



## Massachusetts Board of Higher Education Community College President's Report

Delivered by James Vander Hooven, President, Mount Wachusett Community College  
Chair, Community College Council of Presidents

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Good morning Chair Gabrieli, Secretary Tutwiler, Commissioner Ortega, and members of the Board.

Thank you for the time this morning. I am Jim Vander Hooven, and I'm the president at Mount Wachusett Community College with campuses in Gardner, Leominster, and Fitchburg. I am pleased to be serving as Chair of the Community College Council of Presidents for the next year, and look forward to serving in this role on behalf of my fellow presidents.

As I begin my tenure as Chair, I want to offer a special thank you to President David Podell from MassBay Community College, the outgoing chair of the Council who has represented us admirably for the last two years. David, thank you for serving in this role with distinction and humility and for all of your good work over the last two years.

As we await the final FY24 state budget, we are, again, deeply grateful to the Administration and the Legislature for the investments that we expect to be made in the FY24 budget - \$14 million for SUCCESS and \$17 million for Early College and Dual Enrollment, for example. As we look towards passage of the final budget, we have urged the Conference Committee to include several important priorities.

First, the Senate budget includes \$15 million in funding to plan for **free community college for all residents of the Commonwealth**. We are deeply excited to be discussing a path forward in this work, and strongly believe that strategic planning around how best to implement a plan in Massachusetts is a critical component to ensuring success and sustainability.

Outside section 12, also included in the Senate budget, makes **undocumented students who meet specific criteria eligible for in-state tuition**, is a top priority for our community colleges. So many of our students, who graduate from our state's high schools, many of whom who have been living in Massachusetts for the overwhelming majority of their lives, find that higher education – even the relatively less-expensive option of community college – is out of reach. We believe this is a critical equity item, but beyond that, we are actively pricing individuals out of the workforce by charging them out-of-state tuition and making them ineligible for financial aid.

Also included in the Senate budget is funding for **free community college for nursing students**. The nursing shortage only continues to worsen, and we consider this an important piece of helping to boost the nursing pipeline. Although this funding does not remove all barriers towards expanding the pool, it removes an additional burden for those entering the field.

And, of course, \$20 million for **MassReconnect**. In May, President Podell noted what strong partners the Department of Higher Education have been in planning for MassReconnect, and urged quick passage of the guidelines so that our campuses can begin their internal financial aid system programming. I want to reaffirm that we are committed to working together with the DHE and EOE to get this right, and reiterate the need for quick action on those guidelines.

Beyond that, however, I want to raise another critically important issue with this Board. While I do not relish raising this in such a public venue, we feel strongly that this is something we must discuss today as you prepare to hear a presentation from the Department on MassReconnect. For months, we have been discussing implementation of MassReconnect should it be finalized by the Legislature, and at every turn, we have made it abundantly clear that marketing of this important new program should live with the colleges and not with the Department of Higher Education. Our colleges, not the Department, have the necessary expertise and local awareness, and we believe, fundamentally, that this work should be coordinated and executed by the Association on behalf of the 15 colleges. The Department will present to you a plan in a bit to undertake marketing for this program – this was announced at Tuesday’s executive committee meeting without so much as a conversation with anyone at the community colleges. We recognize the Department’s desire to launch marketing quickly, and agree that time is of the essence – but we believe the plan, as will be outlined for you today, is flawed in its design. We urge the Department to reconsider their plan. We remain committed to working together with the Department on this, and will continue to partner with them to ensure we get this right – for our students and our colleges.

Finally, as we look towards next steps on many of these important initiatives, it’s absolutely critical that I note that our faculty and professional staff are dramatically underpaid. Most simply: we are not paying our faculty a competitive salary. This means that we can’t recruit and retain a talented workforce. And while it’s particularly acute in fields like nursing and health sciences, where the workforce is particularly stretched thin, this problem is not limited by subject or geography, and it’s a problem that is prevalent across each one of our schools. I ask you all, as you consider the initiatives before you today, you also considering the very real barrier created by the low compensation of our faculty and professional staff.