

Many different stories to tell

Diana McGee

On Saturday the imposing white tent that dominates the Fall River campus will be filled with parents, children, and invited guests of the June 2007 graduates at Bristol Community College. Caps and gowns will be donned. Spirited students will decorate mortar boards with personal messages, both serious and silly. Gowned faculty and administrators, counselors and librarians, all in festive alma mater colors, will line the sidewalk to applaud the students they have come to honor. The familiar strains of Edward Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance" will announce the ceremonial march is about to begin. This grand tradition gives poignancy and dignity to the student success that this graduation commemorates.

The ceremony itself I have rarely missed. It is a beautiful reminder of the hope and promise that this community college provides for every student who walks through its open doors. The students, some with flowers in hand, laugh and banter as they take their final Bristol steps amidst cameras and the cheers of faculty, family, and friends. I smile and congratulate my former students, knowing many will graduate with honors and receive scholarships to bring them closer to the personal, career, and professional goals that have motivated them.

The day's pomp and circumstance evoke both gladness and a cathartic sadness and sense of relief. The celebration is a much deserved tribute to the juggling acts that these students have performed to earn their certificates and degrees. Working 30 hours a week is the norm for these graduates. Many have struggled to pay for the tuition, student fees, and books that this educational journey has required. Some are parents. Many are the first in their families to go to college and have had no mentors other than the ones their campus experiences provided. Some have persisted solely driven by their own dreams and by the confidence infused in them with each successful semester.

I am thankful to experience this final triumph with them. Each of these students has a unique tale to tell. Such narrations I have often been privy to in my 20 plus years of teaching – so many marvelous stories filled with the challenges and unpredictability that make good drama. This grand conclusion is fitting pageantry. I love it all, but I know there are other successes that this ceremony does not acknowledge.

Students take courses at our colleges for a variety of reasons, not always with the intent to graduate. Some have come to Bristol Community College to satisfy an employer requirement or study for a year before transferring to a four-year school. Others want associate degrees in allied health fields, but staying at BCC would require them to linger well beyond the completion of their general education coursework. It is in their best interest to transfer elsewhere. Some entering students already have degrees, but attend college classes to develop skills or pursue coursework in other areas to broaden their knowledge and market themselves better for the complex world that awaits them. All are welcome. Their tales, too, reveal success. These students leave our classrooms better able to contribute to the workplace and their communities.

Recent statements by business leaders and the press have focused on graduation rates as the only benchmark for success at our community colleges. Such narrow focus has resulted in undeserved criticisms about our institutions and our students. The critics ignore the complex nature of our mission and its open door admission policy. Some do not acknowledge the important

demographics that shape student success at our colleges. Surprisingly to some, our community college mission is not singularly focused on graduation. Nor does our admission policy state, as some imply it should, that all who enter should complete a degree within three years.

In response to such concerns, the Massachusetts Community College Council recently held a Graduation Retention Rates Summit to gather ideas for a union position paper that would clarify our mission; our students' various goals, challenges, and successes; and their varying degrees of college readiness upon admission. This paper will also include a variety of ways our colleges can improve the retention and success of students and will identify specific recommendations to support such improvement.

Key among such recommendations will be the need for greatly increased funding, as called for in proposed state legislation by the Joint Committee on Higher Education. Accordingly, \$400 million dollars is needed over the next seven years for our public colleges and universities to serve students and the Commonwealth effectively. Such funding could well promote student persistence if, in turn, it greatly reduces student costs to attend college and is used to support proven retention strategies. Advising systems statewide need to be revamped, consistently staffed by experienced faculty and counselors, and integrated with student and academic policies campus-wide.

Libraries, too, need consistent support. BCC has had recent years with no state money appropriated for library resources. To strengthen retention on every campus, more full-time positions need to be funded. More than 50% of our courses are taught by adjuncts, many who lack adequate pension and health insurance safety nets. Capital funding is necessary on all our college campuses as well if we are to ensure that classroom space and campus facilities are safe, updated, and appropriate for the populations and the programs which these institutions are expected to support.

Beyond the resources needed to support student success, college presidents should collaborate with faculty and professional staff on every campus to develop approaches to access and retention that are effective and sustainable, especially given the current under-funding crisis our colleges now face.

As the strains of "Pomp and Circumstance" close these graduation ceremonies once again, I will be reminded of an academic year so filled with triumph. But I will also be mindful that those who evaluate community college success and fund our campuses must move beyond this day alone to judge our colleges and our students. The public and our legislators must know the many other student success stories – as well as the tales of those who stopped out. It is not appropriate to focus only on those who march on graduation day. The public, the policy-makers, and those who hold the purse strings must also know who marched elsewhere and why.

The (Fall River) Herald News published this article as a Guest Opinion on June 2, 2007, the morning of Bristol Community College's 2007 commencement. The paper included the following statement at the end of this article:

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