

Luis G. Pedraja: New year brings promise of new beginnings

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January is a time of hope - a time of renewal and of new beginnings. As the president of a large inner-city community college, I am particularly mindful of the promise of new beginnings through education.

January is also a time when our nation celebrates Martin Luther King Jr. Day. In fact, for the last 37 years Quinsigamond Community College has hosted the Annual Martin Luther King Jr. Community Breakfast. Community members throughout Worcester and the region take part in the celebration to honor the life and legacy of Dr. King. QCC will once again host the event, with this year's theme being "A Day of Service."

It is quite fitting that two days after MLK Day, QCC will also begin its spring 2023 semester. At QCC, a new year offers first-time students, returning students, first-generation students, professionals, single parents and career-changers the opportunity to make a positive impact on their futures and the futures of their families through the power of higher education.

The start of each semester brings to mind Dr. King's famous "I Have a Dream," speech, as we have the privilege of witnessing students from all walks of life, all ages and all ethnicities, work hard each day determined to succeed and realize their dreams of a better life for themselves and their families thanks to education.

I have said it before, but it bears repeating - for our nation to achieve true equity, education must be considered a basic human right.

Dr. King imagined a world better than the one he was living in, and at QCC, as well as at colleges and universities across the nation, we are working to continue his legacy through higher education. Educating communities transforms lives and frees us to envision new possibilities. Education rises people from poverty, and while the elite have been the ones who have historically reaped the benefit of higher education, our society has been working hard to change that narrative.

At QCC, we are changing that narrative, working to facilitate a place that is supportive to all who call this campus "home." In the last year we have exponentially grown our support services, added additional ways in which our students could obtain educational funding, and increased both credit and noncredit programs that can fast-track students to high-demand, higher-paying careers. We have forged partnerships with local businesses and nonprofits, began collaborating with Worcester State University and local health care providers on ways to help graduate more nursing students into the community. We have even become an educational partner in Amazon's Career Choice program. This program empowers Amazon employees to learn new

skills for career success at Amazon or elsewhere. We know education leads to career success, and yet while all this is encouraging, funding shortfalls keep us from doing more.

Each January I dream of the day when our entire nation values education and sees it as an investment in our future and in the future of our democracy. When obtaining an education is not defined by the color of your skin or the amount of money you have in your pocket, I know we will have moved closer to achieving Dr. King's dream.

Many years ago, through my work in Memphis and on the Project on Lived Theology, I had the privilege of meeting and working with some icons of the civil rights movement. I remember sharing a couch with Victoria Gray Adams, one of the founders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. I thanked her for her work and asked her what it was like to be a part of such a historic movement. Her words inspired me then and continue to inspire me today.

“Luis, we did not set out to make history; we simply heeded the call, we did what we had to do, we did what was right. You don't need to thank me; you need to carry on the work, we laid the foundation, but now it is up to your generation and those to come.”

Ms. Adams' words stuck with me and as I continued my career, it was her words along with Dr. King's that would spur me and countless others to help our generation see their way to an enlightened future.

As we prepare to welcome students back to QCC on Jan. 18 or greet them for the first time, it is with a renewed sense of excitement, hope, and promise for a better tomorrow. A tomorrow that Dr. King envisioned - one of equity, inclusion and most importantly, kindness.

Luis G. Pedraja is president of Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester.