

October Board of Higher Education Meeting

10.20.20

Dr. James Mabry —Community Colleges

- Good morning Chair Gabrieli, Board members, Commissioner Santiago, DHE staff, and of course, my colleagues in public higher education. I want to thank you all for allowing me the opportunity to share updates from the Massachusetts Community College segment.
- As you know, the 15 [Massachusetts Community Colleges](#) currently serve almost 136,000 students a year in credit and non-credit courses which represents about half of all undergraduate students in public higher education.
- We serve diverse cities and towns across the Commonwealth and without our colleges, large numbers of low income, first generation, and students of color would not have access to higher education and the skills they need to help power the economy.
- In this era of high unemployment and uncertainty, the Community Colleges' role is even more essential for students seeking affordable high-quality instruction that provides clear pathways to jobs and careers.
- From short-term credentials that will get them quickly into the workforce or critical courses that transfer to a university, community colleges provide a local pathway to greater success.
- It's also important to remind you that our colleges serve as community hubs, integral to the fabric of regions and localities throughout Massachusetts. For example:
 - Many are currently partnering with their local communities to provide COVID-19 testing or flu vaccinations;
 - they operate food pantries or mobile markets on campus;
 - supply technology and provide internet access both on and off campus with several colleges now providing wi-fi in their parking lots—all efforts to maintain access to learning for the students in our many communities;
 - and many are offering virtual events such as workshops and concerts to keep our communities going during this depressing pandemic.
- The [Massachusetts Community Colleges](#) also serve as critical local and statewide economic engines. With locations across the Commonwealth, the Community Colleges are significant local and regional employers, providing high quality jobs to nearly **12,000 people**.

- The Community Colleges have a long track record as a catalyst to economic recovery and in rebuilding the local workforce during economic downturns. Our students will always form the core of the workforce and our localized approach is the most effective way to promote regional prosperity across Massachusetts.
- We all recognize that the Massachusetts economy runs on brain power, and to meet the needs of the future, we know that all residents of the Commonwealth will need access to postsecondary education.
- To meet this vision of equity and long-term economic development, the Commonwealth must realize how integral the Community Colleges are to providing the most affordable high-quality instruction, especially for historically underrepresented student populations. Using the equity lens to focus efforts and investment will show that the greatest impact on the economic health of our state with the greatest return on investment for students comes through investing in public education at all levels.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has led the community college presidents to reach out and collaborate more than ever. Throughout the spring and early summer, we met, online, five days a week. We continue to meet every week and our weekly virtual meetings have proven invaluable to us both individually and collectively. It has helped us to unite and align our efforts, ultimately leading us to be more effective locally and as a segment. With the support of our colleagues, we are able to innovate, be nimble, and maximize our potential amid this crisis.
- A recent showcase of this work is a workforce endeavor by the colleges — an innovative Community College Workforce Consortium. The colleges worked through MACC, the MA Community College Association, to secure grant funding to support this important work. Through a single statewide contact point, we'll be able to leverage our entire system of education and training directly to employers across the Commonwealth. I'd be remiss to not mention the great work of the Executive Office of Education and Assistant Secretary Bob LePage, who has worked closely with MACC on this exciting work.
- In another example of continued collaboration, Roxbury Community College recently hosted the Massachusetts Community College Teaching, Learning, and Student Development Conference. A conference traditionally held in person, RCC managed to make it all virtual so that hundreds of staff and faculty from across the community college segment could come together safely and discuss the important and ongoing work happening within our segment to support racial equity throughout the college experience.

