

Dr. Luis G. Pedraja: Quinsigamond CC and the value of community partnerships

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As we begin another year, I want to discuss the importance of community partnerships in higher education. At Quinsigamond Community College, community partnerships have become an integral part of our educational model.

Building strong local and regional relationships with community organizations and businesses creates a pipeline of skilled workers, who are making a positive impact on our region's economy.

By understanding the needs of our community through collaborations with our community service organizations, we are continuing to increase our reach to under-served populations.

This in turn, helps bring awareness to higher education for those in our communities who have historically been kept from realizing their full potential. Education raises people out of poverty, offering them a better life for themselves and their families.

As Worcester's college, we've worked tirelessly to develop formal partnerships with community organizations such as Catholic Charities of Worcester and the Worcester Housing Authority to host Community Learning Hubs in the areas where students live.

These Learning Hubs offer QCC students a quiet place to study, computer access, and printing capabilities. These Learning Hubs can make the difference between students succeeding or not succeeding in college.

We've partnered with the Latino Education Institute (LEI) and the Latin American Business Organization (LABO) and presented workshops that ranged from learning about STEM careers, short-term training opportunities, English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and other college readiness programs.

We've worked with Worcester Community Connections Coalition (WCCC) and participated in efforts involved with the organization's Worcester Parent/Caretaker leadership group. Other organizations we've worked closely with include ASCENTRIA, African Community Education (ACE), South East Asian Coalition (SEAC) and the Hector Reyes House. All have helped to build awareness of the value of higher education.

As part of QCC's community engagement outreach strategy, we have been hosting a series of information sessions with leaders from El Buen Samaritano, MassHire of Central MA, Open Sky, South East Asian Coalition, Youth Villages, Center for Health Impact, Seven Hills, Thrive, Centro Inc., Worcester Community Action Council, Worcester Housing Authority, Worcester Chamber of Commerce, Worcester Department of Transitional Assistance, Worcester Public Schools, Worcester Community Legal Aid, and African Community Education, among others.

At the end of 2021, we announced an exciting new community partnership with Central Massachusetts Agency on Aging (CMAA). Our Dental Hygiene Clinic has partnered with CMAA to offer free preventative dental care to seniors 55 and older in the Central Massachusetts region. In addition, Worcester's Yellow Cab has partnered with QCC and CMAA to provide transportation to and from dental appointments.

Not only are our seniors in the region benefitting from this program, but also our dental students, who are gaining valuable experience caring for this unique population. This reciprocal relationship is just one example of the value of community partnerships.

We are also engaging high school students in the region through our Early College partnerships that provide high school students with the opportunity to earn college credits while still in high school. This gives them the confidence and skills they need to be successful in college.

These programs enable students, particularly those from historically underserved populations who might not think that college is in their future, with access to higher education and a clear pathway to college. The courses students take in an Early College program transfer to most colleges and universities, saving them time and money once they enter college.

We have partnered with well over 20 high schools across the Central Massachusetts region offering college courses and Early College Programs, as a way for high school students to obtain a head start on college.

Since 2018, QCC, Worcester Public Schools (all seven Worcester high schools), and Worcester State University, formed an Early College partnership called, Early College Worcester. It is the only of its kind in the Commonwealth and is rapidly becoming a model for others. Early College programs create access to higher education for all students and empowers their dreams of a college education!

Another area in which QCC has fortified its partnerships is in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). We have partnered with Massachusetts Biomedical Initiatives (MBI) and AbbVie, to deliver an innovative entry-level Biomanufacturing On-Ramp Workshop designed to encourage more people to enter the biomanufacturing industry pipeline.

A symbiotic relationship between QCC, AbbVie, MBI and the Massachusetts Office of Business Development (MOBD) offers opportunities for students to learn biomanufacturing content and industry terminology, as well as basic soft skills training.

A group of non-native English speakers took part in a 10-week biomanufacturing pilot program, which helps support those in our community who often have the least amount of opportunities. This is in alignment with our diversity, equity and inclusion initiative and helps strengthen equality in higher education and in the workforce. Additionally, the program aids in filling a critical employment need within the Biomanufacturing industry in Massachusetts.

Other QCC partnerships include a multitude of transfer agreements with public and private colleges and universities in Massachusetts and in the Northeast region. These agreements enable our community college students to seamlessly transfer as juniors into private and public four-year institutions, as long as all program requirements are met.

As we begin the New Year our community partners will continue to play a vital role in our students' success. By expanding access to higher education, we will better our community as a whole, which is a shared goal we can all get behind. Working together, we are building a better and brighter future!

Dr. Luis G. Pedraja is president of Quinsigamond Community College.