

# Mapping new course: Tuition-free community colleges in Mass. proposed on Beacon Hill

*Gov. Maura Healey, Senate President Karen Spilka share the vision of free community college; the difference would be in the ages of students that would benefit; and their numbers.*

**Kinga Borondy** | Telegram & Gazette



Doretta Stoler has worked as a waitress and a project manager at a solar company, while raising two young children. Now she's working to make her children, 12 and 13, proud.

A Florida native now living in Spencer, Stoler, 32, moved to Massachusetts in 2013 to change her life. She enrolled briefly at Merrimack College in North Andover before transferring at Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester, where she is enrolled in the business program. She's striving to earn her degree in accounting.

There is no one road that students attending one of 15 public community colleges in Massachusetts follow to arrive at the two-year institutions. And there is no one road that they follow to gain what they seek - a better education, a better job, a career change, self-realization, a more stable future.

Stoler's road was typical of many of the students who opt for community college. Some are first-generation college-bound or are students of color or come from other countries, other cultures.

QCC was a perfect fit for her, offering more financial aid, more resources and a part-time job as a student life manager.

“I enjoy Quinsigamond, it’s a good community, very friendly and helpful,” Stoler said. She is even allowed to bring her small dog, Yoshi, to work with her at the Fuller Student Center.

## **Free education: benefit to society**

Other students attending Quinsigamond see the community college as a stepping stone that will save them money before they transfer to a four-year college in their junior and senior semesters.

Isaac Vieira, 18, Nora Shea, 19, and William Bellows, 18, setting up a game of Dungeons & Dragons at the student center, are straight out of high school.



“For us, a four-year college is out of reach financially,” Shea said. “Community college is so much better economically.”

Shea, who took a gap year and is studying liberal arts - English, sees the expense of a traditional four-year college as a “barrier to class progression. Making it free will be a net benefit for society,” Shea said.

An average of 130,000 students attend programs at the state’s public community colleges. They spend an average of \$6,300 a year in tuition. Books and fees are extra.

The new governor and the state Senate president have proposed making the state’s public community colleges tuition-free.

Gov. Maura Healey has proposed a program called MassReconnect, opening community colleges to students 25 and older who have not earned a bachelor's degree.

Senate President Karen Spilka has proposed opening the state's two-year schools to all in-state students, regardless of age.

"The devil is in the details," to quote House Speaker Ron Mariano, when it comes to how to fund the tuition-free mandate.

Massachusetts has lagged in its support of public secondary education behind other states, according to Nerdwallet. Nineteen other states offer tuition-free community college. Each state has specific programs with stipulated income and academic requirements. Four other states offer free tuition for in-state students in state network institutions, with stipulated income and academic requirements: the CUNY/SUNY system in New York, Indiana, Washington and this year, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.

"It will be expensive," said David Podell, president of Massachusetts Bay Community College in Wellesley, adding regardless of which plan is implemented. If either proposal is implemented, many Massachusetts students will benefit and Podell expects the program will draw many more students into community colleges.

There are many good reasons to offer tuition-free education to Massachusetts residents, Podell said, calling 2023 an "opportune time" to implement the proposal.

## **Mass. lags in workforce development**

Both Podell and QCC President Luis Pedraja cited the pressing needs in the state's workforce as a reason to quickly implement a tuition-free approach, pointing to the dearth of workers in nursing, medical assistants, early childhood educators, cybersecurity and even biotechnology.

“There’s an enormous gap between the demand for workers and the supply,” Podell said.

Community college is a key player in the move to end generational poverty, to move the economy forward, to invest in the future of Massachusetts, they said.



“Investing in higher education is an investment in the future of the commonwealth,” Pedraja said, citing a national study by the Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, that 60% to 80% of jobs these days require at least some higher education or specialized training. Highly skilled workers are the key to economic development, he said.

“It’s a win-win for the student and the community,” Pedraja said. Education ensures workers earn more, contribute back into the economy, pay more taxes, have more purchasing power and are civically involved. It also ensures the future of the Massachusetts economy, that workers are available and able to perform the work that is the future.

It's right where community colleges come in.

“We like to say community colleges serve everyone,” said Sarah Yunits, deputy executive director for the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges, an umbrella organization that represents all 15 public schools in the state.

The community colleges in Massachusetts offer two-year associate degrees and can be a steppingstone for students to enter a four-year program at either a public or private college. The colleges also offer specialized training for nursing, emergency medical technicians and also offer vocational training, and short courses or certificate programs in nonacademic fields. The general public can sign up for community or adult education courses, as can high school students seeking early college courses for credit.

Doug Jasper, 32, of Holliston attends Massachusetts Bay Community College. He said he felt trapped in a job he disliked, property maintenance and management. He had acquired a degree in marketing attending a four-year liberal arts college in South Carolina in his junior and senior years but had fallen into the property management profession.

