

Early college programs score A+ with students at Worcester State forum

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WORCESTER — City students who participated in early college programs at Worcester State University and Quinsigamond Community College, said it helped them explore opportunities, plan their career and prepare for the future.

They spoke on its merits at a roundtable discussion with Gov. Charlie Baker, Lt. Gov. Karyn Polito, state Secretary of Education James Peyser and others Friday at Worcester State.

The students said they appreciated the early introduction to college processes.

Fatimah Daffaie, who graduated from Doherty Memorial High School last week, found office hours with professors and mentors and familiarity with Blackboard, a learning management system often used in colleges, helpful.

Anna Luong, recent graduate of University Park Campus School, said it helped her be comfortable starting college.

“It taught me how to talk to and email professors, how to build a résumé,” said Luong, adding that as a first-generation college student, getting comfortable with college was very helpful.

She will be attending Harvard University this fall.

Quinsigamond Community College President Luis Pedraja, himself a first-generation college student, said the early college experience can be transformative for first generation college students.

“I encourage you to tell your friends about it. It’s not just about getting you credits, it’s about getting you jobs,” he said.

Baker said that 62% of the students who participate in early college programs are people of color and 50% of them come from low-income families. He attributed this to the fact that the program is free.

“It is an opportunity for students who don’t have anybody who went to college in their homes to kick the tires on college in a familiar environment,” he said. “It also means you start your college career ahead of other students who haven’t taken these courses.”

Baker said his government is looking to expand the program and mentioned five new programs starting this fall — Gardner Academy for Learning and Technology in partnership with Mount Wachusett Community College, High School of Commerce in Springfield in partnership with Springfield Technical Community College, North Quincy High School and Quincy High School in partnership with Quincy College, and Waltham High School in partnership with Framingham State University and MassBay Community College.

Calling the students trailblazers, Baker said he believes the program should be in every district and every high school in Massachusetts.

Rep. Jeff Roy, D-Franklin, was present at the discussion and stressed the need for expansion of the program.

“There's no reason why we can't do this in all 351 communities, and we're going to hope to work hard to get that legislation on your desk before the end of the session,” said Roy.

Importance of early glimpse into college

Poltio stressed the importance of early exploration.

“Having this path forward is very valuable because sometimes you go through college but still don’t know what to do,” she said. Baker piped in to joke he was still figuring it out.

“I took a class called STEM careers and public health and it was amazing for me because I wasn’t thinking about going into science,” said Daffaie, who took classes both at WSU and QCC.

She will attend WPI.

Julia Rivera, a junior at Worcester Technical High School, took a biotechnology class at QCC and said it made her a stronger candidate for an internship at the Dana Farber Cancer Center.

“What I was learning in the biotech class was correlating to my internship. It was really helpful because I had a foundation from this class,” Rivera said.

Students like Luong were encouraged to attend programs by their guidance counselors.

“Having counselors give that option to students is very important in your high school career because of the opportunity to take classes outside your comfort zone, which will advance your college career,” Luong said.

“Reimagining high school means all the staff knowing how we connect subjects to college and career readiness,” said Worcester Public Schools Superintendent Maureen Binienda.

Binienda said they want counselors to be the conduit for conversations with students about their future.

Ability to believe in success

Chantale Zuzi, a recent Burncoat High graduate, came to the U.S. in 2018, when she was still learning English, her fifth language.

“I was new to the country and my guidance counselor gave me the ability to believe I could do this. A computer class at QCC helped me get a scholarship for classes at MIT,” she said, adding that taking college classes taught her responsibility and time management.

Zuzi was able to graduate high school in three years and is attending Wellesley College this fall.

Polito told the students she was proud of each of them for making the great choice to attend early college.

“It couldn’t be a better day to spotlight this program than Juneteenth. To me, it represents that we need to be intentional around creating more opportunity for all people and all students,” Polito said.

Polito, who is the chair of the state STEM council, said the students were lined up on pathways that are crucial to the economy and the success of the commonwealth, urging the students to stay in Massachusetts.

“We need you, your talent and your commitment to these careers and jobs,” she said, adding she learned a lot hearing from the students.