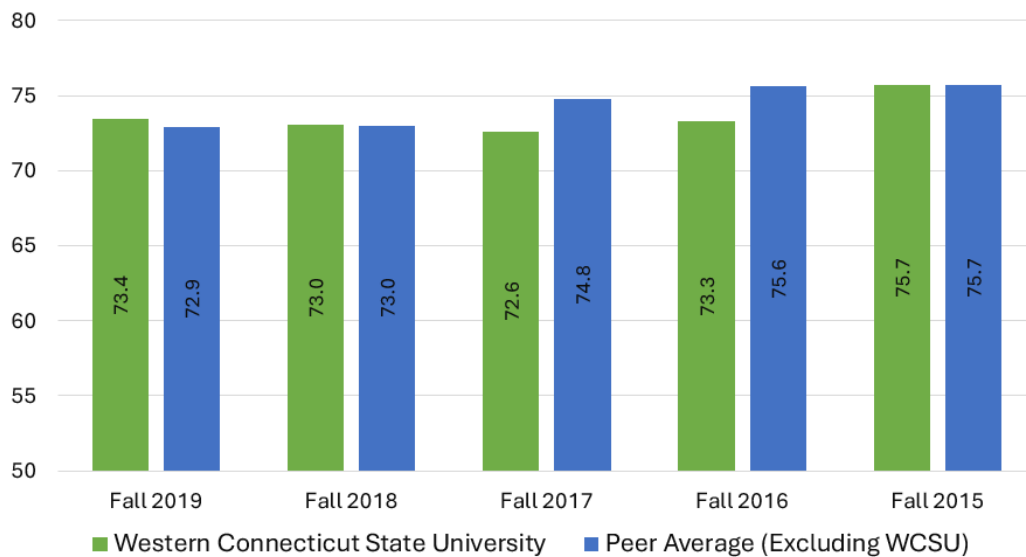
Note: Data are for the preceding years' cohorts who persist into the following fall, i.e., Fall 2019 columns show the percent of the FTFT students from Fall 2018 who persisted into Fall 2019.
Source: NCES IPEDS.

Yet, taking a longer view indicates that WCSU's performance relative to peers weakens (Figure 27). After eight years, WCSU's entering cohorts—whether they were first-time students enrolled full-time, Pell recipients, or 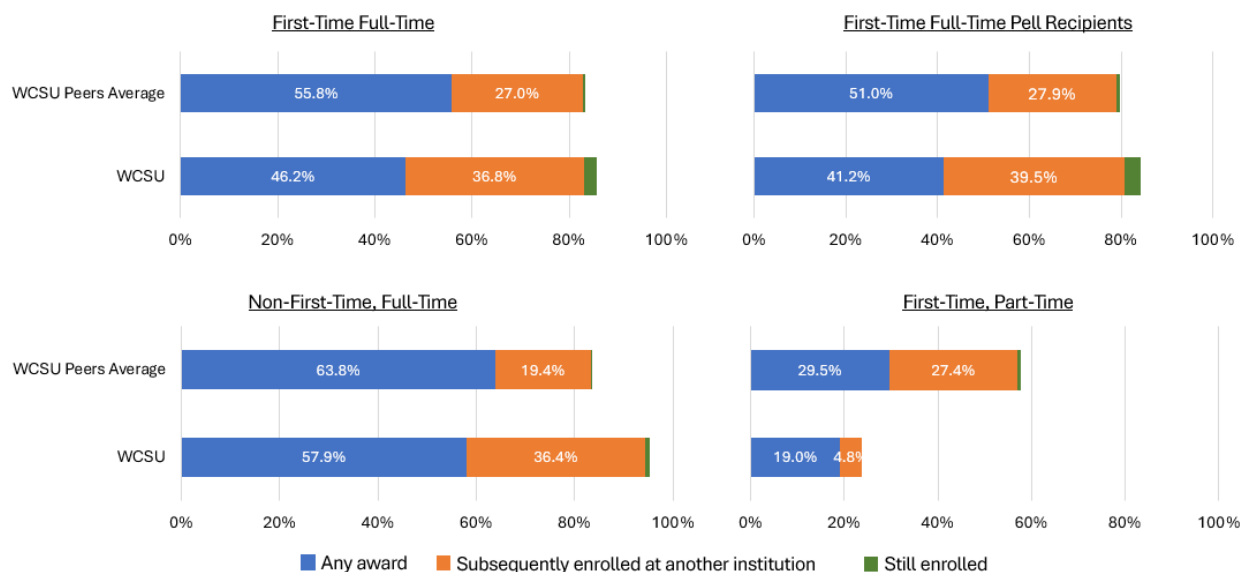incoming transfers—failed to earn a degree from WCSU at much higher rates than its peers. Instead, WCSU students were unusually likely to move on to some other institution, from which they may have eventually earned a degree (these data are unable to determine that).

Figure 27. Outcomes by 2019-20 of 2011-12 Entering Cohort of Students

First-Time Full-Time

WCSU Peers Average	55.8%	27.0%
WCSU	46.2%	36.8%

First-Time Full-Time Pell Recipients

WCSU Peers Average	51.0%	27.9%
WCSU	41.2%	39.5%

Non-First-Time, Full-Time

WCSU Peers Average	63.8%	19.4%
WCSU	57.9%	36.4%

First-Time, Part-Time

WCSU Peers Average	29.5%	27.4%
WCSU	19.0%	4.8%

■ Any award   ■ Subsequently enrolled at another institution   ■ Still enrolled

Source: NCES IPEDS.

These diverging patterns, in which WCSU retains its full-time students into their second year at rates comparable to other similar institutions but fails to retain them in subsequent years, is clearer in more recent data from the University (Figure 28). The data indicate that WCSU loses large numbers of students who have earned a substantial number of credits toward their degree. For example, over the past decade about 500 White students alone abandoned their studies at WCSU even after having earned 91 credits or more, and about 750 more left after having earned 61-90 credits. These numbers are roughly proportionately comparable for other races/ethnicities as well. In fact, while this figure shows these data broken down by race/ethnicity, a similar picture is clear when looking at exiters from WCSU disaggregated by geographic origin, age group, and status as a Pell Grant recipient. Only modest variations in the degree to which students leave WCSU at different levels of credit accumulation exists when breaking these data down by program or by level of academic preparation as measured by math placement exams. In all cases, there appears to be a substantial loss of students even after they accumulate many credits. This finding helps explain why WCSU fails to keep students long enough to confer a degree on them at rates one might suspect it would, given its strong performance in retaining first-time full-time students.

A logical next question is "what is happening to students who leave WCSU without completing a degree?" Data tell us that among the students who subsequently enroll in another institution, a large majority of them are turning to local community colleges to continue their education (Figure 29). The University of Connecticut and WCSU's sister institutions together attracted only about half of the WCSU exiters that the three most commonly preferred community colleges did, and Naugatuck Valley enrolled 25 percent more former WCSU students by itself than the other four-year institutions on this list combined. This pattern begs the question why are so many WCSU students, who presumably aspired to get a bachelor's degree, moving to community colleges?

