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Community colleges vital AS I SEE IT

By Harriette L. Chandler and Gail E. Carberry

Unlike many other states, Massachusetts' most strategic advances in an economy that is growing more complex and more global are our powerful intellectual resources. These highly enviable assets are the building blocks of an economic future that must address the need for the best trained and most educated work force in the history of this nation. The challenge for all of us in the years ahead is to find new business development and job creation that can create the thousands of new jobs needed to respond to the devastating effects of today's economic downturns which are historic in magnitude. The road back to economic confidence and growth must include public and private partnerships that will create new products and services for an ever changing global market.

Turning around the economic recession in Massachusetts will require the placement of residents into well-paying jobs. A recently completed report issued by the Massachusetts Skills 2 Compete Campaign states that, by 2020, two-thirds of all Massachusetts jobs will require at least some post-high school education, but less than a 4-year degree.

Currently, these jobs — largely in health, science and technical fields — make up the largest segment of the U.S. work force and 44 percent of the Massachusetts work force — some 1.4 million workers.

Massachusetts community colleges are witnessing an explosion of enrollment of students looking to enter high growth employment fields. Additionally, more families are using community colleges as affordable launching pads for students who are transferring in record numbers to baccalaureate degree colleges. At Quinsigamond Community College, enrollment has increased by almost 50 percent — close to 3,000 more students attend QCC in 2010 than in 2006. QCC's 2010 graduating class of more than 1,000 was the largest in the college's history; 25 percent larger than the class of 2009.

QCC must be able to expand to accommodate almost universal access to higher education while providing world-class work force development to this burgeoning demand, in state-of-the-art facilities, with talented, passionate and properly compensated employees; while not restricting access due to the cost of tuition and fees. Our shared future requires us to find entrepreneurial responses that increase the skills of a work force that will support economic growth — for individuals, families, businesses and our commonwealth.

Elected leadership, local business leadership and QCC's leadership have been collaboratively responding to these challenges for the past four years: ensuring bond funding for a new science and technology facility (in design phase) and additional future classroom space in Worcester; investing in our facilities on the main campus, opening a Southbridge satellite site, developing new programs to better respond to the needs of today and expanding access to student aid.

In addition, we were successful in having an amendment to the FY 2011 state budget adopted to authorize an independent study on the growth of community colleges, which will further enable the commonwealth to plan to address educational delivery demands.

When the study is completed, it will better inform legislative and executive leaders to challenges and opportunities inherent in a state strategy to educate the best trained work force in the world.

Central Massachusetts has achieved success in the development of cutting-edge life sciences and health care enterprises. Its inventory of strengths has the potential to do even greater business development and job creation because of the explosive possibilities of the green economy.

QCC and the colleges of the Massachusetts community college system will continue to be an indispensable piece of an exciting and innovative future for the Massachusetts economy.

Working together, we must continue to ensure that long-term solutions to these challenges are part of the collaborative approach advanced by

the state legislature and the college administration.

State Sen. Harriette L. Chandler represents the First Worcester District, and Gail E. Carberry is president of Quinsigamond Community College.

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