

Education woes threaten state economy

By Abbe Smith, Register Staff

WEST HAVEN — Without changes and improvements to Connecticut's education system, the future of the state's economy remains at risk, according to a panel of local educators and business leaders convened Tuesday night at Southern Connecticut State University to discuss the relationship between higher education and economic growth.

Panelists included Hamden Superintendent of Schools Frances M. Rabinowitz; Robert Santy, president and chief executive officer of the Connecticut Economic Resource Center; Anthony Rescigno, president of the Greater New Haven Chamber of Commerce; and John Rowland, program director of the Southern New England Program of the Corporation for Supportive Housing.

The consensus Tuesday was that the state has a long road ahead in terms of improving educational opportunities for its residents and nurturing a skilled work force.

CSUS Chancellor David Carter opened the discussion by asking: Why is education important to the future of Connecticut?

"We must be able to compete globally. If we can't compete globally, we're out of business," he said.

Several panelists said that Connecticut needs to work harder to prepare students for the work force.

Rescigno argued that business can't function properly without a skilled work force. Added Rowland: "The work force in this state is not making the grade." He emphasized that education is not just for doctors and lawyers, but firefighters and plumbers and just about any career path a person could choose.

A statistic from a video presentation noted that the number of young people with bachelor's degrees in the state is expected to shrink by more than 4 percent between 1993 and 2020, while the percentage of jobs demanding college degrees grows.

Rabinowitz discussed the need to focus on the educational needs of students at the high school level. She said students have to realize "it's not OK anymore to strive to (just) finish high school."

And when local students go off to college in different states, Connecticut needs to attract them back after graduation, Santy stressed.

From the audience, SCSU English professor Michael Shea pointed out that while Connecticut has the highest per capita income in the state, the state ranks in the bottom 10 in terms of public financing for higher education.

"Those statistics say a lot about our failure to educate our own populace," he said.