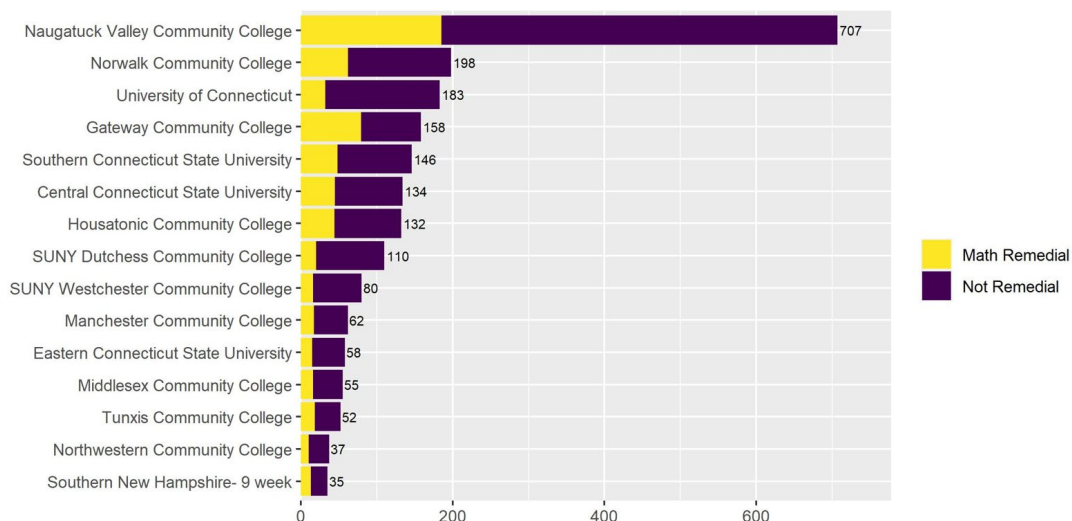**Figure 28.   Students Leaving WCSU Without Completing a Program by the Number of Credits Completed and Race/Ethnicity, 2012-21**
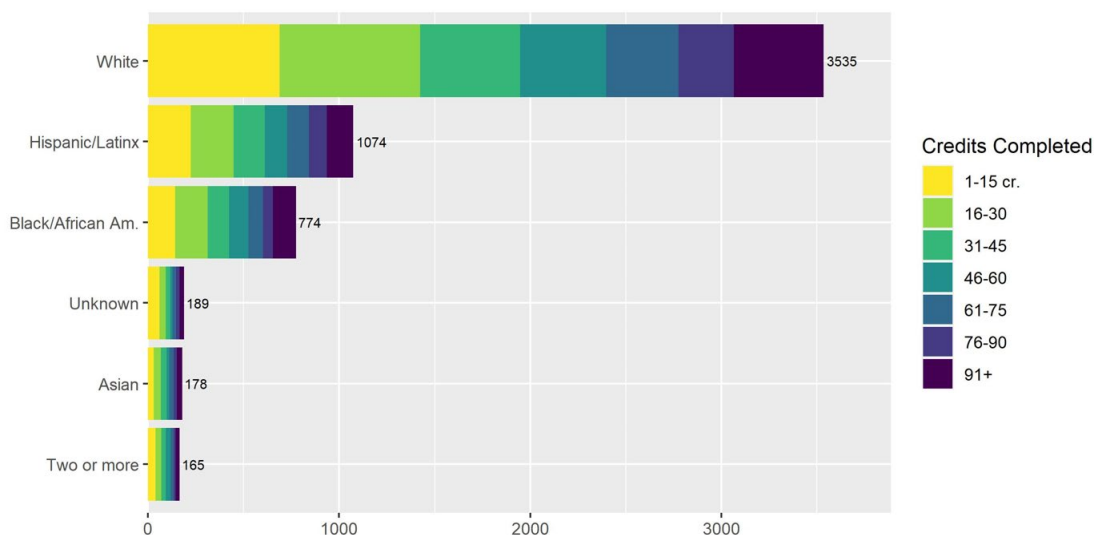
Note: Racial/Ethnic groups with fewer than 35 students leaving prior to completion are excluded.
Source: WCSU.

Figure 29.   Transfers from WCSU by Receiving Institution and Math Readiness Status, 2012-21

Note: Institutions with fewer than 35 enrolled students are excluded.
Source: WCSU.

There is likely a number of reasons these patterns play out as they do. The summer working groups' analyses explored some plausible explanations, but a reasonable case can be made that WCSU is not well staffed or organized to effectively serve the students it currently enrolls, not to mention being ill-suited for the increasingly diverse populations it can expect as the region's demographic characteristics shift. The racial/ethnic composition of the faculty and professional staff previously illustrated shows that underrepresented student populations have few human resources to turn to, at least for those who might be able to speak from shared experience. Additionally, conversations on campus made it clear that WCSU has few Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking employees who could communicate with students and their parents in their native language (the testimony we heard on this point was that WCSU had no such student-facing staff). It was also reported that the failure to develop that capacity was partially in response to interpretations of policies set out by the system office, which has indicated that developmental programming should primarily occur in the community colleges. Why that might be related to a failure to ensure adequate capacity to communicate with the large local population of non-native-English speakers is not obvious, however; in fact, it would be worthwhile for WCSU to direct investments to developing more capacity to communicate with the growing numbers of such students in its natural market.

Student affairs and student services are splintered at WCSU. Rather than organizing these units in a coherent manner that is easy for students to navigate, WCSU houses lots of initiatives and offices that serve different subgroups of students in a very disjointed way. For example, if students' testimony is to be believed, WCSU's academic advisement is of wildly inconsistent quality. This appears to be due in part to unclear roles—some students are advised by faculty who are poorly trained for the purpose and spread across all departments and others are initially advised by the academic advisement center (with challenges compounded by hard-to-navigate general education requirements and scheduling issues, both called out by respective summer working groups). Perhaps more important is the lack of organized attention to the needs of commuter students, the largest portion of the University's student population.

WCSU's overall investment in student support services is out of alignment with the students it tends to serve. Commuters make up 73 percent of all students, yet personnel and resources are disproportionately committed to residential students. Office hours are also hard to access for commuting student populations.

Taken together, the evidence generated by the data analyses included in this report and the preceding report from January 2022, as well as the information gathered from members of the WCSU leadership and campus community and from the System Office leadership, reveal an institution that is an essential asset to the region it serves and, by extension, to the State of Connecticut. But our observations lead us to conclude that it is also an institution that has pursued a muddled mission not deliberately aligned to those local needs, and the failure to prioritize its own relevance in the context of those needs has contributed to the challenges of enrollment and finances it has been experiencing. Compounding this problem is that the institution has not consistently put students' needs first, apart from rhetoric. Decision-making has

been primarily tactical rather than strategic, plagued by organizational silos, and occurred in the absence of a robust culture of data and evidence that would help to center decisions on students' needs. As a result, investments are misaligned with the characteristics of students WCSU is serving (or should be serving), services are not offered in a manner convenient to the majority of students, and the curriculum design is opaque and unresponsive to students' concerns and to workforce requirements. The System Office has generally sought to give autonomy to WCSU and its sister institution to manage their own affairs, while providing oversight and support. Yet it also has opportunities to encourage institutional behavior and system-wide partnerships that can help alleviate some of the pressures impacting the CSUs. The next sections will lay out a long-range financial plan that is aimed at ensuring WCSU's use of key strategic budgeting principles, followed by recommendations that seek to provide WCSU and the System Office with a path forward to fiscal viability and improved relevance to students and to its region.

Long-Range Financial Plan

Since the genesis of NCHEMS' engagement with WCSU was a fiscal crisis, it is appropriate to deal specifically with the topic of annual budgets going forward and to suggest credible targets for revenues and expenditures in major categories. The organizing framework for our comments is the strategic budgeting format presented as Figure 30.

Figure 30. Strategic Budgeting Framework

	Quality	Quantity	Utilization	Unit Cost	Total Cost	Total Revenue	Revenue Sources
Assets Personnel Facilities Equipment Collections Students Finances Program							Student Fees
							State Budget Appropriations
							Govt. Grants
							Private Gifts
							Endowment
							Sales & Services
Consumables Services Supplies Utilities							Other Revenues
							Reserves
Contingency							
New Initiatives							
Total							

Figure 31 uses an abbreviated version of the framework to display the FY2022-23 budget, leaving out the quality, quantity, utilization, and unit cost columns to focus on the key components.

Figure 31.   WCSU's FY 2023 Budget

Note	Expense Description	FY23 Costs	FY23 Revenues	Revenue Description
	Personnel (Total Revenue $152,273,279 less Total Non PS Costs $39,389,233)	$112,884,046	$53,467,894	Tuition & fees
	Institutional Financial Aid	$5,510,000	$63,236,820	State appropriations
	Waivers	$1,230,560	$18,988,280	Additional state appropriations, one-time
	Utilities	$4,567,810	$14,761,126	Room & Board
	OE	$20,421,666	$2,789,260	Other Revenues
	Debt Services/Transfers	$5,659,197	($970,101)	(contra revenue)
Cushion against unexpected events, partial in SP	Contingency	$750,000		
Reserves to apply to UNP at year-end, not in SP	Reserves	$1,000,000		
Budget set aside for new program development, new initiatives, etc. partial in SP	New Initiatives	$250,000		
	Total Non PS Costs	$39,389,233		
	Total Costs	$152,273,279	$152,273,279	Total Revenues

Note: Based on a revised spending plan provided by WCSU dated August 29, 2022.

Several things should be noted in this regard. First, it shows that WCSU's budget for FY 2023 is balanced, at least as planned and as functioning in the early months of the fiscal year. However, because this budget includes approximately $18 million in one-time state funding (which is really federal COVID relief funding), the notion of WCSU's budget being "balanced" is illusory; it still includes a structural deficit equivalent to the amount of the federal funding included in the budget.

The CSCU System Office has mandated that each institution in the system submit a tentative balanced budget for FY 2024. The budget submitted by WCSU in response to this mandate is presented as Figure 32.

Figure 32.   WCSU's FY 2024 Budget

Note	Expense Description	FY24 Costs	FY24 Revenues	Revenue Description
	Personnel (Total Revenue $143,819,474 less Total Non PS Costs $41,158,236)	$102,661,238	$55,019,828	Tuition & fees
	Institutional Financial Aid	$5,675,300	$71,724,197	State appropriations
	Waivers	$1,267,476		assumed no additional state support, starkest of scenarios
	Utilities	$4,933,235	$15,256,290	Room & Board
	OE	$21,254,431	$2,789,260	Other Revenues
	Debt Services/Transfers	$5,777,794	($970,101)	(contra revenue)
Cushion against unexpected events, partial in SP	Contingency	$1,000,000		
Reserves to apply to UNP at year-end, not in SP	Reserves	$1,000,000		
Budget set aside for new program development, new initiatives, etc. partial in SP	New Initiatives	$250,000		
	Total Non PS Costs	$41,158,236		
	Total Costs	$143,819,474	$143,819,474	Total Revenues

Note: Based on a revised spending plan provided by WCSU dated August 29, 2022.

This budget is brought into balance by assuming minor increases in revenues from tuition and other sources, assuming a substantial increase in revenue from state appropriations, and a reduction in personnel expenditures of approximately $10 million. The increase in state appropriations is based on a planning number provided by the System Office. In both budgets, relatively small amounts have been set aside for contingencies, rebuilding of the depleted reserves, and investments in new initiatives. Expenditures in the other expenses category are increased to reflect reasonable inflation adjustments. If there are assumptions in the FY 2024 proposed budget that are likely to be the most tenuous, they would be those pertaining to an expectation of substantial increased funding from the state—even though the number reflects guidance from CSCU—and the relatively small amounts proposed for contingencies and new initiatives. Given the uncertainty associated with state funding in the future years, it would be prudent to have a contingency fund of at least $3 million. Regardless of the revenue scenarios, WCSU will have little choice but to make significant reductions in staffing and substantial changes to the programs it offers and the ways in which those programs are delivered if it is to reach a point of fiscal stability. More than $250,000 per year will be required to invest in necessary changes and innovations aimed at accomplishing those changes.

Finally, as part of the biennium budget submission to CSCU, the WCSU Budget Office has prepared a very tentative FY 2025 budget as shown in Figure 33.

Figure 33.   WCSU's FY 2025 Budget

Note	Expense Description	FY25 Costs	FY25 Revenues	Revenue Description
	Personnel (Total Revenue $145,931,816 less Total Non PS Costs $42,648,213)	$103,283,603	$56,618,320	Tuition & fees
	Institutional Financial Aid	$5,845,559	$71,724,197	State appropriations
	Waivers	$1,305,500		assumed no additional state support, starkest of scenarios
	Utilities	$5,327,894	$15,770,140	Room & Board
	OE	$22,018,420	$2,789,260	Other Revenues
	Debt Services/Transfers	$5,900,840	($970,101)	(contra revenue)
Cushion against unexpected events, partial in SP	Contingency	$1,000,000		
Reserves to apply to UNP at year-end, not in SP	Reserves	$1,000,000		
Budget set aside for new program development, new initiatives, etc. partial in SP	New Initiatives	$250,000		
	Total Non PS Costs	$42,648,213		
	Total Costs	$145,931,816	$145,931,816	Total Revenues

Note: Based on a revised spending plan provided by WCSU dated August 29, 2022.

This budget is based on the assumptions of flat enrollments, a three percent increase in tuition in fees, and no increase over FY 2024 in state appropriations. The same levels of funding for contingencies, innovation, and building of reserves as in previous budget years are assumed. The same concerns about levels of funding proposed for contingencies and for investments in innovations carry forward to this budget year.

Moving forward, we suggest that budgets be based on the following assumptions:
1. That enrollments be assumed to increase 100 FTE per year until a level of 4,000 FTE is reached. It is unwise to be overly optimistic about enrollment numbers and recent history

suggests a downward trend. However, we see no reason why WCSU should not have a somewhat brighter enrollment future if it develops targeted recruitment strategies for the different student bodies it serves, attends to improved student services with the intent of improving student retention, and builds stronger relationships with the most proximate higher schools and its two primary feeder community colleges.[3]

2. The same assumptions about rates of tuition increases of three percent per year be maintained.

3. That expectations be created—and the budget estimates reflect—a $1,000,000 per year increase in other revenues. This is based on the observation that fundraising revenues have been low in the past. There is no reason why a reenergized advancement effort—especially one that is aimed at support an institution that is more consciously focused on the needs of the region—should not yield these (still modest) results, and a set of reasonably increased expectations for fundraising activities should be an important priority for WCSU.

4. A minimum of $2,000,000 be set aside for contingencies each year. It is crucial to recognize that the contingency fund exists to be used to deal with decreases in funding from students and the state, not as discretionary money that absolves the institution from the necessity of making cuts to personnel expenses.

5. A minimum of $2,000,000 be set aside each year for investments in new revised academic programs and in the restructuring of student support services. This level of support is crucial to any hope the University has of improving enrollments, however modestly.

With these assumptions, the University is still left with the need to reduce personnel expenditures by approximately $10,000,000. Perhaps 60 percent of this amount can be achieved by reducing reliance on part-time faculty by half—a stretch but probably not impossible. The balance will force a set of difficult reduction decisions. These reductions should not be left to hoped-for retirements and resignations; while WCSU can try to create incentives for employees to voluntarily retire early as one additional way to help close the budget gap, it is critical to not rely on this tactic too heavily; there is nothing strategic about voluntary departures and WCSU needs strategic decisions above all else.

Recommendations

It is abundantly clear from the data, and from the many conversations NCHEMS has had with members of the WCSU community, that all parties must act with a sense of urgency. Although there have been positive signs among stakeholders of willingness and a commitment to engage productively, it is equally evident that the institution is still somewhat in a state of shock over the late "discovery" of the true extent of the financial challenges the University faces. WCSU remains

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[3] Boosting FTE enrollment by that much is achievable if WCSU can find more success at initial recruitment or improved retention or more likely, a combination of both. For example, improving its market penetration rate by one full-time student per 1,000 18-19-year-olds in its service area would yield 100 FTE. A more likely (and more sustainable) approach would involve a mix of reversing the decline in entering students enrolling directly from high schools as well as adult learners along with improved retention, especially of students who are currently leaving WCSU in spite of having accumulated more than 60 credits.

an institution in crisis. In such cases, there are two unhelpful temptations that should be avoided. The first is a natural instinct to conduct "triage" on the problem. In this case, triage comes in the form of instituting hiring freezes, travel and purchasing restrictions, and relying on natural or induced attrition in the ranks as the principal means to reduce costs. These are tactics that can be quite useful, but they are not strategic in nature. Similarly, to the extent that leadership gets enmeshed in dealing with the minutiae, it will fail to take the bold strategic decisions that are necessary. Strategic approaches are needed if WCSU is going to find its way to a thriving future.

