



Massachusetts Board of Higher Education Community College President's Report

Delivered by David Podell, President, MassBay Community College
Chair, Community College Council of Presidents

May 8, 2023

Good morning Chair Gabrieli, Undersecretary LePage, Commissioner Ortega, and members of the Board.

Thank you for the time this morning. I am excited to be among the first to officially welcome Dr. George Timmons to the Massachusetts community college system. I am certain that Holyoke Community College will be well-served with Dr. Timmons at the helm, and my fellow presidents and I look forward to working with him.

Of course, as we welcome Dr. Timmons, we must also say farewell to Dr. Christina Royal who has led Holyoke since 2017. Anyone who knows Christina knows that she is a visionary leader whose has made an indelible mark on her college and her community. While we will miss her voice at the table, we are excited to see what she does next – after a long-awaited and much deserved period of rest, of course. Christina, on behalf of the presidents and our colleges – thank you.

Since the last Board meeting in March, our colleges have been busy getting ready for the next few weeks of commencements, convocations, and honors ceremonies. Just last week, we honored the All-Massachusetts Phi Theta Kappa Academic Team. Our 31 students represent some of our best and brightest students who are focused not only on their education, but on the betterment of the communities around them. April also marked Community College month, which is a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the many things that make our community colleges so special.

And, today, as we await the Senate's FY24 budget, we are excited to hear the news that is will include funding for: MassReconnect, which covers tuition, fees, books, and supplies for adults over 25 who do not already have a college degree; language that authorizes planning for free community college for all for fall 2024; and free community college for nursing students, which would help lift barriers for our current nursing students. I cannot begin to tell you how dramatically these proposals would change the landscape of community college in Massachusetts – MassReconnect is an important first step, but a commitment from the Senate to scale up over the next year to free community college to all residents is monumental.

I have spoken about MassReconnect several times in prior remarks, but I feel it is important to reaffirm what this means for students in the Commonwealth: establishing MassReconnect offers eligible residents a tremendous opportunity never before offered in the Commonwealth. As the Governor has noted, “MassReconnect reflects an intentional strategy to support those who have been historically underrepresented in higher education, connecting students to the knowledge and skills needed to participate and advance in key industries of the Commonwealth’s economy.”

As the Senate finalizes their budget in the coming weeks and we move to a final state budget, we offer our gratitude to the Governor, the House, and the Senate for their commitment to the Commonwealth’s community colleges and the role we play in developing the state’s workforce.

Now, as we look towards that final approval, there is significant foundational work that needs to be done. We are grateful and excited to have the collaboration and support of the Department of Higher Education – they have been tremendous partners in this work so far, and we urge the DHE and the Board to expedite the development and approval of MassReconnect program guidelines in preparation for a fall launch. Our colleges can’t begin their internal financial aid system programming until those guidelines are finalized. And while we won’t have a final state budget for several weeks now, laying this groundwork is absolutely critical to the success of MassReconnect, and any broader free community college program that may be forthcoming.

Finally, I offer my gratitude to you all for your generosity of time and attention over the last two years that I have served as Chair of the Community College Council of Presidents. This will be my last board meeting as Chair, and I am pleased to let you all know that President Jim Vander Hooven from Mount Wachusett Community College will be speaking on behalf of the Council for the upcoming academic year.

Thank you again for all that you do to strengthen public higher education in Massachusetts.