

Editorial: Free tuition program needs to be permanent, to help boost college enrollment

In fiscal 2014, the five Central Mass. state universities and community colleges had a combined full-time equivalent enrollment of 25,011. By fiscal 2023, [that number fell](#) 26% to 18,467.

Few businesses can withstand the loss of a quarter of their customer bases, and the trend experienced by the local colleges mirrors a national drop in enrollment. That drop has been caused by a variety of factors, including a demographic dip in the number of high school graduates as well as the continuing rise in the cost of higher education. Like the private colleges in the region, the five public schools – Worcester State University, Framingham State University, Fitchburg State University, Mount Wachusett Community College in Gardner, and Quinsigamond Community College in Worcester – have gotten creative in trying to attract non-traditional students, including looking internationally and encouraging people in the workforce to return for additional education.

Gov. Maura Healey gave the public colleges an assist when her administration expanded the MassGRANT Plus program by \$62 million this year, covering the tuition costs for an estimated 25,000 students statewide. Local college administrators already are praising the effort, saying the funding will go a long way to help students who face an uphill financial battle that can easily throw them off track in pursuit of a degree. Worcester State, for example, says about 1,000 will benefit from the expansion this year. Administrators are now calling on the Healey Administration to make the expansion permanent, so students can earn their degrees over multiple years.

Importantly, the funding simply gets more students into public colleges. In the search for nontraditional students to bolster falling enrollment, these schools can now pull from a different demographic: people who couldn't pay for college, or were simply scared off by the sticker price. One year of expanded MassGRANT Plus funding isn't going to cut it, though, for Central Mass. public colleges to build sustainable pipelines into these communities. The higher level of funding needs to be sustained for multiple years, and eventually grow.

In fiscal 2023, the entire state expenditure for public universities and community colleges totaled \$938 million. An additional \$62 million is significant, but in the scale of the state's \$56-billion dollar budget, it's a rather small investment. The additional funding is allocated from the new millionaires' tax implemented in 2023, so the increase wasn't cut from another program. Not only does this funding open colleges up to a broader base of residents, who could earn more money and contribute more in taxes, but the program simultaneously strengthens our state universities and community colleges and their long-term sustainability.

Beyond the high value they already provide in educating our workforce and preparing students for tomorrow's careers, public colleges are important employers and valuable members of the community. With chronic workforce shortages, we need all the qualified students we can get

graduating locally, and those individuals deserve a bright future in the career of their choice. Long-term funding for MassGRANT will go a long way to addressing those issues.