Jasper found himself asking: “What do I really want to do?”

## **Career changes, new directions**

To answer that, he remembered his high school days, when he thought he might try a career in emergency services, as a firefighter, police officer or medic.

“I didn’t know how to go about doing that,” Jasper said of his younger self. But now, he has figured it out and on Tuesday, he was in a class at the Massachusetts Bay Framingham campus where he is enrolled in the paramedic training course.

“Coming here helped alleviate the financial burden on my family,” Jasper said, explaining that this is his second enrollment at Massachusetts Bay, attending the community college for his first two years before transferring to a four-year

institution. Now he can follow his dream without shouldering a huge financial burden himself.

Skyler Bell, 20, of Brookline, went to a different college for a year and a half, where she was enrolled in a physical therapy program. But she found it wasn't for her.

Bell wanted more hands-on medical work and opted to enroll in the paramedic course at Massachusetts Bay.

"I love it here," Bell said.

Ryan DeCoste, 33, of Burlington, also found himself in a career he didn't love, working for a utility company for a dozen years. The proximity of the Framingham campus to his home, and the affordability of classes, is allowing him to "just do school" (and his business) without worrying about finances.

Podell doesn't like to brag but he is certain that his school's curriculum and classes are on par with four-year institutions. He hears as much from students who visit after graduating from four-year colleges. And Jasper can attest to that. "These classes are as good if not better than classes I took at my four-year school," Jasper said.

## **'Nontraditional'**

The bulk of students attending community college are considered "nontraditional."

Community colleges embrace them all. Because of the commitment to nontraditional students, community colleges face unique challenges. The students could be attending school part time while holding down full-time jobs. They may be single parents or first-generation Americans. They may not have been successful students in high school. Some are homeless. They may struggle to pay tuition, buy books or even pay for food, housing or to support their families.

Many of their students step in and out of college, hitting the books one semester, working full time the next.

“They commit to attending school one semester at a time. Their dilemma: Can I afford to enroll for the next semester?” Podell said, citing difficulty is in retaining the students who enroll, supporting them through their academic careers and seeing them graduate into a new life.

The state’s community college network offers students tutoring assistance, help with navigating the administrative process, food assistance and even help with securing shelter for those who are unhoused.

“It is a vulnerable population,” Podell said.

Emily Coughlin, 21, and Eric Camacho, 28, of Worcester embody those vulnerable students. Both suffer from medical conditions that can interrupt their studies.





Camacho, a 2011 high school graduate, is studying web development and programming, and has been attending QCC since 2019. He's had to take breaks from his studies due to a hereditary issue with his bone development. His mother supports his educational goals, and he has recently started a work study job at QCC.

Coughlin, who suffered from fainting spells, is studying to become an early childhood educator, a vocation she wanted while still in high school.

"I always wanted to work with kids, as a teacher, child therapist or in pediatrics," Coughlin said. Right now, she is focused on the programs available at Quinsigamond, and college life.

"I feel as if I fit in here. I make friends," Coughlin said.

But even with tuition-free colleges; students face other challenges and expenses, from books and fees to fees for licensure and certification examinations. Transportation to and from college can be challenging, as can be paying for housing and food and supporting a family.

"Every bit helps," Podell said, explaining that each student's story is a story about sacrifice - what was sacrificed to get the schooling, what tough choices were made.

The challenge facing community colleges is how to retain the students, Yunits said.

## **Supports for students**

Massachusetts has enacted programs that offer supports to the vulnerable population, including OER Open Educational Resources, a program that allows instructors to use instructional material that is in the public domain; bypassing textbooks that can be expensive; food scholarships and book funds.

The state also has SUCCESS (Supporting Urgent Community College Equity through Student Services), a wraparound program designed to support and improve outcomes for the state's most underserved students - low-income, first-generation, minoritized and disabled, and LGBTQIA. The program offers peer mentoring, academic supports and even guidance for students seeking transfers to four-year programs.

The program was funded at \$10 million by the state Legislature for fiscal 2022. The bulk of the funds allocated to and expended by the colleges, some \$1.7 million spent in the fall of 2021, was used to hire personnel as academic coaches, tutors, one-on-one supports for students and administrative support.

Using a cohort system for recruiting, some 4,000 students were supported by SUCCESS in 2021, according to an analysis.

Regardless of which proposal is implemented, administrators of the state's 15 community colleges are excited. Tuition-free community college will open educational doors for more students than ever before.

"It's about making education more affordable and more accessible for more people," Yunits said.

"Many students attending community college worry about finances," Pedraja said, adding many come from low-income families, are single parents or are veterans, but all want to pursue their dreams of a higher education. Finances should not keep people from attaining a degree.

The proposals, Pedraja said, could go a long way, not just as an investment in students, but as an investment in the future of the commonwealth.