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Community colleges put to the test

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MAYOR MENINO is once again attacking Massachusetts community colleges without acknowledging (or perhaps understanding) all of the facts ("[Higher effort on higher learning](#)," Op-ed, Feb. 26).

The mayor does not seem to realize that inadequate funding might have something to do with our ability to deliver the "appropriate academic and student support services" he and co-writer Gary Gottlieb, chairman of the Boston Private Industry Council, call for in their op-ed.

Massachusetts ranks among the lowest in the nation in state support for public higher education, and as a result, we have student charges that are among the highest in the nation.

Cost of living and cost of higher education already present significant barriers for community college students, and we cannot in good conscience seek the needed funding by adding to students' burden.

Moreover, we serve students with the greatest need for remediation and support services, but are funded less per student than any other sector of higher education. What would the mayor have us do?

Attacking us in the public sphere will not solve the problem. Perhaps advocating for adequate funding would.

KATHLEEN SCHATZBERG
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The writer is president of Cape Cod Community College.

IT REALLY isn't very helpful to say that we must raise community college graduation rates; as a generalization, this has little relevance or value, except to exacerbate public disdain for the very important function that community colleges play in our educational system.

What does help is closer looks at what community colleges can and do accomplish and, to its credit, "Higher effort on higher learning" finally gets around to doing this, at least somewhat.

Community colleges, especially in Massachusetts where they end up as the stepchild of a large higher education sector, end up being expected to be all things to all people.

They are supposed to make up for inadequate preparation for college-level work, respond to community labor force needs, address the wide and complex needs of a range of student characteristics, graduate students with employment training (which is often quite different from education), and prepare students to move on to four-year degrees.

They are expected to do all this, and then when they try, they get pilloried for having low graduation rates. It would be far more helpful if those who rush to criticize would instead help the taxpaying public understand who goes to community colleges, why they go, and what they get when they do manage to go. Then we can think a little more constructively about "higher effort on higher learning."

JANE SJOGREN Charlestown

MAYOR MENINO and Dr. Gottlieb are correct to demand higher goals for area community colleges.

Every day, education and workforce development staff face the challenge of helping high school dropouts,

teen mothers, and immigrants obtain their GED or high school diploma. Many of these students know they must go on to post-secondary education or training in order to compete for jobs that pay self-sufficiency wages.

Yet when they get into our community colleges, they drop out or flunk out at alarming rates .

If we are serious about building the skilled workforce this state needs, and about helping low-income families support themselves, then we must do much better at the community college level, providing education, training, case management, career coaching, and mentoring.

Community colleges should provide a route out of poverty and toward economic independence . Academic, business, and community leaders need to come together to elicit greater effectiveness from these institutions. And we need to muster the political will to support reforms in the system that may include more resources for community college and financial aid for students.

EDWARD TIRRELL
Boston

The writer is the director of education and workforce development for the Crittenton Women's Union.

ONE GROUP the mayor might include in his efforts to improve graduation rates at community colleges is the growing number of retired counselors, social workers, psychiatrists, and guidance counselors. An organized effort to harness the wisdom and experience of these groups might help the students and allow Massachusetts to benefit from their skills.

RUTH NEMZOFF
Waltham

The writer is a resident scholar with the Brandeis Women's Studies Research Center.

NO GROUP is more disheartened by the low graduation rate of community college students in the Commonwealth than community college faculty. In their criticism, Menino and Gottlieb left out one of the major factors contributing to this dismal picture. Studies, such as that of Daniel Jacoby in the November/December 2006 Journal of Higher Education, show a clear correlation between the rise in the use of adjunct faculty and the decline of graduation rates.

Part-timers are not paid to hold office hours, do advising, or serve on committees, so as the number of full-time professors decreases, their workload increases, and they have less time to help individual students. Students who need help from a part-time faculty member are usually out of luck.

The American Association of University Professors recommends that colleges have no more than 25 percent adjunct faculty. In my department, there are nine full-timers and 36 part-timers. If the Commonwealth is committed to improving community college graduation rates, it must also be committed to funding more full-time faculty positions.

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The writer is adjunct professor of English as a second language at Cape Cod Community College. ■