

Testimony from Pam Eddinger, President, Bunker Hill Community College, Boston, MA
Subcommittee on Select Revenue Measures, House Ways and Means
Hearing on How Middle Class Families are Faring in Today's Economy
Wednesday, February 13, 2019 – 10:00 AM

Chairman Thompson and Esteemed Members of the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Select Revenue Measures, thank you for the opportunity to brief you on Bunker Hill Community College, the mission and challenges of our nation's community colleges, and the key role we play in educating and advancing the middle class.

My name is Pam Eddinger, I am the college's president. Bunker Hill is the largest of the 15 community colleges in Massachusetts, and one of over 1,100 community colleges across the country. Bunker Hill is a mid-size institution in Metro Boston. But my sister colleges across the nation vary substantially in size, demographics, and geography. We are urban, we are rural and we are suburban -- we range from under 1,000 students to over 50,000.

Together, we educate over 13 million students. One out of every two undergrads around our nation. In fact, both middle- and lower-income students are more likely to attend community colleges than any other type of higher education institution—private four-year, public four-year, or for-profit. You might know us best as educators of our first responders in emergency health, fire and public safety. But increasingly, we are also the source for the future workforce, for what we call “new-collar jobs.” Jobs that are middle-skills, requiring some post-secondary training, and pay well. Jobs in IT, STEM, Big Data, Health Care, Manufacturing, and the Creative Economy driven by the expansion of gaming and artificial intelligence.

We are poised to shore up the work-infrastructure of the crumbling middle class, and to lift those in poverty through higher education. You hear often that “not everyone needs to go to college.” That's true. The concept of college as a 4-year experience is not for everyone, but some training beyond high school is not only important, but *imperative* to working in this new-collar economy. Men's wages rise with education. Between 1980 and 2015, the earnings of men with a B.A. rose 29%, while the earnings of men with only a high school education *fell* 7%. Men who never finished high school saw their earnings decline 24% during those 35 years. College used to be a sure ticket into the middle class, now it's a prerequisite.

In Massachusetts alone, we must fill some 65,000 middle-skills jobs by the end of the decade and the beginning of the next. These new-collar jobs are critical to economic growth and innovation. They are the new paths to the middle class.

Our hopes of a vibrant workforce, of filling these new-collar jobs, lies in educating and training our adult learners. Yet this realization is not widely acknowledged the way it should be, and we see even fewer evidence of it in our policies and our operations.

Even already, our students are not who you think they are anymore. They are not “kids,” 17 or 18, going to college full-time and supported by mom and dad. Already, the demographics at my own college tells the story:

- I have 18,000 students a year
- Only 1/3 are “traditional age” students
- The average age is 26, the median age is 24
- They are likely the first in their family to go to college, many are immigrants, living in gateway cities
- 3 out of 4 work, and many full-time
- 3 out of 5 are parents, and likely taking care of parents of their own
- 77% (more than $\frac{3}{4}$) are in the lowest 2 quintiles of income
- 8,000 are on financial aid, and 1,000 are on SNAP benefits

This is a pretty representative profile of the low and middle income, first-time to college, working students across all geography.

Even though adult students know that college is their path to the middle class, education is not at the center of their lives. