

# Community colleges meet variety of needs

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**T**he recent headlines decrying the graduation rates of Massachusetts community colleges do a disservice to the more than 117,000 students who depend on our institutions as affordable, accessible entry points to higher education.

All 15 of Massachusetts' community colleges aspire to do the best by our students – and that includes higher graduation rates – but our success should not be judged using antiquated criteria.

The graduation rates cited in *The Republican* and other newspapers describe the experience of first-time, full-time students pursuing a degree or certificate – a profile that characterized four-year college enrollments in the 1950s and 1960s.

We are in the 21st century, serving 21st century students. We need to apply 21st century standards to our measure of student success.

Community colleges attract a wide range of students who have diverse life circumstances and educational goals. Less than half the students entering Holyoke Community College



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## Community college students

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and Springfield Technical Community College do so with a particular degree or certificate in mind. Following a lock-step path toward graduation is not realistic – or appropriate – for many of them.

More than half of the students who enroll through our open admission policy need to build their skills before taking on college-level work. We welcome these students and aggressively champion their educational goals.

But these students do not show up in the statistics as “graduates” because they take longer than three years to complete their studies. As educators, we know that their success cannot be measured in such narrow terms.

Many students come through our doors to get their first taste of higher education by taking one or two college-level classes. More than 60 per-

cent of our students begin a journey of part-time education that can take them four, five or more years to complete. Some transfer to four-year institutions well before their graduation date.

But all of these students are labeled “non-completers” by the statistical model that is now making headlines. We don’t buy it.

At HCC, 25 percent of the first-time, full-time students who began their studies in 2001 graduated with their intended degree or certificate in 2004. That statistic doesn’t tell the whole story, though. Another 19 percent of that same group transferred to a four-year institution and nine percent remained enrolled in HCC courses. By fall 2005, the graduation rate for that same group went up to 30 percent and six percent were enrolled in HCC courses.

## VIEWPOINT

At STCC, this success story repeats itself: by fall 2005, 29 percent of the full-time degree-seeking students who began their studies in 2001 had graduated, 16 percent had transferred to a four-year institution, and 7 percent were still enrolled in STCC classes.

The big picture painted by these statistics should soothe the nerves of those calling for higher graduation rates: more than 50 percent of the students remained committed to their educational goals. As educators who work with these students every day, we never doubted it.

The statistics, accurately interpreted, tell us something else, as well. Community college students pursue their education at a pace dictated by life circumstances.

Almost 90 percent of our students work, half of them more than 20 hours a week. Some of our students, enrolled in career programs, are recruited by industry to fill full-time jobs before they graduate.

Others will temporarily opt out of their college studies to earn more money or to meet family obligations. These students are still pursuing their educational goals, but they will easily slide through the cracks of a narrow statistical analysis.

In today's educational marketplace, working students are free to construct their own educational experience, often enrolling in multiple institutions

before achieving their educational goals.

Technically, these students are considered "non-completers" at any of the institutions in which they enroll. But is that really a fair assessment? Many will go on to finish their degrees or certificates or will attain the skills they needed to compete in the workplace.

Their only failure, it seems, is that they didn't achieve their goals the way previous generations did.

As entry points to higher education, community colleges afford hope and opportunity to students from all walks of life. The public deserves an accurate assessment of our work and we benefit from the scrutiny. But the narrow focus on graduation rates does not accomplish this goal.

The Massachusetts community colleges have developed a more accurate definition of success - one that embraces all of the complexities faced by today's community college student. We suggest that those who are truly interested in student achievement consult this definition. Then, let's work together to make it happen.

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