

COMMENTARY

LI's community colleges needed now more than ever



Long Island's community colleges do not only provide low-cost educational opportunities to a diverse student population but are also important engines for economic growth.

Nassau and Suffolk Community Colleges offer degree programs for students looking to go on to four-year institutions, and training programs for those wishing to enter the work force with a valuable skill. However, the students who attend community colleges were the hardest hit by the pandemic, which in turn has created new challenges for these institutions.

The spectrum of students who attend community colleges include veterans, older individuals looking for new skills, recent arrivals to this country, as well as traditional students looking for a cost-effective way to start their college career. Over 15% of the students at Suffolk are veterans, and almost half come from minority households. Many of the students work full or part time and a large number are parents. They are often from financially struggling backgrounds. However, they all have one thing in common: they are trying to better themselves so they can contribute more to our community.

As our nation recovers from the economic impact of the pandemic, one thing is clear, those hurt the most were individuals on the lower end of the economic spectrum. As a result, community colleges that serve these individuals have also been disproportionately harmed at a time when they are needed the most.

Nationally, enrollment at community colleges has decreased by about 20 percent. For the fall of 2020, the enrollment at Suffolk decreased by 10.1 percent and Nassau by 17.9 percent. The decline in enrollment effects the colleges in a myriad of ways, but especially the financial difficulties caused by the loss of tuition and the decrease in state aid based on enrollment. While the colleges can and have mitigated against these financial losses by reducing staff and being more efficient in their operations, many of the colleges' costs are fixed, such as maintenance of buildings and contractual labor obligations.

The decline in enrollment has many causes. Since the



community colleges serve underprivileged or nontraditional students hurt the most by the economic upheaval, many of the community colleges' pool of students gave up their studies to attend to family and financial needs. Many students were forced to work more hours to help struggling families or take on additional responsibilities for childcare because of the closing of schools.

In addition, the reliance on remote education has impacted the students' ability to continue with their classes. Suffolk has been innovative in helping its students take advantage of remote learning, but it is often a struggle for some students, nonetheless.

These obstacles caused many students to pause their efforts to obtain a degree or certificate. The fear is the pause will become permanent, a result which will have terrible consequences for the students, the colleges, as well as the local economy. The colleges must make special efforts to help these students get back on track.

The administrators, instructors and the other employees at the community colleges are some of the most dedicated and caring individuals you could ever meet. All they ask is for our governmental and business leaders understand the importance of the community colleges to all of Long Island and do what they can to help.

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