

Pedraja: Colleges with accent on 'community'

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While the month of April is one of hope and renewal, it is also quite appropriately recognized as Community College Month. Education opens doors, lifts people out of poverty and enables them to fulfill their dreams. Community colleges play a big role in this by offering an affordable pathway to college, enabling students to have the ability to better their lives through higher education.

For many college students, higher education would be unattainable if it wasn't for our two-year colleges. Community colleges have the most diverse and low socioeconomic students in the higher education sector. And while many students come directly to community college from high school, just as many hold off going to college due to family obligations.

These are students who often work one or more jobs to help support their families, put a roof over their heads and food on the table, which takes precedence over a higher education. They cannot get ahead and break the cycle they are in without a higher education. This is where our community colleges shine their brightest. Today, there has been a metamorphosis in higher education, due in no small part to the COVID-19 pandemic. What has come out of this is a deeper look into the educational and life needs of our citizens in order for them to have fulfilling, successful lives.

One of the ongoing issues of attaining a higher education is the ability to afford it. Community colleges have historically been the most cost-effective way to obtain a higher education, yet they receive the least in private donations, and most receive the least in state funding. This is troubling because they serve the most diverse population. However, some exciting changes may be happening in our own state when it comes to higher

education. In her fiscal 2024 budget proposal, Gov. Maura Healey made a budget recommendation that could be a game changer for the commonwealth's 15 community colleges: MassReconnect.

MassReconnect is a program that would offer free associate degrees and certificates to residents of Massachusetts 25 and older who have earned a high school diploma or equivalent, but not completed a postsecondary degree. If approved, MassReconnect would cover all tuition, fees, books and supplies, in essence making community college free for a vast sector of our commonwealth.

This program is one way that would not only make college more affordable and attainable but also help make college more equitable. Too often the cost of college precludes people from realizing a postsecondary education and prevents them from changing their lives for the better. We must continue to find ways to support our communities and ensure that the supports students need to succeed in higher education are in place, and that starts with adequate funding.

At Quinsigamond Community College, we have continued to increase our support services to help students stay in academia, so they are able to still care for themselves and their families. In 2018, we opened a small food pantry due to need we saw among our students. Today, that small food pantry has morphed into a larger food pantry (QCC's Homeplate Food Pantry and Resource Center) and a new refrigerated truck will soon be bringing food to QCC's Healthcare and Workforce Development Center.

There are many parents at QCC, and our new parenting student navigator is helping to build new support structures and resources for these students. These are just a couple of examples of the support services we offer to assist in our students' success – and when our students succeed, we all succeed.

Community colleges are the springboard students need to get right into the workforce and earn a better wage or be able to transfer to a four-year college as a junior, saving them thousands in tuition and fees.

Community colleges are also more than a vehicle to higher education - they are the epicenter of their communities. Through their close partnerships with area businesses and industry, they have become one of the best-kept secrets that remain in plain sight.

Community colleges offer a unique and unrivaled way in which they address the needs of the communities they serve. These educational institutions are community education hubs that meet the needs of area employers by designing academic and workforce training programs, which facilitate economic prosperity in the region. At QCC, we have developed strong local partners with many area businesses and through our credit and noncredit programs, have infused a much-needed skilled workforce into the region.

Postsecondary education such as that offered by community colleges facilitates a better prepared workforce that will assist communities, such as Worcester, in achieving economic and social development success. As the president of one of the largest inner-city community colleges in the commonwealth, I am thrilled that each year we can bring to the forefront the incredible resources that a community college offers. I hope in the coming weeks and months more people will take advantage of this community asset that is right in their own backyard.