The second temptation is for members of the campus community either to look out for their own narrow interests or to resist efforts to meaningfully address institution-wide challenges (or, alternatively, to become complacent). Any unwillingness to play a constructive part in designing and implementing solutions will create student confusion and public criticism that will exacerbate student recruitment challenges. Collective bargaining units must be concerned about the institution's future health and relevance to its surrounding at least as much as they attend to the typical issues of compensation and the terms and conditions of employment. If they fail to strike that balance, the future viability of institution and its programs will be put at risk.

Fortunately, after the initial shock, there have been significant and sincere efforts made by many members of the campus community to wrestle with the University's challenges and to advance constructive ideas to resolve them. Most notably, these efforts were channeled into the summer working groups, each of which delivered thoughtful reports, often drawing heavily on institutional data. The recommendations below incorporate some of the substance of those reports as well as the spirit of constructive problem-solving that the working groups sought to embody. As WCSU's efforts to secure its financial viability move ahead, it will be essential that any signs that the community is losing collective momentum be countered by champions from within who are able to maintain a clear focus on the health of the institution as a whole.

This vigilance is important since WCSU simply does not have the luxury of time. Federal stimulus funds will run out soon. Although additional investments in the public university serving the state's fastest-growing county may be justified, state leaders may not be in a position to make substantial additional recurring investments in public postsecondary institutions as economic conditions evolve. This is especially the case given the significant enrollment losses institutions experienced in recent years, and with a bleak demographic picture in Connecticut, New York, and throughout the New England region is forecasted to get notably worse within the next 4-5 years. These conditions will put WCSU's tuition revenues under even more strain. These pressures mean the time to act is now. While it will be important for WCSU's leadership to honor academic shared governance, existing labor agreements, and the like, it cannot afford to hesitate in making bold decisions or to permit key decision-making processes to drag on interminably.

With that sense of urgency in mind and bolstered by the preceding analyses and by observations drawn from conversations with stakeholders, NCHEMS makes the recommendations for strategic

change that follow.[4] These recommendations are aimed at securing a common understanding of WCSU's institutional identity and mission—one that is tied to service to Danbury and the surrounding area—and reorienting its programs and activities to serve that mission effectively. They include beefing up WCSU's use of evidence to inform decision-making, nourishing a culture of accountability, and committing to changes aimed at improving organizational effectiveness. Finally, recommendations also suggest initiatives to be undertaken at the CSCU System Office to leverage its capacity for reaping the benefits of scale and to differentiate institutional roles to drive efficiencies and effectiveness at WCSU and its sister institutions.

1. WCSU should articulate an "operational mission" that is deeply embedded in service to its surrounding region. Components of such a mission should specifically articulate the audience the institution serves, the programs it offers, and other important and established elements of mission that are either explicitly assigned or historically significant.

    Based on the findings from NCHEMS' analyses, it is clear that WCSU is an institution that serves students who are:
    a. Residents of Fairfield and Litchfield Counties in Connecticut, and Dutchess, Putnam, and Westchester Counties in New York who have completed a high school education and are seeking a baccalaureate degree or continuing professional education. WCSU's students are predominately from within a 30- to 40-mile radius of WCSU's campus, the large majority of whom will commute to campus from home, although WCSU also supports students who live in campus residences.
    b. Seeking an education that will prepare them for in-demand jobs in the surrounding area, as well as skill-building that will ensure their success post-graduation.
    c. Increasingly from a diverse racial/ethnic background and often not native English speakers.
    d. Both recent high school graduates and adult learners who are 25 years of age and older. Both groups of students may be enrolled either full- or part-time.
    e. Transfer students who are seeking a baccalaureate degree after beginning their postsecondary education at a community college.

    In addition, WCSU is responsible for serving employers in the surrounding region, especially school districts, health care providers, local government and nonprofits, and businesses (typically of small and medium size). It also supports local civic leadership and regional economic and community development efforts.

    WCSU serves this mix of audiences by providing:
    a. Baccalaureate programs in the arts and sciences in a variety appropriate to a comprehensive, instruction-oriented institution.

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[4] Several of these recommendations respond to questions were initially raised in April and which may continue to be useful as guides for decision-making as the work moves forward (see Appendix B).

b. Baccalaureate programs in applied fields, especially health care, education, business, and the visual and performing arts.

c. A limited set of master's level and post-baccalaureate certificate programs, also in applied fields, especially education, health, and business.

d. Cooperative programming with other CSU institutions so that students and employers have access to programs that are not a current specialty of WCSU.

e. A curriculum across all programs and general education requirements that is as thoroughly infused with professional practice as possible. Even students enrolled in the School of Visual and Performing Arts, who may have aspirations for a performance career, should be exposed to a curriculum that offers ample opportunities for gathering meaningful relevant experience in other facets of their chosen field (for example, in the business aspects of the performing and visual arts industries).

These characteristics are consistent with the recognition that, as a regional public institution, WCSU (and its sister institutions) is called to serve as a "Steward of Place."[5] Such institutions are of, and for, a particular locality; their students are predominately from nearby communities and their programs are closely attuned to their needs and those of nearby employers. As a result, the institution must remain nimble enough that it can be continuously refreshed to ensure its ongoing relevance to that place, in particular by reflecting the demographic and workplace changes occurring in the community. For WCSU, this means being a place that welcomes a diversifying student body in a community that already boasts generally high educational attainment levels and personal income levels— although there is substantial variation within its service region. Residents without those advantages will struggle to thrive in a setting that presumes students are well prepared for a college experience. This makes WCSU a critical asset supporting social and economic mobility, one which cannot fully perform that duty without establishing and conscientiously pursuing a disciplined, clear operational mission.

Even if a traditional mission statement can fail to meaningfully focus on what an institution really does, it is still helpful to distill an operational mission into a relatively concise statement that highlights the institution's core purpose. Such a statement can aid in communicating with community members, prospective students, legislators, employers, and others. With that in mind, a summary statement of the operational mission for WCSU that might fit the above description is:

> *WCSU serves residents of all backgrounds in western Connecticut and adjacent areas of New York, as well as employers in the region, by providing students with*

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[5] For a discussion of this term, see AASCU (2002). *Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place*. Washington, D.C.: Author. Retrieved from https://www.aascu.org/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=5458. Additional recent research on regional comprehensive institutions is available from the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges at www.regionalcolleges.org.

the knowledge and skills necessary for successful careers in the regional economy and for making positive contributions to the civic life of their communities.

Articulating an operational mission, organizing programs and outreach activities to align with that mission, and communicating it broadly is a necessary step in orienting WCSU to a more relevant and thriving future. That mission must clearly spell out WCSU's commitment to serving the diversifying, less financially secure population within the otherwise generally prosperous nearby communities by offering programs and student experiences that are deliberately designed to develop professional competencies linked to the workforce demands of the surrounding area.

In the process of developing this greater clarity, it will be necessary for WCSU to resolve the degree to which it will remain an institution with a fully-developed residential housing program. A residential program can provide a significant boost to student retention efforts, but with nearly three-quarters of its students attending as commuters and persistent challenges in achieving adequate occupancy levels, WCSU should carefully consider how much housing capacity to maintain—and on which campus. This decision is secondary to its need to clarify the institutional identity, but divestment of current space represents an opportunity to find some savings. An appropriately qualified campus master planning consultant would be helpful to engage at that point.

