

# Community colleges see challenge, opportunity in pandemic

By [Scott O'Connell](#)

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WORCESTER – While the rest of the economy struggled, community colleges usually have seen recessions as a period of higher demand and expansion, as larger numbers of workers go back to school to receive training.

But the coronavirus pandemic is not usual. From the still completely unknown state funding situation to the unprecedented workforce challenges presented by the novel virus, community colleges could find it more difficult to establish their customary role as an engine of economic recovery this time.

College leaders say they're still prepared, however, to help the region's rebound, even if there are missing pieces of the equation.

"I think we're absolutely in a position to respond to this," said Tom Sannicandro, president of the state's community college association. But to fully capitalize on the public two-year system's built-in career training apparatus, "we'll need financial resources," he added, which the state in recent years has not provided to community colleges at the level some campus officials would like.

For now, colleges said they're in a relatively good place for the new fiscal year that began this month, based on the level-service stopgap summer budget the state approved to get public institutions into the fall.

"I would love to see (our funding) increase, but I'm also being realistic," said Quinsigamond Community College President Luis Pedraja. "If we're level-funded, we'll be able to do it – we're nimble, we're adaptable."

In addition, the community college system has benefited from the influx of federal stimulus aid, which has helped them transition to the remote learning models they quickly launched once the pandemic stopped in-person instruction back in March.

Local community colleges have already announced they intend to continue that virtual approach this fall, bucking the trend followed by four-year colleges in the region that are attempting to reopen their campuses.

While many two-year schools will still offer a few on-campus courses – mostly lab classes that would be difficult to replicate online – college officials said they wanted to err on the side of caution as the coronavirus lingers in the region.

“For me, the primary concern was the safety of our faculty and staff,” Pedraja said. Unlike four-year colleges’ mostly residential student populations, which can be sequestered on campus, “ours are coming and going,” he said. “They’re out working in the community,” potentially raising the risk for exposure to the virus.

While he and other community college officials acknowledged virtual education is not a substitute for in-person instruction in most fields, their decision to stick with remote learning apparently has not hurt their fall enrollment numbers so far.

“They’re actually getting better,” said Mount Wachusett Community College President James Vander Hooven. “When this all started, the initial (projections) were that this year was going to be quite a struggle.”

Since the college’s announcement it would continue online learning, however, “we’ve seen a much better trend,” he said.

Enrollment at Bunker Hill Community College in Boston, meanwhile, is up by about 28%, said President Pam Eddinger, continuing a trend this summer that saw the school’s enrollment increase 25%.

That would be a promising development for a sector that has struggled with declining enrollments in recent years. Since fiscal 2013, the community college system as a whole has seen its annual full-time equivalent enrollment plummet from 65,352 to 49,799 in fiscal 2019.

While some college officials said they saw some stabilizing and even improvement last year, the loss of enrollment has been compounded by underfunding by the state, campus officials said. Many community college presidents pointed out, for instance, that while their system enrolls about half of

all public higher education students in the state, they receive only about a quarter of state funding dedicated to public colleges and universities.

In the unprecedented current situation, where virtually every public sector is competing for what could be a leaner state budget once all tax revenues are accounted for, some of those officials worry community colleges could once again be neglected.

“I’m extremely concerned the funding trends of the past will continue, or even get worse,” said John Cox, president of Cape Cod Community College.

“I’m a bit wary,” Pedraja said. “We get our job done, we do the yeoman’s work ... but sometimes we’re treated as second-class citizens.”

While two-year colleges by now are used to operating efficiently, any cut to funding would be especially damaging to their efforts to expand programs for the economic recovery, some college administrators worried.

“I think the challenge has been that we’ve already been underfunded for the last 20 years, and we’ve been grossly underfunded even compared to the other two sectors of public higher education,” Sannicandro said. “We never really came back after the dot-com bust, and we’ve been struggling through this process ever since.”

At stake is a large population of workers who will need to be trained for new fields as jobs evaporate in the recession, in many cases for good. Massachusetts had an unemployment rate of 17.4% in June, the highest in the nation, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“You’re going to see a lot of people shifting industries, because many industries will not be going back to what they were before,” said Jeff Roberge, executive director of the MassHire North Central Workforce Board, who added retail and hospitality in particular have been decimated by the coronavirus. “The effects of this pandemic will go way beyond this year.”

Even before the present crisis hit, the region was dealing with an aging workforce, particularly in key sectors like manufacturing and health care, he said, which will make a coordinated workforce training effort even more important.

Unlike past recessions, however, a lot of that education, much of which traditionally has been hands-on, will have to be done remotely, which is a complication the state was largely unprepared for, according to Roberge.

At QCC, for instance, Pedraja said the college has struggled to find hospitals willing to host students in medical programs, which has forced the school to look to alternatives like urgent care facilities.

Two-year schools have also had to move many support services – critical to assisting their diverse and in many cases economically vulnerable students – online. A big emphasis at QCC, for example, has been on creating more virtual “touchpoints” where the college can connect with students and make sure they’re getting what they need.

“This has changed some of the parameters of how we’re operating,” Cox said. “I don’t think we’ll ever tilt back to the way things were ... it’s a moment where we’re really looking at how we do business.”

Officials’ optimistic point of view, however, is that the present moment is an opportunity for community colleges to capitalize on the quickly changing landscape. Campus leaders have long prided their system on its ability to pivot to the needs of the state and the local economy faster than four-year colleges are usually able to.

Virtual learning, for example, “gives us more flexibility to do things we haven’t been able to do before,” Pedraja said, in terms of academic programming.

There may also be a short-term boost in interest from traditional college-age students, who have been a shrinking population in Massachusetts in general and for community colleges especially. Several two-year college presidents specifically said they expect their programs to get more of a look from families who are balking at the prospect of paying to send their student to a more expensive four-year college that won’t be able to provide the same campus experience as in years past.

“The value of what parents are willing to pay for that experience is changing, and a lot of families are rethinking (their original college plans),” said Alison McCarty, interim assistant vice president of enrollment management at MassBay

Community College. “If my child’s first-choice school is not going to have freshmen on campus this year and is going to be remote, do I really want to spend our family’s savings on that right now?”

That level of uncertainty may be even higher for families that had been considering an out-of-state school this year.

“About 80% of students go to college within 30 miles of home, and I suspect that number will increase going forward based on the family’s concerns about their child having to go out of state, should there be another shutdown or quarantine,” McCarty said.

Most community college officials said it is too soon to know exactly how the fall enrollment picture will play out, however, not only because of the unpredictable effects of the pandemic but also because two-year schools have a rolling admission cycle anyway.

“Many prospective community college students apply later in summer, so it’s still early in the process, and forecasting during COVID is a challenge,” said Louisa Davis-Freeman, dean of admissions at Springfield Technical Community College.

Any optimism about a positive enrollment scenario is also tempered by the also unknown funding situation at the state level, which is making it hard for colleges to budget for the new academic year.

“We’re in the fiscal year we’re talking about now, which makes me a little nervous,” Vander Hooven said. “It certainly makes long-term planning very difficult.”

He and other community college officials are holding out hope state budget makers will once again remember their system’s particular value during rough economic times, however.

“We’re preparing the nurses, we’re preparing the first responders,” Vander Hooven said. “And I think that’s going to be recognized, that’s going to be valued.”