

Free community college tuition turns dream into reality for many in Central Mass.

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Worcester Telegram & Gazette

WORCESTER — For years, Athena Corbin has found it near impossible to move up in jobs in the medical field without some type of degree or certification. And for a long time, the idea of going to college seemed out of reach.

But after Gov. Maura Healey launched the new MassReconnect program this month, Corbin, 59, and thousands of others in the state will now be able to attend community college for free.

MassReconnect covers the cost of tuition and fees, and provides an allowance for books and supplies for people 25 and older and who have not received an associate or bachelor's degree previously.

“I almost broke down and cried because I needed to consider school no matter what, but was struggling with how am I going to do this, even though I have to do this,” Corbin said. “Really all I can try and do is pay it forward when I do have my license and my degree by trying to help others.”

Corbin will start evening classes next week at Mount Wachusett Community College, pursuing a license in substance abuse counseling her first year, and hoping to earn an associate degree in health and social sciences her second.

Corbin now handles intake of people seeking treatment for substance abuse issues at St. Vincent Partial Hospitalization Program. She hopes to become a substance abuse counselor.

Having previously struggled herself with addiction and an eating disorder, she said she understands where her patients are coming from, and wants to be able to help them more directly.

“I speak with them on a daily basis — all day, every day — either on the phone, virtually, or in person when they come here, and I really get it,” Corbin said. “We're all just humans having a human experience, and I think we all kind of go through a lot of the same things, and I'd like to help.”

Local community college presidents excited

Mount Wachusett Community College President James L. Vander Hooven and Quinsigamond Community College President Luis G. Pedraja said they were happy to see it happen.

“I'm very, very excited,” Vander Hooven said. “It is already providing fruit, we are seeing significant interest from prospective students who are 25 and above.”

Removing the financial burden of community college, he said, will allow more people to not only finish their associate degrees but go on to pursue a bachelor's and even master's degrees.

He said that, in his experience, the majority of students drop out of school for financial reasons, or for work or family reasons, and not due to academic issues.

“This step, that helps ease some of that financial burden, I think inevitably will lead to more participation in higher levels of education, and significantly more participation and higher-level, more technical career paths,” Vander Hooven said.

He hopes free community college expands in the future to include students younger than 25.

Vander Hooven, who is also chair of the board of directors of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce, also said MassReconnect will elevate the perception of community colleges by increasing their visibility with employers.

Vander Hooven said that during a recent board meeting, the CEO of a large company expressed excitement about MassReconnect and what it will mean for the region's workforce.

"They are struggling to find a highly qualified workforce," Vander Hooven said. "It is going to, I think, help regional employers make a better connection with the prospective workforce."

Pedraja agreed.

"Having a well-prepared and trained workforce helps economic development," Pedraja said. "It helps attract new businesses to the community, because they know they'll have the employees."

It will also be transformative for students, he said, by creating a more accessible way for them to learn skills and earn higher wages, and find a way to advance in their careers.

This fall, QCC is awarding 410 students \$1.2 million through MassReconnect. And the school will work on reconnecting with students who have previously dropped, Pedraja said, to try and help them reenroll.

"Investing in community colleges and education is an investment in the future of our community," Pedraja said.

Ticket to a better life

By moving up in her job, Corbin said, she'll be able to do more than just pay her bills and survive — she'll be able to improve her lifestyle and do things she previously struggled to do, like purchase a new car or go on vacation.

She said she's earned a "decent living" without a degree or license thus far, but will be able to significantly improve her lifestyle with them.

"I don't want to just survive, I don't want to just pay my bills," Corbin said. "I want to be able to go on vacations and have a decent car, and also help other people."

Corbin said she is still figuring what she'll do after finishing her associate degree, but is confident she will pursue a bachelor's degree. She has also floated the idea of starting her own practice.

Regardless, she said, she no longer feels "locked out" of her future.

"Maybe I'll save the world? I don't know," Corbin said. "Now that this has opened up to me, I feel like I can dream again."