

Pedraja: MassReconnect opens doors to higher ed

Luis G. Pedraja

Last month the Healey-Driscoll administration and the Massachusetts Legislature took the unprecedented step of passing a budget that included \$20 million for the creation of a new program, MassReconnect.

This groundbreaking step in the commonwealth's higher education system has the potential to deliver free community college to upward of 8,000 eligible Massachusetts community students age 25 and above — and that's only in the first year.

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

Eligibility for MassReconnect requires that students must be 25 or older on the first day of their classes, be a permanent Massachusetts resident for at least one year at the start of the enrolled term and complete the 2023-24 FASA (Free Application for Student Aid). The program is limited to residents who have not previously earned a college degree (associate's or bachelor's). MassReconnect funding will cover the full cost of tuition and fees, in addition to an allowance for books and supplies after all other financial aid and scholarships are applied. Today, there are approximately 700,000 Massachusetts residents who have some college credit but no degree.

At Quinsigamond Community College our financial aid department has already awarded over 400 students MassReconnect funding for the fall 2023 semester and is working tirelessly to award more students before the semester begins.

The ramifications of this program are vast. For the first time since our state was incorporated in 1788, we are offering real and positive change for

thousands of Massachusetts residents who have been unable to fulfill their dreams of a higher education due to financial constraints.

MassReconnect is a program that is dismantling the financial barriers that have kept so many from attaining a higher education. This groundbreaking program will not only change the lives of individuals and their families by opening the door to higher income-earning potential through education but also help uplift entire communities, raising them up from generational socioeconomic constraints.

Furthermore, enabling more individuals to achieve their dreams of a higher education has a ripple effect on our state's economic health, prosperity and future growth. MassReconnect will enable more in our communities to realize their dreams of a higher education and will help to level the playing field, creating a more inclusive and diverse educational landscape. No longer will higher education be reserved for the privileged few but instead will be a fundamental right for all.

MassReconnect will help to fill a glaring void in our society by fostering a knowledgeable and skilled workforce that is representative of all our communities, not a select few. Historically disadvantaged and marginalized populations have faced barriers to education that perpetuate cycles of inequality. Now, with MassReconnect, students from all walks of life will have the resources and supports they need to realize and reap the benefits of a higher education. As a first-generation college student myself, who one day became a college president because I was able to obtain a college education, I understand the transformative power of a higher education.

Additionally, the commonwealth and current administration have taken this commitment to equitable and attainable access to learning one step further by recently passing the Tuition Equity Bill. This bill allows unauthorized Massachusetts students who have attended at least three years of high school in the state and earned a high school degree or equivalent to be eligible for in-

state tuition and financial aid at all Massachusetts public colleges or universities.

These types of visionary initiatives help to forge a clear pathway to socioeconomic mobility for our students and their families, while also serving to fill a workforce gap in many of our industries, such as health care and food services.

It is with a profound sense of excitement and hope for our future that I, and our collective college personnel, prepare to welcome students for the start of the fall semester on Wednesday. Our state is investing in the future of the commonwealth through this program that will help many attain an education, achieve their aspirations of a better life and keep our communities competitive through a skilled workforce.

The dream of equitable access to education is within our grasp and I for one cannot wait to see where we land.

Luis G. Pedraja is president of Quinsigamond Community College.