

A Man on a Mission:  
Foster Furcolo and the Creation of the Massachusetts Community College System  
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The higher education landscape in Massachusetts is unique compared to other states due to its high concentration of prestigious private colleges and universities. Harvard, established in 1636 and located in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is the crown jewel of American higher education. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston College, Boston University, Wellesley College, Amherst College, and Smith College, to name a few, are also located in Massachusetts. The powerful presence of “the privates” is significant in the history of public higher education in Massachusetts. Their presence and powerful influence is viewed historically as a root cause of the state’s neglect of its public higher education system (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Mullen, 1994). Holding these prestigious private colleges and universities in elevated esteem “lessens the public’s inclination to support public college and universities” (Mullen, 1994, p. 68). The lack of support also stems from the lack of personal experience most state legislators have with public higher education. If they went to college at all they earned their degrees at Massachusetts private colleges. This resulted in a lack of understanding and personal commitment to institutions of public higher education. Opposition to increased state spending has historically exacerbated the struggle for support of public higher education (Brint & Karabel, 1989). This phenomenon is still faced today in the movement for the creation of a public law school (Making a better case, 2005; Schweitzer, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the development of the community college system in Massachusetts with a specific focus on “the father of the Massachusetts community college system” (Ialenti, Anderson, & Hiron, 1979) Governor Foster Furcolo. The paper begins with a brief overview of the junior and community college movement in the United States and then

provides a detailed account of the political successes and challenges Furcolo faced in realizing his education agenda in the late 1950s in Massachusetts.

*History of Community Colleges in the United States*

Changes in American higher education in the late 1800s and early 1900s paralleled the changes occurring in business and industry (Diener, 1986). Industrialists and entrepreneurs were experiencing success on a grand scale and viewed education as critical to building the nation and its economy. College building was prevalent and enrollments steadily increased (Thelin, 2004). As industrialists moved towards increased efficiency, university reformers called for increased efficiency and quality. Their efforts to reorganize universities, such as dividing undergraduate colleges into “junior” and “senior colleges”, laid the foundation for the junior (and later community) college movement (Diener, 1986).

University support was critical to the success of early junior college (Pedersen, 1997). Private four-year colleges’ struggled to survive, and the demise of many brought attention to the need for reforms. Often colleges had few enrollments in third and fourth year courses and were essentially junior colleges. By the early 1900s, university leaders actually encouraged some four-year colleges to become authentic junior colleges and offer only first and second year courses (Diener, 1986).

A number of additional forces also supported the success of the early junior college movement. Public high schools, changes in the structure of employment, policies and practices of national agencies and an overall increase in the access Americans had to higher education also influenced the growth of the junior college movement (Diener, 1986). Beginning in the late 1800s, increased access to public secondary education provided the impetus for ambitious educators and civic-minded community leaders to further expand educational opportunities for

youth (Diener, 1986; Pedersen, 1997). This community boosterism, coupled with eager university leaders wanting to shed the first two years of undergraduate education, resulted in the addition of thirteen and fourteenth years to the public high school curriculum. The goal of the thirteenth and fourteenth year was often twofold - to provide the general education students needed to transfer to a four-year institution and, in the absence of more prestigious options, to incorporate higher education into the civic life of a community (Diener, 1986; Pedersen, 1997). Local property taxes supported this extension of the public school system (Thelin, 2004), resulting in local control and governance (Pedersen, 1997). Public junior colleges such as these were created most frequently on the west coast and in the midwest (Pedersen, 1997; Thelin, 2004).

National and regional agencies such as the U. S. Department of Education, the American Association of Junior Colleges, and regional and state accrediting agencies all brought the junior college movement forward. These agencies viewed and promoted junior colleges as institutions of higher education rather than secondary education, therefore helping the junior colleges to establish their legitimacy and credibility (Diener, 1986).

While educators were focused on reform, the structure of employment in the United States was changing (Diener, 1986). Developments in business and industry required a technically skilled labor pool, creating a need for new technical junior colleges and the addition of new technical and business programs to existing two-year colleges. Junior colleges expanded curricula to include vocational and technical programs to accommodate the needs of business and industry as well the working adults who needed to upgrade their skills (Diener, 1986).

