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Community college holds key to future

by The Republican

Thursday August 20, 2009, 6:00 AM

As Massachusetts struggles with a busted economy, a 9.1 unemployment rate and an uncertain future, it is becoming increasingly clear that the state must have vibrant community colleges to help rebuild our economy.

So we were not happy to read this week that Springfield Technical Community College was forced to lay off 10 employees in the face of shrinking state funding.

Although we understand why the cuts were made, the layoffs still come at an inopportune time. Enrollment at STCC has risen to 6,300 students, many of them refugees from an economy that has battered their jobs and deprived them of nearly all their hope.

Community colleges help rebuild hope by offering students training in the job skills that already are - or will be - in demand when the economy finally turns around. They also help upgrade workers skills - all at a low cost.

The unemployed - especially older workers - know that and they are filling the classrooms at STCC. Holyoke and Greenfield community colleges have also seen enrollment jumps. An official at HCC said recently that many of the students enrolling there are in their 40s, 50s and 60s.

The reach of the community college extends beyond the workplace. High-tech jobs pay well, and those wages help grow the economy.

In a speech in 2004, former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan described how important the growing community colleges have been to the national economy. "The increase in these enrollments over the past 30 years attests to the success of these institutions in imparting both general and practical job-related training," he said.

We see the results of that training every day. When you go to the hospital for an X-ray or MRI, chances are the technicians received their training at a community college. And it's probably a community college-trained nurse who is caring for you. The region's high-tech machine shops also rely on community college grads to operate increasingly sophisticated machinery. The list is nearly endless.

We know that state officials daily are dealing with an unlimited demand for limited funds, but we should not allow these colleges to fall off the Beacon Hill radar screen. Community colleges work, and they put people to work.

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"We see the results of that training every day. When you go to the hospital for an X-ray or MRI, chances are the technicians received their training at a community college. And it's probably a community college-trained nurse who is caring for you. The region's high-tech machine shops also rely on community college grads to operate increasingly sophisticated machinery. The list is nearly endless."

The Founders of New Challenge Academy could not agree more.

We have stated before that if Springfield is to have any chance of turning itself

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around it will require changes in how we look at what is taught and how it is taught in our one size fits all school system.

With the need for constant upgrading of skills and life long learning Community Colleges will play a critical role in the new learning economy.

This is why on convocation day this year we encourage Mr Ingram to announce the departure from scripted lessons in Springfield Public Schools giving his administrators and teachers the freedom to create learning environments that answer the very important question.

What would we like to see our kids to be able to do?

The answer to this question helps put our kids on the path to life long learning.

You get a very different answer than when we continue to ask what would we like our kids to know (memorize)?

People learn best when they are doing things rather than just memorizing the vocabulary. Even your vocabulary improves if you use the words.

How do you learn how to use an X-ray machine or MRI (working on one: doing)? Don't nurses also have to do an internship (doing)? Isn't the best way to learn how to run a high-tech machine by running it? Most important aren't all these people being taught by mentors as they are (doing) these different things in environments that are similar to where these occupations really take place?

Creating safe learning environments where students can have these types of learning experiences can make learning fun for kids and adults.

It would be a brave move on Mr. Ingrams part. We believe it would be a shot heard all around Western Ma., Springfield means business about educational change.

New Challenge Academy Founders believe Real Change Requires Real Change.

We are of the belief it can be done.

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