2. Become disciplined in gathering, analyzing, and using data to make strategic decisions, evaluate programs, and operationally support student success, and nourish a culture for effective data use. Strategic decisions demand good information, particularly when challenging external conditions raise the stakes of those decisions. WCSU's summer working groups stimulated an appetite among their participants for more and better data, and the University should not miss the chance to capitalize on that by making a consistent commitment to collecting and analyzing data and infusing important communications to the campus with empirical evidence. Making improvements in student success should be the uppermost defining goal of this effort. This commitment is an essential element of any long-term plan for institutional sustainability and success.[6] Key to this effort will be the following:

   a. Prioritizing the development of a more robust institutional research/effectiveness function, ensuring that it is elevated to a level that ensures that information and data are invariably relied upon by the president and his/her cabinet, and

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[6] Here are a few resources that may be useful in guiding implementation of this recommendation: EDUCAUSE (2018), *Understanding and Developing a Data-Informed Culture,* https://library.educause.edu/-/media/files/library/2022/5/understandinganddevelopingdatainformedculture.pdf; Association for Institutional Research, EDUCAUSE, & National Association of College and University Business Officers (2019), *Analytics Can Save Higher Education. Really: A Joint Statement,* https://changewithanalytics.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Joint_Analytics_Statement_2020.pdf; Association for Institutional Research (2016), *Statement of Aspirational Practice for Institutional Research,* https://www.airweb.org/ir-data-professional-overview/a-statement-of-aspirational-practice-for-institutional-research.

appropriately staffing the office responsible to ensure that progress in building a data culture gets embedded throughout the institution. This role should also be closely linked to colleagues at other CSUs and with the system office to share resources, concepts, and data on students with enrollment records at multiple institutions.[7] In fact, it would be best if a chief strategy officer be organizationally embedded in the president's office, in order to better integrate data on academic and student success with business management data, rather than run the risk of creating multiple information silos by situating the function under either the provost or the chief administrative officer of the institution.

b. Developing a data strategy and a discipline of data governance. A data strategy is a plan for how data are to be deployed in service to the institution's mission. A strategy ensures intentionality around how data will be used to ensure student success, promote operational efficiency, manage financial risk, and drive innovation. Data governance refers to formalized behaviors and rules/processes concerning how data are collected, stored, and used. These activities deal with issues about what data are collected, by whom (and what office "owns" what data), how and when operational data are gathered into analytical files (e.g., when to "freeze" daily enrollment data for analysis), what people/roles get to access what data, how variables are defined and by whom (e.g., who maintains the data dictionaries), what are the processes for how data quality is assured, what analytical tools are needed, etc. The creation of a data strategy and the development of data governance are tasks that must be assigned to some office or individual, who will need support from an advisory group to ensure the function's work is conceptually sound, is vetted, and that execution of its work is capably carried out. As the amount of data generated from learning management systems, analytics platforms, and other tools proliferates alongside advances in techniques for using data in institutions and across emerging instructional delivery models, a clear plan and disciplined implementation of these functions are increasingly necessary core competencies for an institution that thrives.

c. Develop a core set of institutional effectiveness and efficiency metrics and report on them regularly. Examples of such metrics, which, whenever appropriate, should be disaggregated by student characteristics (e.g., income/Pell recipients, race/ethnicity, age, academic preparation, commuter/on-campus resident, native/transfer students, athlete, etc.) and program, are:

1. Student outcomes—completions, milestone achievement (e.g., 30 credits, gateway course completion), time- and credits-to-completion, licensure pass rates.

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[7] Gagliardi, J.S. & Lane, J.E. (2022). *Higher Education Systems Redesigned: From Perpetuation to Innovation to Student Success.* SUNY Press; Tandberg, D.A., Sponsler, B.A., Hanna, R.W., Guilbeau, J.P. (2018). *The State Higher Education Executive Officer and the Public Good: Developing New Leadership for Improved Policy, Practice, and Research.* Teachers College Press.

2. Post-collegiate/workforce outcomes—employment rates, subsequent enrollment, and median wages at one- and five-years post-graduation; ideally these are data to be collected from administrative records with assistance from the System Office.
3. Efficiency—completions per 100 FTE.
4. Affordability—net price after all grant aid and a reasonable work commitment; hours worked per week among full- and part-time students; median total out-of-pocket payments to WCSU through the first degree for tuition and fees, and for total cost of attendance; percent of a graduating cohort that borrowed and average or median annual and cumulative debt.

d. Ensuring that decisions about curriculum and programs are tightly linked with data and information about the regional workforce needs to ensure that students are receiving instruction and skill-building, as well as degrees, that are known to be relevant to their success after graduation. Building obvious connections to local workforce needs is a critical step in recruiting students and engaging employers from WCSU's primary market.

e. Establishing links between fiscal and student data to enable the consistent use of cost-benefit analyses and program/intervention evaluation.

f. Rationalizing budgeting to ensure that both revenue and expenditures are assigned appropriately.[8]

3. Create a culture of accountability and transparency at all levels of the university. There are numerous dimensions to this recommendation; the university should:

a. Enforce existing policies fairly and consistently. Explain the rationale for controversial decisions using data wherever possible as a means of reinforcing the data culture of the institutions.

b. Commit to improving retention and graduation rates and to closing completion gaps. The highest form of institutional accountability is focused on student success. Information on student success, presented separately for different subpopulations, should be published annually and used as the centerpiece of a campus-wide meeting to celebrate progress, share new planned initiatives to make continued improvements, and discuss how to remove or reduce additional barriers. Early indicators of student success should become a regular agenda item throughout the year for major decision-making bodies within the institution (Cabinet, Academic Affairs, Student Affairs, Faculty Senate, etc.).

c. Practice truth in advertising. For example, students who choose to enroll in classes that are advertised as being in-person should expect that each session will be conducted in-person. The advertised benefits (e.g., job placement rates)

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[8] This point is borrowed from the efforts of the summer working groups, which were frustrated by the degree to which revenue data were linked to student major but expenditure data were linked to the departments that provided the instruction.

associated with program completion should be backed up by evidence specific to WCSU.

    d. Given the fiscal circumstances of the university, it is important that all units of the university be held to strong standards of fiscal accountability; a budget for each unit should be developed within the constraints of a balanced budget for the university as a whole and strictly monitored (including use of unannounced fiscal audits). WCSU should develop and implement incentives that encourage units to end the year with a surplus, rather than spending budgeted funds down to a zero balance. For example, a portion of saved funds may be returned to the unit for discretionary purposes with the balance placed in a central fund for investment in student success initiatives.

4. Develop a set of enrollment strategies specifically tailored to the different student subpopulations served by WCSU.

    a. High school students—the students who will enroll in college directly after high school graduation. Given the regional draw of WCSU and the reality that many of the high school graduates in the region come from large public schools in Danbury and Waterbury, it is especially important to develop strategies specifically for these two high schools. These strategies should extend to working directly with the high schools to develop academic programs in those schools that allow students to complete a portion of a baccalaureate program while still in high school and transfer seamlessly to WCSU with credits in hand. WCSU might consider offering conditional admission to qualifying students who participate in such programs prior to their high school graduation. These efforts must be supported with regular outreach efforts to give meaning to the relationship WCSU is trying to develop with these local students.

    b. Transfer students. Most students who transfer to WCSU come from Naugatuck Valley and Norwalk Community Colleges. WCSU should consider placing a full-time academic advisor at each college to recruit students and, more importantly, to advise them on courses they should take while still at the community college in order to ease the transfer pathway into their major program at WCSU. The university might also consider establishing an academic presence at each college, teaching classes to community college enrollees that count toward a degree at WCSU. Instructors assigned to teach those classes should be able to provide a broad overview of WCSU and its curriculum, and to refer interested students to appropriate WCSU staff for more thorough answers to any questions. The more ways WCSU can be visible on the campuses of these community colleges, the better.

    c. Adult students, particularly those who have accumulated some college credits but have not completed a program. There are two steps that the university can take to improve its ability to serve this group of potential students. The first is to make sure that its academic programs align with the needs of such students—primarily that they provide students with degrees or shorter-term credentials that prepare

them for jobs that pay a living wage. The second is to increase the use of prior learning assessment (PLA) to provide these students with credit for learning they have acquired from experiences outside the classroom; speeding their path to a credential in this way helps reduce the opportunity costs of enrolling.

d. Graduate students, specifically students that need additional education in fields in which WCSU has expertise at the undergraduate level. This is likely to be post-baccalaureate certificates as well as Master's degrees. Given WCSU's program base the focus of these programs are likely to be specialties in the fields of Education, Health Professions, and Business.

