

Guest column: Congratulations - and thanks - to community college graduates

Luis G. Pedraja

Worcester Telegram & Gazette

We are again entering the month when colleges and universities across the country hold their commencement ceremonies. This is a time filled with jubilation and excitement for the future, yet it is also a time of uncertainty and, for some, even a bit of trepidation as they embark on a journey into an unknown future.

For the past seven years I've had the honor and privilege of conferring degrees and certificates on thousands of graduates at Quinsigamond Community College. For many, the accessibility and affordability of community college was the only way they could even consider a higher education. They might not have wanted to attend a community college, but this was their best or sometimes only option.

However, what many students who began at QCC didn't realize was that this was the start of an incredible journey that would change the trajectory of their lives. They had an education unlike any other — an education that was tailored to their needs, aspirations and goals. They learned from top educators and staff who were not only their instructors but were also their biggest cheerleaders and supporters. Their success was the driving force for everyone at QCC and in the process of finding themselves, they found their community.

It brings me such pleasure to witness the successes of each graduating class. These commencement ceremonies take me back to when I was graduating college and my parents watched with pride knowing I was the first in my family to attain a college education.

I have seen the tears of joy on the faces of our graduates and their family members, as they cross the stage prepared to face an uncertain future with confidence and determination.

Each year I watch with a sense of appreciation and humility as hundreds of graduates cross the stage and I hand them a degree or certificate, knowing the obstacles they have overcome. From the single mom who had to juggle child care, work and schoolwork to the veteran who conquered his fears and came back to college to pursue a degree, QCC has been life-changing. I know that whatever is in our students' way, they have been given the tools and skillsets to manage all obstacles with grace, perseverance and a newfound sense of confidence.

These graduates are our future, and they are prepared for it!

Community college graduations hold an even bigger significance for our communities than those at four-year colleges and universities, as these new grads can help address the financial inequities that are often fraught in many of our minority communities. These graduates will have opportunities to enter new careers or further their education. This will help to bolster our local economy and help our region thrive.

Each year at commencement our graduates hear from a keynote speaker who offers words of wisdom designed to inspire and uplift. Often these speakers share common goals with the graduates and offer them a look into the future and the possibilities it holds for them.

This year, Sen. Robyn Kennedy, born and raised in Worcester, will serve as our keynote speaker. Sen. Kennedy sees firsthand the long-standing issues that impact the bulk of our students and works tirelessly to address them. She most recently served as chief operating officer at the YWCA Central Massachusetts and previously served as the deputy chief of staff to former Lt. Gov. Tim Murray and the deputy assistant secretary for children, youth and families at the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services.

Today, she is the state senator for the First Worcester District and focuses on long-standing needs within our communities such as child care, elder care, investing back in our workforce, improving regional public transportation and reducing the gap in racial and health inequities. Her work directly influences our students and their families. It is an honor to have her as this year's commencement speaker.

In closing, commencement from a community college is a major milestone. It's the culmination of students' hard work, dedication and determination so they and their families can have a better life. It is a celebration unlike any other and one that each year leaves me in awe of what our students have accomplished. Each graduate is positively changing our communities.

This month I ask each of you to make a point in congratulating a community-college graduate. Let them know the incredible accomplishments they have achieved and encourage them to make the world a better place, as only they can.

Luis G. Pedraja is president of Quinsigamond Community College.