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What shifts in enrollment are you observing?

Community colleges tend to follow the patterns of employment. When unemployment is low, so is community college enrollment. That is because the students we serve tend to be working adults or high-school students from low-income families. For those reasons, we saw a decline in enrollment during the spring and fall semesters as well as a decline in African American students and Latino males, which is a national phenomenon. In addition to unemployment being low, you have inflation and an increase in housing prices, which has made it more difficult for people to find places to live in the area.

With people focusing on saving money, they are prioritizing work over education, which I think personally is a mistake because education opens doors to better wages and long-term benefits. However, it is hard to convince someone who is struggling in the present. Recently, we made changes within some of our support programs and for the spring semester we are seeing a 8% increase in enrollment, so it is good to see that what we are doing is creating positive results.

Which programs are in high demand?

Healthcare programs are in high demand from both students and employees. I am looking for ways that we can get help to expand our nursing capacity to make sure there is not a long waiting list because of capacity issues. Beyond that, there is good demand for business and STEM programs.

What legislative areas would you like to see prioritized?

We need to look at the way we fund public education. Community colleges in particular are significantly underfunded as we get about 25% of the state appropriation divided among 15 colleges but we serve about 50% of undergraduate students and provide a lot of the workforce training. Obtaining more funding on our end is important so that we can continue creating that workforce and, as you may know, investing in education is an investment into economic development and growth.

There is a bipartisan push to increase the eligibility of courses for short-term Pell Grants that we are looking out for and, of course, debt forgiveness. ■

(...) struggles in recent years. This pattern, which began almost a decade ago, has been further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. As detailed in the Condition of Education in the Commonwealth 2023 study, there has been a significant reduction of approximately 23,000 students, accounting for a notable 10.4% decrease in enrollment at Massachusetts community colleges since 2015. The University of Massachusetts (UMass) and the state university system encountered a significant decline of over 50,000 students in 2021 alone. However, the report indicates that these figures have since recovered to levels observed prior to the pandemic.

Holyoke Community College has experienced a considerable decline in enrollment, ranging from 25% to 35% since fall 2019. This drop in enrollment reflects a growing trend where students increasingly opt for diverse careers and alternative pathways after completing high school. The college has proactively forged partnerships with various community agencies and local schools in western Massachusetts to address this issue. These collaborations aim to pinpoint and engage students who are opting out of traditional higher education routes.

To combat declining enrollment in Massachusetts colleges and universities, instituting flexible learning formats, tailoring programs to meet industry demands, fostering strong industry partnerships and expanding financial aid options are possible strategies. Adapting to online and part-time learning, aligning curricula with job market needs, collaborating with employers and increasing financial support can collectively enhance accessibility and relevance, attracting a broader student base while equipping them with practical career skills.

■ Looking ahead

Despite the challenges, education is and will remain pivotal in driving Boston's economic success. Initiatives like the Cultivate Fellowship reflect a commitment to addressing racial disparities in the science and technology sectors, thereby contributing to the city's economic growth and fostering greater equity. Furthermore, Gov. Maura Healey's plan to provide free community college education for individuals aged 25 and over should help to equip residents with skills relevant to burgeoning sectors such as advanced manufacturing and healthcare.

As Boston grapples with enrollment declines, teacher shortages and shifts in admissions policies, education remains a cornerstone for addressing challenges and propelling the city's economic prosperity. By addressing these challenges head-on and leveraging education to foster diversity, equity and innovation, Boston can ensure continued growth and success in the years ahead. ■