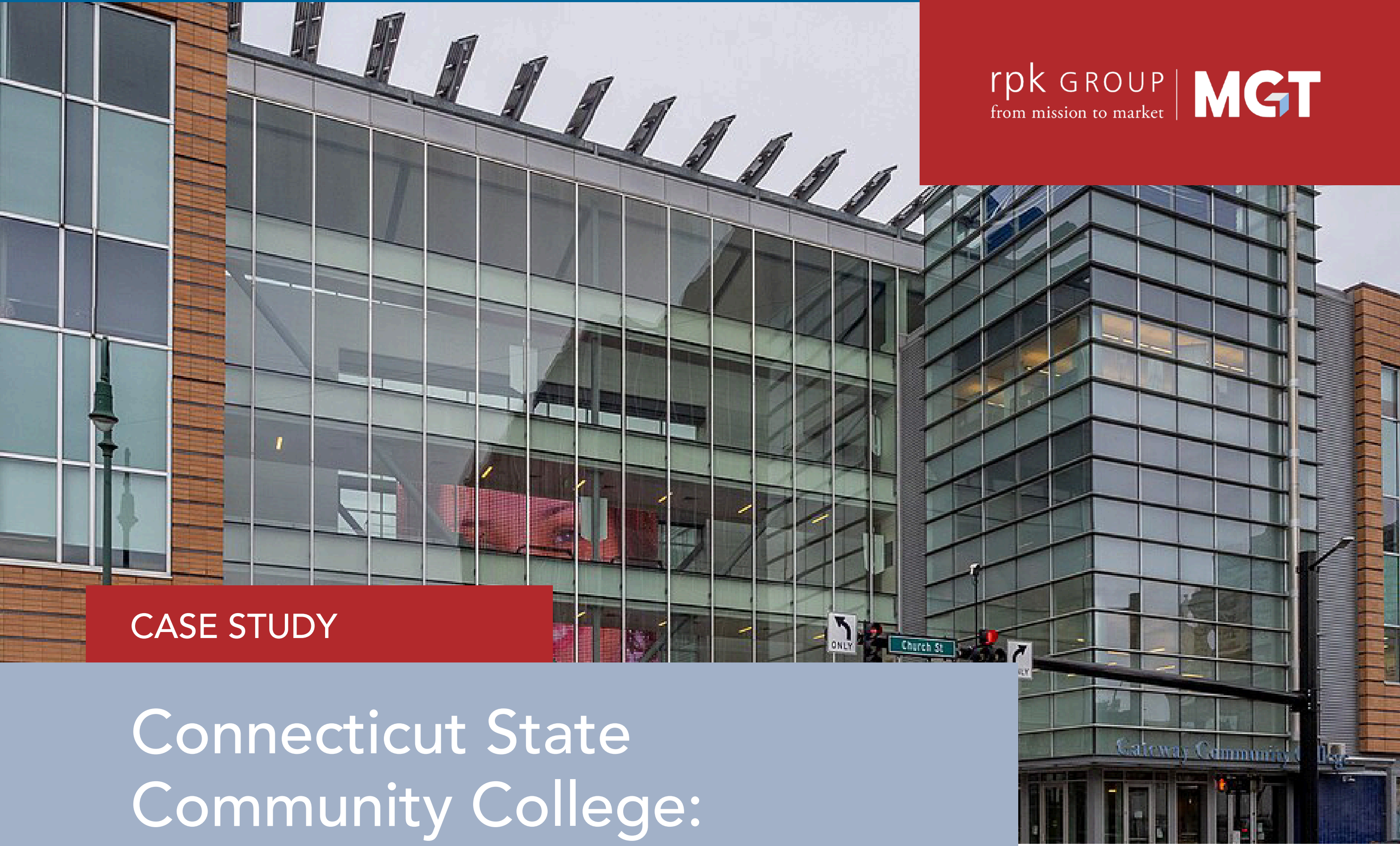

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CASE STUDY

Connecticut State Community College:

Twelve Campuses, One College—Mobility at Scale

rpk GROUP | MGT

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This case study is part of the rpk GROUP | MGT System Transformation Toolkit, which provides public higher education systems and institutions with tools and examples for undertaking system reform in ways that leverage system-level advantages and strengthen financial sustainability.

Public higher education systems across the country are reconsidering how their structures support students, manage resources, and respond to workforce needs. In Connecticut, that reexamination led to one of the most ambitious governance and operating model changes in higher education, which included **consolidating twelve separate community colleges into one statewide, multi-campus college rebranded as Connecticut State Community College (CT State).** The key aspects of this transformation include:

- **Reenvisioning the structure and leadership of the state's community colleges,**
- **Building a common academic, technical, and operational backbone, and**
- **Using institutional scale to improve student access, mobility, portfolio alignment, and long-term sustainability.**

The transformation into CT State required far more than a structural reorganization. It demanded leadership redesign, accreditation approval, common systems, more consistent academic processes, and a new operating model capable of supporting students across a single institution with multiple campuses.

The strategic logic is clear. Connecticut sought to use operational scale to strengthen student outcomes and improve financial sustainability by reducing duplication, standardizing degrees and student-facing processes, improving course mobility, and aligning the academic portfolio more intentionally to workforce and student demand.

From an institutional return on investment (ROI) perspective, the intended value proposition is straightforward: fewer administrative

QUICK FACTS & KEY STRATEGIES

System: Connecticut State Colleges and Universities (CSCU) are governed by the Board of Regents; the state's community colleges now operate as a single entity, the Connecticut State Community College (CT State).[1]

Scale: One institution with twelve campuses statewide, plus additional locations, serving tens of thousands of learners each year.

Signature structural change: Consolidation of twelve separately accredited community colleges into one accredited institution, CT State, effective July 1, 2023, following a multi-stage accreditation and approvals process.[2]

Student success indicator: CT State leaders point to increased cross-campus course taking, FTE enrollment, and credit attempts as early evidence that student mobility is improving.[3]

Affordability strategy: Tuition prices were already relatively comparable across campuses, so the merger's affordability case rests less on price alignment and more on reducing excess credit hours, expanding access to in-demand courses across campuses, and creating a simpler path for students to progress to a credential.

Cross-campus access strategy: A single enterprise resource planning system across the statewide college model now allows students to register for and take courses across campuses more easily. CT State reports that 28% of credit students attended classes at more than one campus in 2023-24, up from 1% before the merger.[4]

barriers, a more coherent academic portfolio, and stronger shared services should create opportunities for reallocating resources for instruction, advising, and high-demand programs.

At the same time, Connecticut's experience shows that implementation discipline matters. Early public claims about cost savings proved overly optimistic, and erosion of trust complicated execution even where the student-facing rationale remained strong.

Background

Connecticut's redesign reflects pressures that are familiar across public higher education: demographic decline in the Northeast, enrollment pressure, fiscal constraints, competition from private and online providers, and increased scrutiny about whether credentials deliver clear value for students and the state. System leaders concluded that incrementally improving twelve separate institutions would be too slow and too fragmented to meet the moment.

The 'Students First' redesign set the direction in 2017, but translating that vision into an operating model required more than a governance decision. Leaders had to create a common data language, stand up a single enterprise resource system environment (i.e., 'Banner'), establish new governance structures, and recruit leadership for the unified institution while the legacy colleges were still operating.[5]

Accreditation readiness became a critical consideration. The system's regional accrediting body required evidence related to CT State's financial sustainability, equity, and student success. The merged institution went live on July 1, 2023 after completing a multi-stage review process to demonstrate that the new entity could meet the accreditors expectations across all campuses.[6]

Opportunities Created by Transformation

The shift to a single-college model gives CT State a platform to operate more coherently across campuses, with greater consistency for students and stronger alignment between academic offerings, workforce needs, and institutional resources. Realizing that potential depended upon common systems, shared practices, and clearer performance data to translate scale into better outcomes. The transformation into CT State provided:

1. **A simpler, more consistent student experience.** Under the single-college model, students can take courses across campuses with substantially less friction than before, rather than reapplying to another college simply to access a needed class. Common degree requirements and more consistent registration practices make the institution easier to navigate and reduces avoidable barriers to progression.

2. **Common academic requirements and consistent access to student supports.** Connecticut's consolidation creates the conditions for systemwide curriculum and student success management. Degrees are now CT State degrees with common requirements, and the increased opportunity for mobility across campuses is contributing to stronger FTE enrollment and credit attempts, while making student movement more visible in system data.

3. **Movement toward a unified academic portfolio.** This initiative consolidated hundreds of distinct academic programs into six comprehensive Areas of Study facilitating credit transfer and cross-campus enrollment. It also streamlined the catalog into unified, statewide pathways for associate degrees and certificates, structured around these foundational areas. The unified institution can now review the academic portfolio across campuses rather than campus by campus. In practice, CT State has used systemwide curriculum processes and layered portfolio reviews to delist outdated or duplicative programs while preserving enough flexibility to respond to local mission, geography, and employer demand.