Increased access to higher education in the early to mid-1900s was the last force influencing the growth of junior colleges. According to Diener (1986), higher education's movement "from

the notion of college-as-fortress to one of college-as-service-provider” was of special significance to junior colleges (p. 12). At this time junior colleges transformed, from mini versions of elitist colleges with a traditional curriculum to comprehensive community colleges, serving as entry points for the growing masses of working class and diverse students seeking higher education opportunities.

As junior and community colleges developed their niche in the higher education stratification, core functions emerged (Diener, 1986). Offering freshman and sophomore level courses, advising students for transfer, training for increasingly technical jobs, serving nontraditional students, and providing remedial education all materialized as the essential functions of the community college. Providing the early years of a liberal arts education to both the transfer and the terminal student was a legitimate and laudable mission. Helping students succeed in their studies and successfully transition to a four-year institution required careful attention to academic advising. By the 1930s, junior colleges were serving an important function in training technicians, accountants, and clerical workers needed by business and industry. After World War II, junior and community colleges provided access to the many diverse students seeking higher education. These students were working adults, women, minorities, retirees, career changers and the disabled. Junior and community colleges took their open access mission seriously and developed remedial education programs to serve students not prepared for college level work. The two-year colleges navigated these uncharted waters with agility. These colleges

abandoned the traditional notion of higher education that quality was defined by the high numbers of persons denied admission or the high rate of academic failure among those admitted. The concept of adding value – taking the learner where he or she is and promoting tangible academic successes—became a mission, a hallmark, of the two-year community college movement (Diener, 1986, p. 9).

The mid to late 1900s witnessed two-year colleges experience dramatic change. Junior colleges became community colleges. Control moved from municipalities to county or state-level government. The typical small rural campus gave way to urban, multi-campus sites. Two-year college missions grew from a singular transfer focus to an exponential expansion of purpose (Diener, 1986). Community college enrollments across the country doubled from 1950 to 1960 and multiplied fivefold from 1960 to 1970. While private two-year colleges were declining, public community colleges were flourishing in the 1960s (Thelin, 2004).

*Massachusetts Public Higher Education in the 1950s and 1960s*

While enrollments at public colleges and universities nationwide were strong in the 1950s and 1960s, public higher education enrollments in Massachusetts were minimal. Before 1950 public higher education institutions in Massachusetts served fewer than ten thousand students, which was slightly more than ten percent of the total higher education enrollments. In 1960, enrollments in Massachusetts public colleges and universities reached sixteen percent of the total higher education enrollments. Public higher education enrollments in Massachusetts lagged behind private colleges and universities until the 1980s (Brint & Karabel, 1989).

While the junior and community college movement was sweeping the country during the first half of the twentieth century, Massachusetts policymakers were unsuccessful in creating a public community college system. George Zook, a prominent educator in the 1920s and staunch supporter of junior colleges, authored a report recommending twelve tuition-free community colleges to be controlled locally with state financial support. This recommendation, like others that came before it, was rejected due to the influence of the private colleges and an aversion to increased government spending (Ialenti et al., 1979; Mullen, 1994). Policymakers introduced at

least four more bills to the Massachusetts House of Representatives recommending the creation of a two-year college system before the 1950s (Mullen, 1994).

*A Man on a Mission: Governor Foster Furcolo*

Governor Furcolo, a liberal democrat, introduced a bill to create a statewide system of community colleges in 1958 against the advice of his close political aides (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Ialenti et al., 1979; Mullen, 1994). Furcolo's aides were concerned about antagonizing conservative legislators, but as the son of Italian immigrants and the state's first Italian American governor, he was dedicated to increasing educational opportunities to citizens of Massachusetts (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Mullen, 1994).

Furcolo worked at manual labor jobs to put himself through Yale University and Yale Law School (Mass Moments, July 29, 2005). Furcolo's deep commitment to access to higher education was evident in his tenure as a U. S. Congressman where he created a federal student loan program (Ialenti et al., 1979; Mullen, 1994). Tributes to the former governor hail his dedication to education through the establishment of the Massachusetts community college system and the expansion of the University of Massachusetts (Neal, 1995; *Governors of Massachusetts*, n.d.). Furcolo envisioned community colleges providing educational opportunities within commuting distance to students of all socioeconomic backgrounds (Ialenti et al., 1979; Mullen, 1994). He wanted all students to have the ability to reach their maximum potential through transfer to a four-year institution or a career program (Mullen, 1994).