5. Undertake a variety of curricular changes designed to both improve the student experience and to make delivery of academic programs less costly. Among the changes that should be made are the following:

a. General Education
1. Revise the General Education component of the university's curriculum. Summer Working Group #3 described General Education coursework as being just one more set of courses for departments to compete over, justifying the continuation of many undersubscribed courses in numerous departments on the basis of their eligibility for general education credit. This inefficient behavior continued even as institutional enrollment was dropping. Many of these courses were offered at the upper-division level at the commensurately higher cost (to WCSU). These practices have the effect of justifying the retention of large numbers of faculty in disciplinary areas that were already "underloaded." For both coherence of learning outcomes and efficient course delivery, the university should develop a common core of gen ed courses with far fewer choices. Furthermore, there is ample evidence that a reduced menu of courses that are coherently organized can improve students' chances of making timely progress and eventually completing a degree. This same evidence indicates that too many choices reduces student success. To the degree that such improvements in student success lead to better retention rates, this recommendation can be revenue-positive for WCSU, not just a way to conserve scarce resources.

2. Make a concerted effort to revise the delivery of the entry level math courses. Math 100 has consistently been a major barrier, consistently derided by faculty, staff, and students alike. It is not helpful that it is often taught by contingent faculty. When a gateway course is consistently a barrier to student success, the situation begs for serious attention and a revised approach that leads to student success, not failure. Attention to the principles and strategies put forward by the Charles A. Dana Center Mathematics Pathways project at the University of Texas at Austin may prove useful in making critical reforms.[9]

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[9] https://dcmathpathways.org/

3. Establish course caps for general education courses at a more appropriate (higher) number, e.g., from 30 to 38, as recommended by Working Group #3.

4. Work with the System Office to create a common core general education curriculum that will serve not only WCSU students but will ease transfer for community college students as well.

b. Modify the curriculum in ways that make it more appropriate for the kinds of students being served by WCSU. NCHEMS offers the following for consideration:

1. Structure the curricula so that students get an early introduction to the professional content in which they are interested. Most students go to college to "get a better job." Students who do not get a taste of the content that sparks their interest until after they have met a series of gen ed requirements often become so disaffected with the college experience—and tuition payments—that they drop out before they experience a course that they are really interested in. WCSU should execute a strategy aimed at presenting students with a coherent first-year experience program that is managed at the university level and incorporates opportunities for career exploration and the application of concepts to real-world experiences, in ways that dovetail with the professional elements of the general education curriculum. This is important for all incoming first-year students but it is especially critical to have an approach that deliberately addresses the exploratory experiences of students who enter the University as "undecided" or "undesignated." Admitting these students into meta-majors structured in a way that introduces them to a professional field while also enrolling them in gen ed courses with particular relevance to that field is one approach worthy of consideration. There may be other approaches that could be explored. The objective should be to ensure that all students are enrolled in courses that let them see how their college work connects to the world of work—they see application of knowledge, not just acquisition of knowledge.

2. Increase the use of full-time faculty teaching courses offered to first- and second-year students. Also consider whether there is another approach to organizing instruction, e.g., an instructor of record who is a full-time faculty member working with coaches, rather than simply claiming there are not enough faculty available. Note too that section size limits and reductions to sections, including in upper-division courses, may free up some of those too-committed faculty.

3. Ensure that all students have a meaningful work experience as part of the academic program. One way for WCSU to distinguish itself among generally similar institutions in the region, is to make work experience an integral part of the curriculum in each major. To meet the needs of students, such work experiences should provide remuneration to the students and carry academic credit. Such a structure would also be a selling point to potential students. There are a growing number of opportunities to work with partner

organizations, including employers and funders, that are already engaged in such activities, which means it may be possible to develop programs and related capacity at WCSU without breaking the bank.[10]

Such restructuring of the curricula should free up enough faculty teaching time so that a much higher proportion of first-year students are taught by full-time faculty. A target should be that first-time students have part-time faculty for no more than one of their courses.

c. Invest in revisions to programs and the selective addition of new programs. In all cases, the objective should be to bring academic programs into better alignment with the interests of students. Among the steps that might be taken are the following:

1. Revise existing Liberal Arts curricula by adding courses that provide students with an understanding of how to apply the knowledge and skills gained in the major to problems/issues that prepare them for the world of work. Examples would be embedding courses dealing with medical (or business, or education) in the philosophy curriculum, courses dealing with technical writing in the English curriculum.

2. Evaluate the possibility of adding new programs that complement successful programs currently being offered in order to round out a cluster of related programs. Such complementary programs help to reinforce the reputation of WCSU as being the "go-to" university in certain fields for both students and employers. They also provide students an off-ramp to locally relevant competencies, e.g., allied health options for students who are not able to get accepted into the nursing program.

3. Identify a short list of potential new programs expressly prioritizing opportunities to meet existing workforce needs, and with solid evidence of student interest a secondary factor; existing capacity to offer a program should not be the determining factor.

4. Develop a regular process and associated metrics for evaluating existing programs.

6. Revise the delivery of student services to better meet the needs of the kinds of students that WCSU actually serves and must serve in the future. Revisions recommended for consideration include:

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[10] Programs that build connections between education and the world of work are proliferating. Examples include a program in which companies will pay for bachelor's degree completion for currently enrolled community college students who commit to a minimum employment tenure (https://workshift.opencampusmedia.org/deloitte-will-pay-for-students-to-finish-their-bachelors-at-asu-or-northeastern/) and programs that seek to embed work simulations into existing coursework (https://workshift.opencampusmedia.org/issue-41-work-experience/). It would be impossible to catalog all of the various innovative strategies that have launched in recent years as the hiring economy has been tight, but suffice it to say there are a number of possible avenues to mine for ideas about how WCSU could accelerate its efforts in this arena.

a. Determine, in consultation with students, the array of services most needed by commuter students, as well as the times of the day/week when access to such services are most needed. This recommendation is made in recognition of the fact that most students at the university are commuting students while the array of services currently being provided is better aligned with the needs of traditional residential students.

b. Link students with a mentor/coach when they first apply to the university and maintain the connection throughout their undergraduate time at WCSU. This person should serve as:

   1. A navigator who can help the student deal with university processes, ensure that key actions (like applying for student aid, enrolling for classes, etc.) are taken in accordance with procedural timelines.

   2. A monitor of student engagement with the university and an early intervention counselor. The coach needs to ensure that students are attending classes, completing coursework and taking exams, and otherwise meeting faculty expectations for course participation.

   3. An ombudsperson who will support the student in cases in which the student needs assistance in overcoming barriers created by failure to adhere to university policies or procedures.

   These coaches should be generalists who can deal with routine problems confronted by students—the vast majority of issues that do not require deep, specialized information and expertise. The university, in consultation with the System Office, should ensure that this more detailed expertise can be accessed from staff somewhere in the System.

c. Relatedly, WCSU should better organize its academic advisement function. One option is to adopt a more professionalized model in which all first- and second-year students are assigned trained advisors working out of a Center for Academic Advisement and equipped with appropriate tools (such as degree audit software). Once a student formally declares a major, he or she also gets assigned a faculty advisor in the appropriate department who can address the specific requirements of the major, but the student does not lose access to the initial advisor. The professional advisors would work hand-in-hand with the student's concierge. But a more cost-effective approach would have the professional advisors play the role of student coaches.

d. Consolidate all institutional financial aid funding in the financial aid office and require that office to allocate awards to students based on a clear strategy.

7. Create efficiencies through reductions in the costs of overload/release time payments. These costs have been allowed to escalate and accumulate over time. One essential step toward fiscal stability would be to rein in these costs and eliminate the backlog in the liabilities that such payments represent. Specific steps that WCSU could take include the following:

a. Devote extra state/system funds received to buying down the accumulated liabilities and resetting the books on these payments.

b. Establish a specific account in the provost's office for payments of release time and require that all such payments be approved by the provost rather than any other academic administrator. Monitor this account closely to ensure that budgeted limits are not exceeded.

c. The single largest use of release time is that used to "buy" faculty out of teaching assignments to serve as department chairs. WCSU is too small—especially with reduced numbers of students in recent years—and has more departments (many very small) than can be justified. It is not unreasonable to set a target to reduce the number of academic departments by as much as one-half the current number.