- Also, we are celebrating Massachusetts STEM Week by showcasing the pivotal role we play in STEM education. Our STEM Starter Academies have been tremendously successful programs, serving thousands of students each year, building awareness for STEM careers, closing achievement gaps, and almost doubling student success rates. One currently engaging program comes from the Mt. Wachusett's "The Election Connection: How Math could improve the U.S. Voting system" project. Throughout the week we are joining with our partners and the Administration to highlight the prospects and the importance of STEM education in Massachusetts.
- But as you all know, higher education changed significantly in the spring, and all 15 Community Colleges are operating mostly online or remote this Fall semester with limited in-person classes on the college campuses. Without residence halls, we were able to make that decision early, plan accordingly, and communicate our plans to meet COVID-19 safety regulations, while ensuring access to a high-quality education.
- And just yesterday, we collectively announced the 15 community colleges will continue to offer primarily remote, online, and hybrid learning in the upcoming Spring semester. Each college will continue to provide our students with the services and support they need to succeed while carefully tracking local public health conditions. We are hopeful that by again making this decision early, we can give our students, faculty, and staff, who are already balancing the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic recession, the necessary time to prepare for the Spring semester.
- In reality, many of our campuses are still enrolling students for *Fall*. The Community Colleges have longer and varying open enrollment periods, with many students signing up later or even the day they plan to start classes. Additionally, many colleges offer "flexible terms" or "mini semesters," which offer significant advantage to students who may not be able to commit to a full semester's worth of courses right now.
- But COVID-19 has presented unique challenges for community colleges, and the students and communities we serve. This crisis has really taken our economy apart from the bottom up, disproportionately impacting low income and communities of color across the country and throughout the Commonwealth.
- Millions of jobs in the hospitality and retail industries are gone, and tragically many of our students have lost jobs. They are being forced to put off their educational plans and we are concerned that many may not be able to get back on track. But too often, the difficulties of

childcare, home schooling, food insecurity, housing insecurity, and transportation costs —many of which existed *before* the pandemic began – often prevent them from pursuing higher education.

- Our faculty and staff are working tirelessly to help our students overcome the challenges brought on by COVID-19. But these challenges have caused a difficult reality where many students are unable to enroll. This is heartbreaking for us as leaders of colleges that strive to be a bridge to brighter futures those students who rely on us.
- We also see many current and former students continue to feel the impacts of COVID-19 first-hand. They have been out on the frontlines for months as our nurses, respiratory therapists, radiologists, CNAs, medical assistants, paramedics, among others, all who started their journey to an “essential job” at a community college.
- These enrollment changes reflect just how high the stakes are for many attending community colleges and the current crisis has only exacerbated the various inequities they face.
- During the last economic downturn enrollment began to surge a year or so into the Recession. But this recession is different, and with the threat of COVID-19 still with us for the foreseeable future, the uncertainty remains, and the challenges continue for many that we serve. The intersectional impacts of lost income, lost jobs, inadequate childcare and other basic needs, all remind us of the responsibility to be flexible and to maintain access so that our students get the skills they desire and our communities prosper.
- With this in mind, I do want to thank the Baker Administration for recent dispersal of funds through the Governor’s discretionary Fund through the federal CARES Act will provide critically needed investments to support COVID-19 related expenses as well as emergency financial aid resources for many needy students. And last week, the revised FY21 Budget Recommendation by the Governor is an important step toward a sound and stable budget that our public institutions will depend on.
- Nevertheless, even with “level funding,” our colleges are still facing a fiscal crunch. Community colleges have always done an incredible job of providing a high-quality education with the most affordable price tag in the state, all while operating on shoestring budgets that are the result of historic underfunding. Those resources are laser-focused on the teaching, learning, and economic development that is needed to support the state and its residents.

- Funding education is an investment in the future of the Commonwealth's economy. That's why now is the time, more than ever, that we must invest *further* in our institutions to meet our unique mission and fuel the economic recovery.
- With 15 colleges with campuses operating in all corners of the Commonwealth, the community college system provides an integral service to Massachusetts residents. There's no doubt, our localized approach is the most effective way to build regional economies in Massachusetts: in our Gateway Cities, in rural towns, from the Berkshires, down to Cape Cod and the Islands — the community colleges are the engine of equity for the Commonwealth.
- Thank you all for this opportunity and what you do to support public higher education in Massachusetts.