Furcolo was clear with his education agenda from the start of his administration. In his inaugural address, Furcolo pointed to the increasing number of college age citizens and that only one of ten applications to the University of Massachusetts (then a small institution dedicated to agriculture) was accepted. He was committed to the transformation of the state's teachers

colleges to liberal arts institutions and to a new mission for the three technical institutes struggling from the decline of the Massachusetts textile industry. Furcolo surrounded himself with advisors who were either educators or who held a high value on education and a commitment to access (Mullen, 1994).

*The Commission on the Audit of State Needs*

Early in his administration, Furcolo called for an audit of the state's needs. He recommended the creation of a Commission to look at seven major policy areas of which education was the first priority. In announcing the Commission on the Audit of State Needs, Furcolo expounded the critical need to provide adequate educational opportunities for students of all ages. The commission languished for much of his administration in a political quagmire, but it was eventually refocused and produced enabling legislation (Mullen, 1994).

Furcolo spent a good deal of his tenure as Massachusetts governor working on fiscal issues. He had inherited a billion dollar debt from the previous administration. Massachusetts was in the midst of a fiscal crisis and he was burdened with finding additional revenue for his liberal agenda. He wanted to expand educational and other programs but was constrained by severe budget deficits, a worsening fiscal situation and a legislature averse to voting for new tax programs. He spent the first year of his two-year term creating enemies in the legislature and the Democratic Party over his insistence that a sales tax was the solution to the state's fiscal woes (Mullen, 1994).

After the failure of the sales tax proposal, Furcolo created a legislative agenda that included eight priorities. The closest to his heart was a bill that proposed \$111 million in higher education expansion, including \$24 million for the creation of a regional community college system. It was at this time the Commission on the Audit of State Needs awakened. The Commission issued

a preliminary report focused on the marked shortage of higher education facilities and the lack of the state's capacity to meet the "rapidly rising tide of college enrollments" (Mullen, 1994, p. 114). The report pointed to the demographic projections of increased college age residents and recommended expansion of the existing fifteen public institutions and the creation of a network of regional community colleges (Mullen, 1994). In their report, the Commission cited numerous benefits of a community college system. Beneficiaries included 1) families who would save money on the cost of the first two years of college; 2) secondary schools which would see an increase in the motivation of students to continue their education; 3) business and industry which could tap into a larger skilled labor pool; 4) taxpayers who would not have to pay for a more expensive expansion of the state residential colleges and 5) the state and the nation which would gain in the increased knowledge and skills of its youth (Mullen, 1994).

In recommending a funding structure, the Commission steered away from models found in other states that relied on local and county funding streams. Massachusetts differs from other states in that it does not have a strong system of county government, eliminating this option for funding a community college system. In addition, Massachusetts property taxes were the second highest per capita in the nation. Commissioners realized placing an additional spending burden on local cities and towns could jeopardize their proposal for a regional community college system. Therefore, they recommended local support through the use of dedicated space and full financing by the state (Mullen, 1994).

The Commission filed an extensive final report on the need for a regional community college system to the Massachusetts legislature. The content of the report was not favorably received by the state legislature. The state's fiscal problems made it difficult to sell a new program, especially when Furcolo was considering another attempt to pass the unpopular sales tax. As he

faced these daunting hurdles in his quest for a regional community college system, Furcolo collected about twenty-five of his trusted advisors from within and outside the government. “Twenty-four argued against pursuing a community college bill at that time; one argued in favor. ‘I had one vote,’ Furcolo remembers, ‘so we went ahead’.” (Ialenti et al., 1979; Mullen, 1994, pp. 118-119).

### *Furcolo's Proposed Bill*

Governor Furcolo's bill for \$24 million and the creation of a Massachusetts Board of Regional Community Colleges (the Board) to oversee the development of the system, was adopted after he personally lobbied for its passing. In his lobbying, he stressed “the opportunities for social mobility and cultural enrichment that the colleges would provide and the role the colleges would play in training, at a low cost, workers for the state's economy” (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p.145). Furcolo used a three-pronged approach to gain support for his community college plan. The governor and his aides met with legislators individually and in small groups to educate them on the need for regional community colleges. They also sought grass roots support from key constituencies in the regions initially thought to house the state's early community colleges. It was hoped that this local support would boost cooperation on Beacon Hill. The third prong was a special message to a joint session of the legislature on July 1, 1958 in which Furcolo passionately framed the debate in terms the general public could understand. He outlined benefits of a community college system, including convenient college access to students of limited means, an abundant supply of technically trained workers, lifelong learning opportunities for students of all ages and savings to the tax payers from a streamlined state system (Mullen, 1994).

According to Brint and Karabel (1989), Furcolo's unwavering lobbying was coupled with good timing. They cite an unexpected fiscal surplus that calmed the fears of the fiscally conservative legislature and that the bill easily passed in both the house and the senate. Mullen (1994), however, provides additional information on Furcolo's political strategies. Furcolo set forth the community college bill strategically packaged with other initiatives that were important to key legislators. The community college bill was passed in the House of Representatives, led by Furcolo's committed supporter and Speaker of the House John Thompson, by a voice vote only after significant political maneuvering on the part of Furcolo. The bill then languished in the Senate where the Republicans had a two-seat majority. While Furcolo's adversaries were voicing their opposition to the bill in the Senate, he called upon Harvard Professor Seymour Harris to make the economic case for the community college proposal. Harris was a staunch supporter of public community colleges and a loyal spokesman for Furcolo's progressive education agenda. Harris wrote a letter to the editor of the Boston Herald Traveler and developed the economic arguments for a public community college system.

Furcolo also had a strong ally in Massachusetts Senator Edward Stone, a Republican from Hyannis. Stone wanted a community college campus in his district due to the dearth of higher educational opportunities on Cape Cod after the closing of a local college. Stone was a well-respected senator and a senior member of the Ways and Means Committee. Furcolo allowed Stone to take the lead on another bill important to Stone and the Republican Party. With a solid supporter of the community college bill in the Senate, Furcolo had almost all of his cards in place (Mullen, 1994).

Furcolo then chose to separate the authorization to establish the Massachusetts Board of Regional Community Colleges from the capital outlay proposal for campus planning and

construction. Furcolo agreed to push for passage of the authority to appoint the Regional Board and establish its powers. The funding for the bill would follow with a separate capital outlay bill. The original capital outlay bill called for \$24 million for the construction of the community college campuses. As opposition rose in the Senate, Furcolo and his allies were forced to cut their losses and take the \$1 million allocated by the Senate rather than losing everything in a renewed fight. Only then was the bill quickly approved (Mullen, 1994).

### *The Passing of Chapter 605*

On October 3, 1958 Governor Furcolo signed his bill, Chapter 605: An Act Establishing a Massachusetts Board of Regional Community Colleges and Providing for the Establishment of Regional Community Colleges (Chapter 605, 1958). Chapter 605 established the Massachusetts Board of Regional Community Colleges and its duty of determining the need for community college level education and executing a plan to meet the determined need.

Chapter 605 describes the composition of the Board in detail as well as a number of aspects of the Board's supervision and control of the regional community colleges, including 1) appointing and fixing the duties of the colleges' chief administrative officers and professional staffs, 2) securing facilities, 3) establishing the colleges' curricula and 4) establishing advisory boards for each college.

Chapter 605 called for the makeup of the Board to consist of fifteen members, "including the commissioner of education, the president of the university [sic] of Massachusetts, a president of a state teachers college . . . a president of a Massachusetts technical institute . . . and eleven members appointed by the governor with the advice and consent of the council, at least one of whom shall be the president of a private college, university, or junior college in the commonwealth" (Chapter 605, 1958). According to Brint and Karabel (1989) when Governor

Furcolo created the Board, he wanted members who would generate public confidence and roll up their sleeves and get to work. The first Board consisted mostly of educators, including the presidents of the University of Massachusetts, Salem State Teacher's College, New Bedford Institute of Technology, Wellesley College as well as the commissioner of education, a Brandeis University dean and a Harvard University economist. Governor Furcolo also included representatives of important constituencies including the president of a bank, the president of the Massachusetts AFL-CIO and the executive secretary of the Massachusetts Congress of Parents and Teachers. The Board and its members were viewed as productive, efficient and results-oriented.

