

Massachusetts Community Colleges, Council of Presidents
Chair: Dr. Patricia A. Gentile, President, North Shore Community College
Massachusetts Board of Higher Education
Wednesday, April 8, 2020

Good morning Chair Gabrieli, board members, Commissioner Santiago and all of the DHE staff along with participating virtual colleagues. I hope all of you are well and remain healthy and that your loved ones and friends are also safe and healthy in this coronavirus pandemic. We are all doing our best to pull together and help our colleagues, students, alumni and communities make it as safely as possible through the next several months until the virus ebbs and appropriate therapies and effective vaccines are created.

The COVID-19 situation has created unique and huge challenges for so many across the Commonwealth, including public higher education institutions – especially our 15 community colleges. I can say in all my years in this sector as well as in senior management in other sectors, I have never experienced a similar crisis that evolves daily, encompasses every aspect of the educational business, and deals such significant financial blows to budgets – both institutional and personal.

Despite the unprecedented nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, the community colleges keep moving forward to pursue our very important public mission which commits to excellent teaching and learning for transfer toward a baccalaureate, career preparation for entry into high demand occupational careers with a significant emphasis on the healthcare industry, and workforce development for retooling and supporting the advancement of the labor force in partnership with business and industry.

As our faculty and staff juggle the economic, social and physical impacts of the epidemic, we continue to reach out through remote strategies to connect with our students, create innovative ways to educate and support learning, and provide a personal and welcoming experience through a virtual reality. Without a doubt – these are difficult and stressful times for everyone.

But I must state the obvious – for the lower- and middle-income students who make up the vast majority of community college students, the struggles are deeper and much more challenging. So many of our students rely on the food pantries and mobile markets we routinely hold, the open computer labs that allow them to access the equipment, software programs and

printers needed to complete their coursework both those in the remote realm as well as in-classroom, the libraries that store reference books and textbooks they can't afford to purchase while providing the subscriptions to resources included in their course syllabi, the tutoring centers that make a dramatic difference for course completion and better understanding of complex materials, as well as the academic pathway and career counseling needed to guide them to their educational goals. While in our colleges, students build new threads of community, leadership and teamwork skills through our student engagement activities and learn about the wider world through internships, field experiences and scholarly trips they might never have the opportunity to experience otherwise.

This pandemic has taken away the in-person touch that traditionally supported our community college students in staying in college and completing their credential. I think of all the losses our students are experiencing right now, I believe that this personalized sense of belonging and inclusion in the academy are one of the major losses for those never included in higher education previously.

This is especially painful because we know how hard our students work to get into a community college in the first place. Our students' typical profile is someone who is employed full-time or more than full-time, are caretakers for family dependents, and are first in their families to go to college. Despite the considerable odds against them, our students work hard at embracing the demands of college, persist despite the usual high hurdles, and thrive in an environment that believes in their success.

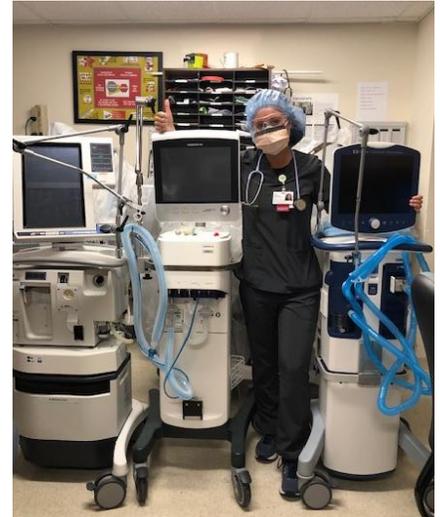
During this pandemic while virtually conferencing with my brother and sister community college presidents, I've found to a person that the health and safety of our faculty, staff and students have been the number one priority. We've done everything in our power to respond as quickly as possible with thoughtful strategies to keep our communities safe and our students supported. The response across the state from leadership, faculty and staff has been extremely inspiring – everyone is adjusting to the new landscape and we are all trying to support one another as much as is possible. Let me give some examples of this sector-wide innovation and support:

- In a few short weeks during spring breaks, our faculty transitioned already in progress in-classroom curricula to a variety of remote strategies utilizing familiar and new technologies, supporting each other within and across departments with best practices

- and ideas, reaching across campuses to share their curriculum, resources and expertise. This resulted in thousands and thousands of adjustments so that courses that were held in classrooms and labs could continue to meet student learner objectives in remote and virtual formats. This is awe inspiring as to the amount of work, creativity and communication that was needed and provided.
- Our faculty didn't do this alone. They were supported by the instructional technologists and computer information specialists who worked night and day to provide the laptops, desktops, software downloads, internet access and technical advice to help make the transition possible.
 - I can't forget the purchasing agents and finance folks who located the technology supplies, subscriptions and contracts to ensure we quickly got the equipment and access needed as well as locating scarce sanitizing supplies and equipment. Bravo!
 - The community colleges purchased thousands of Chromebooks to ensure that students without technology could access the remote platforms and bought and installed hotspots for students and employees who didn't have access to the internet at home. For some students in courses like engineering and who needed CAD software or other specialized supports, they were provided individual licenses, and loaned higher capacity laptops and desktops to be able to keep up with their home and classwork assignments.
 - All of our student supports transitioned to remote – this includes academic advising, mental health supports, enrollment services, financial aid, transfer information sessions, accessibility supports, and special grant programs – like TRIO Student Support Services and the like. Tutoring, library services, and student engagement services and activities all went virtual and remote as well. Can you imagine the sheer intensity of work and ingenuity to accomplish this in such a short amount of time?
 - Our facility and security/campus police staff have provided yeoman performance in keeping our campuses safe and secure during this time. Deep cleaning, frequent routine sanitizing, and thoughtful sanitary protocols have been quickly put into place. Despite their own concerns for their health, our bricks and mortar support folks have been heroic in keeping the rest of us healthy.

- Most of the colleges were providing daily communication briefs to employees, students, Trustees, donors and the general public. This was an enormous outreach effort that included email, texting, phone calling, new web pages and notices with updated Coronavirus information and referrals, and blanketing of social media sites.

Despite the bedlam of the internal transition, our community college sector did not forgo its community obligations. We have all stepped up to help through a groundswell of donation of PPE supplies and loaning of course equipment to community hospitals and first responders. Here's a photo of the three state-of-the-art, industry-standard mechanical ventilators and a non-invasive ventilator, called a BiPAP machine, that North Shore Community College Respiratory Therapy Department loaned to Winchester Hospital.



Our relationship with the healthcare industry is a long and successful story. Community colleges provide the educational foundation for a large proportion of that labor force. In fact, most of the healthcare workforce also attended a community college at some point on their way to earning their final credential. Further, in Massachusetts, community colleges provide 85% of first responder training. We train and credential the EMTs, police officers, fire fighters, nurses for acute and long-term care facilities, nurse assistants and home health aides, respiratory therapists, surgical technicians, occupational therapy assistants, physical therapy assistants, health care technicians, radiologic technicians, medical assistants, EKG technicians, central sterile technicians, pharmacy technicians, phlebotomy technicians, and Dental Assistants, just to name a few. To state a few specifics, I'll give you some stats from Holyoke Community College:

Right now, enrolled at Holyoke are:

- **110 PN (Practical Nurse) and RN (Registered Nurse) students** being prepared to care for patients in acute care, long term care, and home care in supervisory and direct patient care roles.
- **35 Radiology Technician students** being prepared to perform all X-ray procedures in acute and urgent care settings.

- **70 Community Health Workers** who are being prepared to assist underserved populations to promote positive health practices. And,
- **45 students in the Addiction Studies Certificate program**, training to enter the mental health field which will be responding to the effects of the pandemic for a generation.

Many of our alumni are currently at the front lines of the COVID-19 battle providing urgently needed skills and experience. The workforce development provided by the 15 Massachusetts Community Colleges is essential to a high quality of life in our Commonwealth and to the health and wellbeing of its citizens.

That's why the fiscal health and stability of the community colleges are essential ingredients in guaranteeing a strong future for our state's economy. Our 15 colleges have already spent an enormous amount of their budgets on the unexpected costs of moving work, instruction and services to remote platforms. Just last week, our CFOs added up the incurred and expected short-term costs of the cleaning, IT infrastructure upgrades, equipment, and supplies as reaching nearly \$17 million dollars. The most recent estimate for the overall financial impact of COVID-19 on the community colleges is estimated at nearly \$47 million. Although that seems like a whole lot of money, the CFOs believe it is a very conservative estimate.

With the looming recession, the 15 community colleges are going to play an even more important role in the retooling and retraining of displaced workers, just as we did in the Great Recession. Our colleges will need to ramp up to meet new demand when the COVID-19 crisis recedes. Without recouping the unexpected costs of this virus emergency and without new investment from the state, we will not be in a healthy state to rise to this next occasion. Our workforce development know-how and expertise will be critical to educate more healthcare, cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, IT and critical middle skilled workers to restart the economy and recover from the negative economic impacts of COVID-19.

State investment in the community college sector is an investment in a future healthy Massachusetts economy. In my appearances here at the board as well as those president-chairs who preceded me in past years, you heard a consistent message: our sector has been chronically underfunded for decades. We've brought to you the examples of how difficult the lives of our students are – the high rate of homelessness, the even higher rates of food insecurity, the need for quality affordable child care, and the need for financial assistance – for tuition and fees as well as to purchase books and supplies, to pay for transportation costs and living expenses – so that they

can stay in college and finish their credential. This has long been the reality of so many of our students.

What's so sobering now is *that* reality was all before *this* pandemic. COVID-19 has caused a massive disruption for our students, faculty and staff. The "pivot to remote/online learning" is extremely complex for our sector because our colleges already live in the complexity of life for lower-income students. We have been working hard to close the achievement gaps created by lifelong income inequality and the disparities of opportunities for the communities we serve. We are mightily worried that if the state doesn't rise to this occasion by investing in supporting our students and institutions, these inequities and disparities will only worsen.

Although our students are not the only ones feeling the negative impacts of this crisis, now is not the time to abandon the Board's commitment to educational equity for the future workforce of our Commonwealth. The Commissioner is hoping to see great achievements with the equity agenda, and the community colleges hope to contribute to those successes. But some of our most at risk students are low-income students and students of color who have likely been hit hard economically, and this disruption could keep them out of higher education altogether. The decision made now regarding the distribution of financial resources will reverberate for decades. That's why it is more important than ever to invest in the community college sector and public higher education as a whole. Our institutions will be one of the few public assets that will provide the means to enhance the post-coronavirus economy for everyone. There are few better returns on investment than investing in our future workforce.

Thank you, as always, for your attention to and support of the community colleges of the Commonwealth. I believe that this may be the last Board of Higher Education meeting for this academic year. If we do not have another opportunity to meet before the end of June, I want to thank you now for all you do and will do for our students and institutions. I wish you God speed in your future decision making and want to let you know that as I am retiring in July I have had the honor of a lifetime serving North Shore Community College as its 4th president and am grateful for the honor of the opportunity to represent my colleagues as Chair of the Council of Presidents.