

Guest column: Giving thanks to QCC community

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Thanksgiving is a time to offer thanks and recognize the cultures and amazing contributions of Indigenous people during Native American Heritage Month. It is also a time when I am reminded and am forever grateful for the incredible Worcester community that has been home to Quinsigamond Community College for the last 60 years.

At QCC, our college community is made up of dedicated faculty and staff who work tirelessly to help our students succeed. However, it is more than just our internal college community that makes up the college. QCC extends beyond our campuses and into the communities we serve. Over the years we have partnered with organizations, employers and nonprofit groups to build a pipeline of skilled workers who then enter our community, increasing the economic growth in our region.

Many organizations are long-standing partners that see firsthand the value of a community college. One external partnership event that has been a staple at QCC is the Hispanics Achieving and Celebrating Excellence awards. Each year the HACE awards honor Hispanic high school students in Worcester and Southbridge who have excelled in arts, academics, athletics, civic involvement/community service and leadership.

This is the 38th anniversary of this incredible community-centric event, which this year celebrated close to 40 students from Worcester and Southbridge. Over the last 37 years, the HACE Committee has recognized 823 Hispanic students with not only accolades but also financial awards totaling \$212,350.

Every year I am thankful for the multitude of people who work hard to organize this celebration and for the numerous community leaders who come

to support our students at this event. Leaders like state Sen. Robyn Kennedy; Worcester City Manager Eric Batista; Superintendent of Southbridge Public Schools Jeffrey Villar; Dr. Déborah L. González, HACE co-chair and co-director of Worcester Public Schools Family & Community Engagement; and Jessica Mandes, director of multilingual education of Worcester Public Schools, who offered greetings at the Nov. 8 event.

Marco Estrella and Claudia Oliveira De Paiva presided over the event, which featured special awards named after three powerful women who are role models in our Hispanic/Latine community.

Presented by HACE Chair Gilmarie Vongphakdy, this year's Marlyn Reyes Memorial Community Leadership Award went to Edwin Delacruz Davila, of YouthWorks; the Dolly Vazquez Cultural Award went to Worcester Technical High School student Pameley Saldana and North High School student Briana Baez, and the Olga Lopez-Hill Community Leadership Scholarship was awarded to Quinsigamond Community College student Melissa Cahill.

As has been the custom in recent years, Worcester City Mayor Joseph Petty declared Nov. 8, 2023, HACE Day in the City of Worcester with an official proclamation. Additionally, the Southbridge Town Council, represented by Jasmine Rivas and Ariel Ortiz, offered their city's proclamation in honor of the students' academic excellence and leadership. It was a night these students will long remember and serves as a powerful message of support for our local Hispanic/Latine population, who make up close to 24% of Worcester's residents and over 34% of Southbridge residents.

Finally, I would be remiss in not thanking the many local sponsors who each year help with funding to support student scholarships. The proverb "It takes a village to raise child" is extremely apropos as this event so clearly demonstrates.

Another QCC community event, coming up on Nov. 15, is the second annual Apprenticeship Conference, "Empower, Engage, Endure: Shaping Your

Workforce through Apprenticeship Excellence.” Held in honor of Apprenticeship Week, this all-day event features a variety of workshops by industry professionals and innovators in the apprenticeship and workforce development field, such as Massachusetts Secretary of Labor and Workforce Development Lauren E. Jones, who recognize the value that apprenticeship programs bring to our society.

Today, there are well over 600,000 active apprentices across the country — an increase of over 100% from 2013. In Massachusetts alone there are close to 12,000 active apprentices.

There is no doubt that we are seeing a resurgence in apprenticeship programs. And why shouldn't we? Apprenticeships enable students to earn wages while they are improving and advancing their skills, which is especially helpful to underserved populations. This type of earn-while-you-learn program is a game changer for many students and offers a bridge between academics and practical hands-on learning. Apprenticeships also give companies a cost-effective way to train their future workforce and increase profitability, which in turn helps our economy prosper.

At QCC we will continue to forge more community partnerships, educate more students and help more people realize their dreams through higher education. I am thankful to be a part of this thriving and caring community and for our community partners who recognize that we are not just a college in Worcester, but we are Worcester's college.

Luis G. Pedraja is president of Quinsigamond Community College.