It is apparent that Furcolo was strategic in designing the makeup of the Board (Mullen, 1994). Involving leaders from both public and private colleges and universities ensured they would become involved with the new community college system. He appointed three of his most trusted advisors to the Board who would voice his interests. These men were Harvard Economics Professor Seymour Harris, Brandeis Dean Kermit Morissey and political scientist and Furcolo aid John Mallan (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Hogarty, 2002; Mullen, 1994). They possessed impeccable academic credentials, were politically savvy and were passionate about the community college agenda. Their appointments gave Furcolo confidence that the new community college system would be built as a credible entity and the development would be on solid ground long after his term as governor was over (Mullen, 1994).

Before Furcolo left the governor's office, he witnessed the opening of the first Massachusetts community college. In Furcolo's FY61 budget submission, he included \$85,000 for the opening of Berkshire Community College. This was much less than the \$200,000 requested by the Massachusetts Board of Regional Community Colleges and attests to the continued strained

relationship between the governor and the legislature and the condition of the state's fiscal condition (Mullen, 1994).

At the end of Furcolo's second term as governor, he announced a run for the United States Senate against a powerful Republican incumbent. Damaged by allegations of state government scandals, the public's desire for fresh leadership and numerous scars from political battles, Furcolo shockingly lost the Democratic primary.

It is poignant and ironic that one of the final stops of that last campaign, opening ceremonies at the new Berkshire Community College on September 10, had to be postponed due to the threat of Hurricane Donna. An emotional Furcolo, unable to complete his remarks, would attend that ceremony as outgoing governor in December, 1960" (Mullen, 1994, pp. 147-148).

### *Conclusion*

Governor Foster Furcolo believed all students, including those of meager means, should have access to quality education. He was bothered that qualified students were unable to afford a college education. The state lacked the capacity to serve the growing numbers of students wishing to pursue access to higher education. Furcolo believed it was the state's responsibility to provide increased access to affordable, high quality education and he committed himself to transforming the Massachusetts higher education landscape.

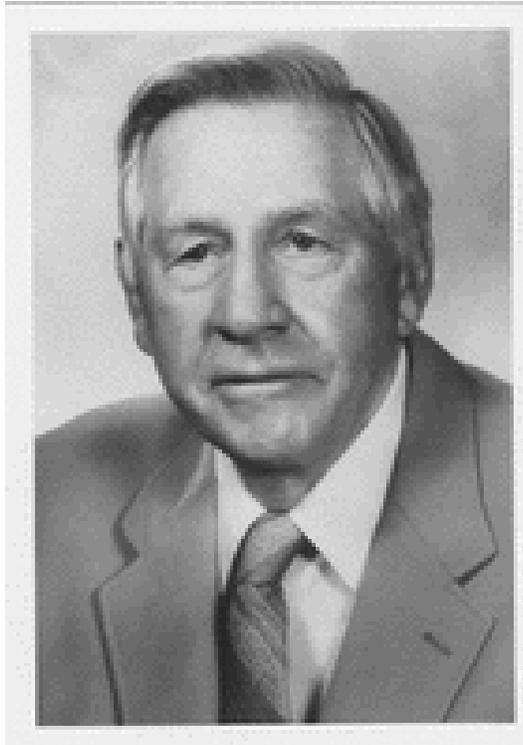
The creation of the Massachusetts community college system is adequately documented. However, I found myself wanting to know more about the role of the private colleges in the prevention and later support of the creation of a community college system. Why did private universities in Massachusetts resist community colleges with such force when their counterparts around the country embraced them? What caused their change of heart in the 1950s, when private college and university leaders contributed to the shaping of Furcolo's dream? Was it simply the wave of increased enrollments that caused the change? Has the power of the privates

changed since the late 1950s? These questions could generate further inquiry that would contribute to a greater understanding of the challenges and successes of public higher education in Massachusetts.

The years of Governor Furcolo's administration are an important period of time in the history of public higher education in Massachusetts. The creation of the Massachusetts community college system transformed the educational options for its citizens. As of 2005, there are fifteen community colleges in the Massachusetts system serving more than two hundred thousand students per year, accounting for more than forty-three percent of public higher education enrollments in the state (Massachusetts Community Colleges Executive Office, n.d.). Without Furcolo's efforts, millions of students would not have had the educational and training opportunities afforded to them by the Massachusetts community college system. Furthermore, understanding the issues surrounding the birth of the Massachusetts community college system can inform decisions made by college administrators who are currently shaping its future.

Appendix A

Photograph of Governor Foster Furcolo



Foster Furcolo

Governor of Massachusetts

1957-1961

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