8. Make a series of organizational changes designed to improve institutional functioning and improve revenues. While many of the recommendations in this report will take time to implement, those regarding organizational realignment can be implemented quickly; there is no need for delay. The campus understanding of the university's financial condition creates a limited window of opportunity within which the changes can be executed. The organizational changes are also central to implementation of many of the other recommendations.

a. Create a management structure that has the following offices reporting directly to the President.

1. Provost/VP of Academic Affairs. Given the recommendations about embedding professional and career-relevant education throughout academic programming at the University and current efforts to incorporate career programming into the first-year experience, it is sensible that the Office of Career Services should report through the provost to better ensure that its efforts are fully integrated with the mission.

2. VP of Finance and Administrative Services

3. VP of Enrollment and Student Affairs

4. Associate VP of Planning and Analysis / Chief Strategy Officer

5. VP of Institutional Advancement and External Relations

6. Chief Diversity Officer

7. Chief of Staff

b. Create a coherent advancement function that includes all aspects of institutional fund-raising within a single office—alumni affairs, annual giving, major gifts, etc. This office has historically underperformed. The institution needs a coordinated fundraising strategy and capacity to carry out that strategy. Reasonable fundraising targets should be established and progress toward meeting those targets be monitored on an on-going basis.

c. Create an office of strategic analysis and institutional effectiveness (the function is important; the title could be something different) and elevate this office in importance. The office should be headed by someone at the Associate VP level and

should be responsible for a series of functions much broader than the current office of institutional research. These functions should include:

1. Data governance as described earlier in this report.
2. Conducting analyses of potential students and assisting the office of Enrollment Management in developing strategies for increasing the numbers of enrolled students.
3. Conducting retention and completion studies, with a particular emphasis on identifying factors that lead students to drop out or transfer out.
4. Conduct workforce demand studies. Identify workforce needs that indicate the possible need for new programs or cast doubt on the efficacy of existing programs.
5. Conduct student follow-up studies to compile information about the kinds of jobs students (by major) are getting after graduation—data about industries and occupations in which graduates are working. These data can help inform changes that could be made in curricula to better prepare students for life after college.
6. Compile and analyze data about work in which students are engaged while enrolled at WCSU—hours per week worked, employer, occupation/type of job. Having his information will aid in devising work-based learning experiences that can give graduates an advantage in the employment market.
7. Conduct analyses of faculty workloads and identify ways in which savings can be achieved.
8. Work with the Office of the Vice President of Finance and Administrative Services to link data on student activity and success with the institution's financial information in ways that permit cost-benefit analyses of existing and proposed programs and activities.
9. Report data to the System Office and state and federal governments as required.

d. Bring WCSU into conformity with most higher education institutions and create an office of Finance and Administrative Services, headed by a Vice President and responsible for the following functions:
   1. Financial services, accounting, and the internal audit
   2. Budgeting
   3. Human resources
   4. Procurement
   5. Information Technology
   6. Facilities Management
   7. Public Safety

e. Student Affairs. Under the leadership of a Vice President of Enrollment and Student Affairs, bring together a set of functions designed to ensure that students are supported in individually appropriate ways throughout their careers at WCSU. The

principal goals of this role will be the provision of necessary support services and the removal of barriers to student success. These functions include:

1. Enrollment management.
2. Student financial aid allocation. The financial management aspects should be within the purview of the VP for Finance and Administrative Services.[11]
3. Student Life—with attention to two very different student populations:
   i. Commuter students. This group has historically been underserved.
   ii. Residential students. This group is a minority of the student body but has historically received most of attention.
4. Student support services. In addition to providing services to specific populations, such as disability services, counseling, etc., this set of activities should also include the oversight of coaches who help students navigate the processes and ensure that they receive the advising and other support services on just-in-time basis.
5. Athletics.

It should be noted that nothing about the titles indicated in this series of suggestions should be taken as recommendations regarding the individuals who should be assigned the responsibilities of filling the recommended offices. Moreover, every effort should be made to streamline the organization within this student affairs function to eliminate silos between separate offices serving particular student needs. Insofar as possible, these services should be located in a single shared space on each of WCSU's two campuses to promote students' ease of access.

9. Adopt and implement recommendations put forward by the summer working groups that are consistent with the overall strategy outlined in this report, especially those that are tactical in nature and are reasonably expected to produce better student outcomes and be cost-effective. At the same time, recognize that the summer working groups served to create space for meaningful change as members of the campus community wrestled with dilemmas that had largely been swept under the rug in preceding years. Identify allies and champions among those whose involvement in the working groups helped to catalyze a desire to be solutions-oriented and seek opportunities to keep those individuals productively engaged. For example:

   a. Change the academic schedule to better serve commuter students and to put commonly needed courses on a regular, predictable cadence.
   b. Develop a first-year experience program and centralize its management as is currently being initiated by the Provost's Office.
   c. Reform the general education curriculum to streamline it, reduce confusion over requirements, and reorganize courses to better meet student needs (including by

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[11] As described below, this is a function that may be appropriate to coordinate through the System Office.

investing in career planning early and reimagining courses that are known to be serious barriers to student success).

Recommendations to System Office and Board

While the work conducted by NCHEMS has been focused on improvements and changes that can be made by WCSU in order to ensure its future, there are several actions that should be taken at the System level that could alleviate the fiscal strain on the University and its sister institutions. In an environment in which demographic changes are likely to fundamentally reshape the profiles of students who will need postsecondary education and training, how many of them there will be, and what kind of programs are needed, the System will need to exercise a more robust coordinating and institutional support function focused on improving efficiency, nimbleness, program quality, and relevance across all of its constituent institutions. To be most immediately helpful to WCSU and its sister institutions, NCHEMS recommends that CSCU seriously consider the following actions:

1. The System Office should expand opportunities for the CSUs to take advantage of shared services in functions such as IT, human resources, purchasing, and finance, to help reduce overhead and duplication of effort. The community colleges and Charter Oak have already taken advantage of some shared services operations, but efforts should be made to extend this option at the four-year institutions with regard to some of their unique needs. Such efforts should include shared resources in the delivery of academic programs, as well as administrative functions, which can increase access to educational programs that are unavailable at students' local institution. These activities would not only reduce costs but also introduce standardization of data definitions, unlock a more robust capacity to develop intelligence for strategic decision-making, and provide a platform for sharing best practices across campuses.
2. Develop a common core general education curriculum based on common course numbers to be implemented in all system institutions. This step would improve transfer and articulation for students. It would also provide guidance to campuses regarding a limited number of courses to be offered for general education credit—allowing institutions to reduce the number of courses taught. This in turn would create economic savings.
3. Utilize Charter Oak State College to greater advantage to better serve both students and the other institutions in the system. Among the functions that might be assigned to Charter Oak are:
   a. Conducting Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) on behalf of all institutions in the system. This would have the advantage of centralizing expertise in conducting such assessments and in providing commonality in results. When a judgment is made by Charter Oak, it should be understood to apply equally to all institutions in the system—local institutional faculty cannot overrule such judgments.
   b. Providing a common platform and the support mechanisms for delivering distance education by all institutions. This includes instructional designers, student support

specialists, and other specialized expertise that can lead to better outcomes for students enrolled in online courses.

4. Create a mechanism that allows interinstitutional sharing of expertise on matters of student financial aid and other student support services. As recommended previously in this report, students at WCSU would be better served if they had strong attachments to "coaches" who can help them navigate a variety of procedures and help them avoid costly missteps. This would require that student affairs staff housed on campus to be generalists rather than the specialists that most of them are currently required to be. There is a need for specialists but all institutions in the system do not each need a full array of this kind of expertise in all areas; there are benefits to be obtained if this expertise can be shared. The system itself need not gather all of this expertise in the system office in Hartford; instead, it can ensure that all the necessary expertise exists somewhere on the collective campuses and that mechanisms are in place to allow it to be tapped by all institutions in the system.

5. Provide the necessary support of institutional efforts to develop roles and missions that fit their local circumstances. The involvement of System staff and provision of assistance at key junctures has been critical to the work performed by NCHEMS on behalf of WCSU. Other institutions in the system have their own issues that must be addressed. Key contributions made by the System Office include:
    a. Provision of key data and analytic support. Particularly important are data detailing workforce gaps in the various regions of the state. Also important are data about the destinations of students who leave the university either as transfers, dropouts, or graduates who are pursuing further education or entering the workforce.
    b. Stating a clear set of expectations about the development of "operational missions" for each of the universities and about the need for balanced budgets and the maintenance of operating reserves.

6. Ensure that collective bargaining agreements (CBAs) are sufficiently flexible to allow institutions to fulfill their different missions—missions that will likely become more different over time. If institutions are to truly serve local and regional needs, they will have to be much nimbler than they are now. The CBAs cannot serve as an insurmountable barrier keeping institutions from meeting regional needs.

This map is a reference for multiple figures in this report.

Figure 34.   Area Three-Digit Zip Codes
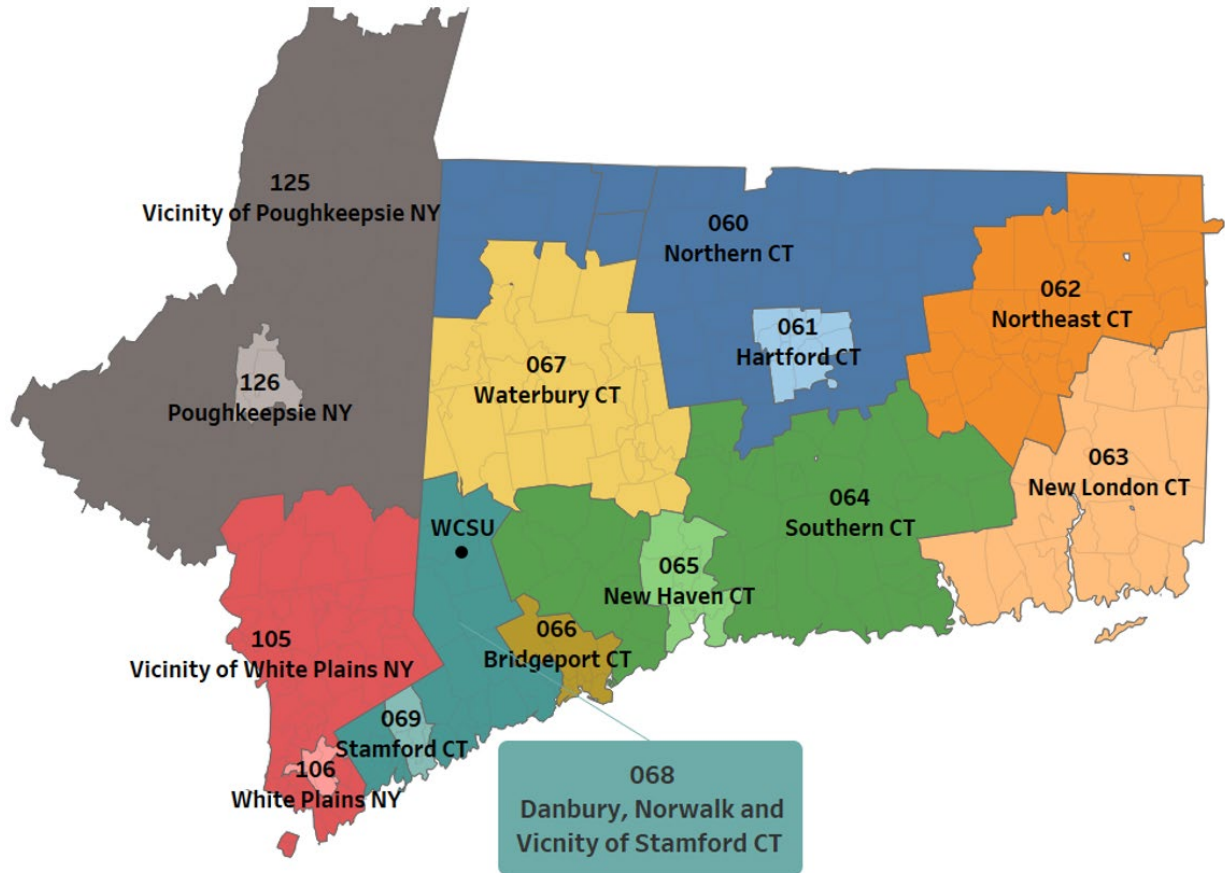
Appendix B. Planning Questions Prepared for the April 2022 Campuswide Retreat

In preparation for the campuswide retreat organized by WCSU leadership in April, NCHEMS prepared a set of overriding questions that might be useful in guiding discussions. These questions are included below because, although this report attempts to answer many of them, it may be helpful for WCSU to continue to periodically review and reflect on them as the University moves forward with changes aimed at ensuring its long-term financial viability and relevance to the region.

1. What makes WCSU unique (in addition to its location and price)? What is the university's comparative advantage? What's the selling point?
2. How do we want WCSU to be known?
    a. An affordable institution that prepares students from the region for good jobs and serves the workforce needs of the region?
    b. A small, public liberal arts college with a few professional programs that serve the region?
    c. Something else?
    d. Essentially, address the questions:
        i. Who do we want to be?
        ii. How does this differ from WCSU's current expression of what kind of institution it is, what its comparative advantages are?
        iii. Will demography and competition allow WCSU to become that kind of institution?
3. What student bodies should WCSU strive to serve?
    a. Continue to focus on recent high school grads? If so, what will it take to attract more CT students, especially students from Danbury High School but also from Fairfield County and the rest of Western CT?
        i. Data on trends in market share from high schools in these geographic areas.
        ii. Alternatively, numbers of first-time students from these zip codes compared to numbers of 18 year olds in these zip codes.
    b. Should WCSU adopt a more intense focus on serving transfer students? Why have transfer numbers declined, and what will it take to attract more Naugatuck CC transfers?
        i. Trends in transfers from NCC. From other institutions.
        ii. In which WCSU programs do transfer students enroll?
    c. More focus on the adult population? How will program mix, delivery methods, and student services have to change to successfully serve this student body?
        i. Trends in enrollments of adult students
            1. Full-time
            2. Part-time
        ii. Data on program choices of adult students.

        iii.   Numbers of adults in the service area with some college but no degree.

        iv.   Numbers of adults in the service area with a HS diploma but no college experience.

    d. More focus on graduate students? What programs can be grown? How? And what new programs might be considered?

        i.   Enrollment trends in graduate programs, by instructional modality (in-person/on-line)

4. What programs are needed to better serve the workforce needs of the region? How can new programs be identified? What existing programs are not sustainable and should be eliminated?

5. Should the university embrace a wider array of instructional modalities:

    a. More on-line?

    b. More short courses (5 to 8 weeks)?

    c. Limited residency?

    d. More attention to prior learning assessment?

    e. Embrace competency-based education?

    f. Incorporate work-place learning into more curricula with provisions for paid internships and academic credit for the work experience.

6. How can gen ed be reformed to be both more educationally sound and efficient?

    a. Incidence of small classes in gen ed courses.

    b. Guided pathways

7. How can facilities be better utilized?

    a. Should programs be redistributed among the two campuses?

    b. What facilities might be leased out or otherwise turned into revenue producing assets?

8. What steps can be taken to improve retention?

    a. What are trends in retention at WCSU?

    b. What are rates of retention at other CSUs and comparison institutions?

    c. What happens to students that leave WCSU?

        i.   Enroll in another institution, and if so, which ones?

        ii. Leave PSE completely?

9. What changes to the internal organizational structure should be made to:

    a. Improve service to current students?

    b. Attract new student populations and serve them well?

    c. Create opportunities for additional revenues?

    d. Generate efficiencies?

10. How might WCSU capitalize on system-wide assets to accelerate changes needed?