

State budget delay complicates free community college push

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State House News Service

BOSTON - With a new academic year nearing, community colleges are tentatively moving forward with plans to help students 25 and older attend for free even though the program has not yet been approved within the fiscal 2024 budget that's stalled in negotiations on Beacon Hill.

Community college leaders say the delay in striking a budget deal, which was due by July 1, means they have less time to implement MassReconnect, launch marketing campaigns and recruit potential students, including reenrolling people who previously dropped out.

Gov. Maura Healey, who pitched the program while campaigning, has said MassReconnect could reach 1.8 million Bay Staters who are eligible to receive state aid as they earn a college degree or certificate. But the budget impasse could imperil Healey's plan to offer the program in the approaching fall semester.

"Since Governor Healey put forward this proposal over the winter, the Department of Higher Education has been working closely with the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges, and all 15 community colleges to coordinate the successful rollout and implementation of MassReconnect," Commissioner of Higher Education Noe Ortega said in a statement to the News Service Tuesday. "Thanks to this collaboration between the Department and the whole community college community, we are prepared to implement MassReconnect as soon as the FY 2024 state budget is signed into law."

Should Beacon Hill not approve a final annual budget by the start of the fall semester, DHE and community colleges could retroactively credit eligible

students once MassReconnect takes effect through a later budget agreement, a DHE spokesperson told the News Service.

But not all community leaders interviewed by the News Service seemed aware of that reimbursement procedure and prepared to launch MassReconnect in the fall if the budget isn't finished.

Jackie Jenkins-Scott, interim president of Roxbury Community College, said she and her community college counterparts had oriented MassReconnect planning around a mid-July budget agreement.

"Of course, we're not able to actually start the program until it's funded, so we have all just been planning, and talking, and preparing our institutions for a fast rollout when it is funded, so hopefully it will not be delayed much longer," Jenkins-Scott said. "My guess is we will all just do our very best to make this funding available to students who qualify as quickly as we possibly can. We'll do our very best to get students enrolled in programs, in classes that make sense for them; it may mean that they can't really start until January."

Healey, asked whether she's concerned about students not being able to attend community college for free due to the stalemate over the larger \$56 billion annual spending plan, said she hopes to receive a budget from House and Senate Democrats "as soon as possible."

"I think our budget proposal and what has been the subject of the other proposals contains a lot of important and good investments, including investments for education, investments for MassReconnect, investments for housing, and in a number of different areas," Healey told reporters Monday.



Community college presidents will collectively decide if they need to make major adjustments to MassReconnect to ensure fairness for prospective students throughout the state, said Luis Pedraja, president of Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester. Administrators are awaiting other funding in the budget to support marketing and outreach efforts tied to MassReconnect, such as hiring more personnel to prepare for an influx of students, he said.

No timetable for compromise

Pedraja said community colleges will "have to play it by ear to some degree" if Beacon Hill still can't reach a budget agreement by late August. House Ways and Means Chairman Aaron Michlewitz, a top budget negotiator, couldn't pinpoint any timetable this week for finalizing a compromise.

"My expectation is the budget will be approved with MassReconnect. We're proceeding with the assumption that it's happening," Pedraja said. "My assumption is students will be applying for financial aid — they'll have some funding. It will just be a matter of delaying the funds getting into our budget.

A lot of times we do work with the expectation that the money is going to be coming."

In a different scenario, should the budget not pass until the start of September, Cape Cod Community College can consider launching MassReconnect during its "quick term" option that starts in October, said Patrick Stone, director of strategic communications and marketing. Applicants could also be encouraged to enroll for classes in January, Stone said.

"If this happens really late and we can't do September, that's just what we would be pivoting to," Stone said. "We've been promoting it, but we've been promoting it through the lens of it's coming. The governor has obviously made it well known that it's coming."

John Cox, president of Cape Cod Community College, said higher education officials are still waiting to understand the rules and regulations surrounding MassReconnect. For example, it's unclear whether the state money could cover specialized fees for certain programs, including nursing, dental hygiene and aviation maintenance, he said.

"There's quite a lot of unknowns that we still have to work through," Cox said. "I think there was an acknowledgment among many between the Department of Higher Education, the community college presidents and other folks at the state that this year may not see the biggest bump in enrollment driven by Reconnect because of how it's rolling out towards the start of the fall semester. I'm not sure the number would necessarily be as big as it would have been if we had a more solid start, say a month ago, but we'll get there."

House, Senate match proposal

The House and Senate matched Healey's proposal to allocate \$20 million for MassReconnect in their budgets. Community college leaders told the News Service that represents a promising sign that MassReconnect will come to fruition once the final budget is approved on Beacon Hill.

Unlike the House, the Senate also wants to invest \$20 million in a free community college pilot program for nursing students this fall and \$15 million for start-up costs to gauge enrollment demand and strategies for launching a universal free community college system.

Nate Mackinnon, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges, said there's been no outreach yet on the free nursing proposal this fall due to a lack of agreement on the measure between the House and Senate. The focus, he said, has been on reaching roughly 719,000 students who fit the MassReconnect target audience, according to data from the National Student Clearinghouse, who have taken some college classes but don't yet have a degree and are no longer enrolled.

MassReconnect reinforces the opportunity that students have to apply for and leverage federal financial aid, which not all eligible individuals take advantage of, Stone said. MassReconnect is designed to provide last-dollar scholarships after that other aid is awarded, covering remaining costs for tuition, fees, books and supplies.

"If some sort of doomsday situation happened where this didn't go through and it wasn't passed, our students would still very much be situated to be at the college for the fall," Stone said. "We know that the majority of students that will ultimately wind up as the Reconnect scholars would largely be supported by financial aid anyway."

MassBay Community College is holding information sessions about MassReconnect on Thursday and Aug. 8, describing it as a proposal that's pending in the Legislature's budget process. Students can attend community college free in the fall, according to an advisory for the virtual sessions, if the budget is approved.

"We're ready to go as soon as the budget is passed and the funds are secured. We'll be ready to enroll every eligible resident that is surely eager to seize this opportunity," said Jeremy Solomon, MassBay's associate vice president of

institutional advancement, marketing and communications. "We really are confident that this is ultimately going to pass ... And if it takes an extra couple of weeks and months before the Legislature passes it, we're fine."