4. **Shared services and more disciplined operations.** The merger created a platform for shared enterprise systems, common reporting, and a more centralized financial model, although localized activity can still be tracked by each campus. Even as elements of the operating model have been recalibrated over time, the consolidation established the infrastructure for central IT, finance, and related services that individual colleges would have struggled to build independently.

5. **More transparent, systemwide performance management.** The merger required the system to build data capacity that did not previously exist at the center. Leaders had to establish common definitions for enrollment, headcount, and student success, develop a central data warehouse approach, and track outcomes that extend beyond graduation alone so that transfer, part-time attendance, stop-out, and re-enrollment patterns are more visible.

Challenges and Tradeoffs

Large-scale consolidation can produce clear student-facing benefits, but it also concentrates risk during implementation: complex work must happen while day-to-day operations continue, expectations about savings collide with transition costs and capacity limits, and early indicators of progress may not show up in familiar outcome measures. CT State's experience highlights these tensions, and the practical tradeoffs leaders must manage as a unified model takes hold. In practice, the work surfaced three recurring tradeoffs. Challenges included:

01 **Implementation complexity and 'the long middle.'** Connecticut's consolidation was not simply a legal merger; it was an institution-building effort carried out while the legacy colleges continued to operate. Accreditation, governance, data integration, committee work, and day-to-day campus operations all had to move simultaneously, making the process a long and demanding middle period marked by skepticism and uneven trust.

02 **Service quality under resource constraints.** The financial case proved more difficult than early public messaging suggested. Early planning documents projected sizeable savings, but implementation also required major IT, transition, consulting, and accreditation work. At the same time, efforts to centralize functions created staffing strain and operational pushback, and some responsibilities later shifted back toward campuses, reducing some of the expected efficiency gains.[7]

03 **Measuring success fairly and accurately.** Some of the most meaningful early benefits—cross-campus course taking, higher credit attempts, and greater FTE generation—do not map neatly onto traditional graduation-rate measures. Connecticut's experience underscores the importance of using metrics that reflect real community college pathways while acknowledging that legacy systems, complex back-end finance, and multiple student entry and exit patterns make attribution difficult.

Lessons for other Higher Education Systems

Connecticut's experience underscores that consolidation is not just a structural change; it is an execution challenge that requires a clear student-centered rationale, disciplined implementation, and transparent measures of progress. For other systems, the central lesson is to pair the promise of scale with the operating capacity and stakeholder trust needed to realize it. Actions that support that central lesson include:

- **Start with a clear value case, not a reorganization chart.** The strongest retrospective lesson is that leaders must establish the 'why' early and keep reinforcing it. When public messaging overpromises savings or understates disruption, trust erodes quickly and systems can spend years trying to rebuild it.
- **Build the operating model (process + technology + governance), not just structure.** Connecticut's case makes clear that 'systemness' has to be built through common data definitions, enterprise platforms, governance forums, and decision rights that can actually function in a political and unionized environment. Structural change moves faster than institutional practice unless leaders invest in the operating model underneath it.

- **Define and publish a small set of outcomes that matter.** A useful scorecard should combine traditional student outcomes with measures that reveal whether the new model is actually working, including cross-campus enrollment, credit accumulation, retention, graduation, and service responsiveness. Early signs in Connecticut include headcount growth of roughly 4 percent and more students taking courses across campuses.[8]
- **Be explicit about reinvestment.** Systems should distinguish between short-term merger costs and longer-term efficiency gains rather than promising immediate savings. If consolidation creates cost avoidance, capacity, or savings over time, leaders should specify how those resources will support advising, high-demand programs, technology, or other priorities tied to student outcomes.
- **Preserve access while standardizing the backbone.** Connecticut kept a statewide campus footprint while moving to common degrees, systemwide curriculum processes, and a single student record environment. The continuing challenge, and a lesson for others, is to balance local identity and labor realities with the benefits of a stronger shared brand, more flexible staffing models, and common student-facing systems.

CONCLUSION

Connecticut's consolidation into CT State is an example of a public system seeking to become more coherent, more navigable for students, and more disciplined operationally without giving up local access. The case points to meaningful progress, especially in student mobility, portfolio rationalization, and the creation of shared systems, but it also shows how culture, trust, and implementation costs can delay the realization of value.

For other systems, the central lesson is that structural change is only the opening move. Realizing value depends on honest cost assumptions, durable leadership messaging, common data and technology, and a willingness to keep adjusting the operating model as campuses, labor agreements, and student needs evolve.

Notes

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[7] Connecticut State Colleges & Universities. (n.d.). Students first final consolidation plan. https://www.ct.edu/files/pdfs/sf-final-consolidation.pdf

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