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Higher effort on higher learning

By Thomas M. Menino and Gary Gottlieb | February 26, 2007

LAST WEEK, the State Board of Higher Education announced its goal of reaching the national community college average graduation rate within seven years.

It's astounding that in Massachusetts, which prides itself on educational excellence, that some aspire merely to be average. This strategy will leave behind too many Bay State residents.

Across the state, the graduation rates of community colleges are uneven. The statewide average is 19 percent, compared with 29 percent for the nation. As a state and as a city, we need to aspire for more. We should aim to raise our graduation rates from 42 d in the nation to the top 10.

Ironically, in Boston we have a higher rate of access to two- and four-year colleges -- 71 percent for the class of 2004 -- than the nation. But for many of our students, college retention and graduation are another matter altogether, with particularly low rates of graduation from Boston's community colleges -- an average of only 10 percent. This is unacceptable.

We have seen case after case of students who have been failed by the lack of attention to appropriate academic and student support services. In one illustrative case, a recent Boston graduate who needed developmental coursework was admitted to a self-directed program at a community college, with no instructor or adviser. He earned incomplete and failing grades, resulting in the loss of his federal financial aid. His college career nearly over before it began, he has debts and no college credits.

Indifference to low graduation rates at our city's community colleges will hold back our economy. So it will take strong leadership from the governor, the Board of Higher Education, individual colleges, public high schools, city government, and private industry to transform our educational institutions and pathways.

We acknowledge more work must be done to improve Boston's high schools and turn around the dropout rate. We are doing just that.

High schools are being transformed into smaller schools with business and higher-education partners. We are developing a "consumer report" for higher education so that Boston Public Schools students can make better decisions about college selection. The system recently created the Office of College and Career Connections to expand its college pathway programs. We accept the responsibility for developing every young person to his or her highest potential; the goal is graduation and a plan for the future.

In Boston, the business and nonprofit communities have already launched model programs to do this.

For example, the Private Industry Council is piloting a college retention and talent pathway project for recent high school graduates interested in pursuing degrees in healthcare. In its second year, the project has expanded from 24 to 40 students, and with a college retention rate for that first cohort of 92 percent. This project is being done in partnership with the Brigham and Women's Hospital and other medical institutions.

It is our hope the Commonwealth will not only support these efforts but also consider:

Reorganizing one of the Boston community colleges as a healthcare campus, in light of our largest industry. This has been a successful strategy in other US cities, enabling them to better fill critical technical positions at good wages.

Integrating remedial coursework with credit-earning occupational studies so students of all ages can learn in context and move forward more quickly toward a degree.

Centralizing the governance of the community college system to even out disparities in funding, resources, and strategic

planning, so that the state can respond better to business needs.

In Boston and Massachusetts, we have an economy rich with well-paying, interesting jobs, the majority requiring a two- or four-year degree. While we are fortunate to have these jobs, many go unfilled for lack of qualified applicants.

Meanwhile, the cost to those who don't get the education they need is significant: An associate's degree earns a worker an additional \$300,000 more over a lifetime than a high school graduate earns, while someone with a bachelor's degree earns \$1 million more.

The meaning is clear: Low graduation rates at community colleges are not only bad news for business and the economy; they mean lost opportunities and lost futures for many of our residents.

Thomas M. Menino is mayor of Boston. Dr. Gary Gottlieb is president of Brigham and Women's Hospital and chairman of the Boston Private Industry Council. ■

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