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# Guest column: Yes, new college students, you belong here

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“What am I doing? I don’t belong here!”

These thoughts lingered in my mind as I sat on a bench and looked across the college campus. I had just finished my first day of classes and the doubts lingered.

The assignments for the semester seemed impossible. Was I prepared to take on this challenge?

As I looked around, very few of the students and none of my teachers looked like me. As the first in my family to go to college, I did not know what to expect, and my parents could not offer any advice. There were people who believed in me — teachers, mentors and neighbors who encouraged me to go to college — but did I believe in myself?

As a Latino, immigrant and English-language learner who grew up in a poor inner-city neighborhood, the cards were indeed stacked against me. So, I wondered, do I really belong in college?

Despite my doubts, I continued. Taking it one step at a time, overcoming every obstacle, I persevered.

Fast-forward to the present. I now stand every fall semester before a sea of faces at new student orientation and see both the excitement and apprehension etched on those faces. They are excited to pursue their dreams of getting a college education, but there is also apprehension.

I am sure the same question I asked myself is lingering in their minds: Do I belong here?

Now, as a college president, I stand before them and assure them that they do belong here. I urge them not to let their doubts deter them from pursuing their dreams of obtaining a college

degree. I urge them not to let obstacles and pitfalls, which are inevitable, stop them from persevering.

According to research, college students who question whether they belong in college are more prone to interpret adversity and negative events as proof that they do not belong. They are also more likely to be disengaged both socially and academically.

This is particularly true for first-generation, low-income and minoritized students. In a 2019 study conducted by Gopalan & Brady, underrepresented racial and ethnic minority college students, as well as first-generation and low-income students, reported a lower sense of belonging than their counterparts, which affected their academic performance, mental health and ability to persist in college.

Although I have come a long way since that first day in college, throughout my career as a college professor, dean, provost, and even now as a college president, I have had to fight imposter syndrome. The doubts have faded over time, but they have never fully gone away.

As a Latino, I feel that I must constantly prove myself and to prove that I belong at the table. At times, this is the result of discrimination as well as condescension. In the 1970s, psychologists Suzanna Imes and Pauline Rose Clance coined the term “imposter syndrome,” the feeling that you are a fake and don’t belong despite your accomplishments and success. This is common for many low-income, first-generation and minoritized students in college. As they enter college, they are embarking on a journey into the unknown. Uncertainty and doubts linger.

That is why at community colleges like Quinsigamond Community College, we work hard to ensure that students feel they belong. We do this in a variety of ways such as multicultural programming, clubs, sports, mentoring, tutoring, advising, counseling and assistance with basic needs that include food and housing. At QCC, we also serve a wide spectrum of students of all ages, backgrounds, ethnicities, nationalities and races. At QCC you will find people like you and a place where you belong.

College students also need support from the community: family, employers, neighbors, friends, churches and other organizations need to get involved in encouraging, mentoring and offering support to students. It is important that we, as a community, encourage others to pursue their education despite their doubts and support those who are currently enrolled to continue their studies.

Worcester is a city of colleges, with over 30,000 students who contribute and enrich our community. QCC is one of the largest colleges in Worcester, serving over 10,000 students who live and work in our local region. As a city, we need to be there to foster our student population, so they believe they belong.

The start of the fall semester is just around the corner and there are more opportunities than ever before to attend college. One of the most exciting initiatives in the state's higher education history is the newly announced investment by the commonwealth that will make community college free for all Massachusetts residents, beginning this fall. The program, known as MassEducate, is for anyone of any age, regardless of income, who has not already earned a bachelor's degree.

MassEducate gives everyone the opportunity to earn an associate degree or certificate at any one of the commonwealth's 15 community colleges if they meet all eligibility requirements and complete the proper steps to enroll.

This program will be offered in tandem with MassReconnect, launched last year, which offers free community college to eligible students 25 and older without an associate or bachelor's degree.

For those who feel they aren't a candidate for higher education, there has never been a better time to set aside your doubts and give college a try.

As I think about my career and my current role as president of a college, it is hard to believe that there was a time when I sat and questioned whether I belonged in college. As I learned over time, when we pursue new ventures, doubts are common. But don't let the doubts consume you or prevent you from pursuing your dreams. Set your eyes on the goal, learn from the setbacks and continue to forge ahead.

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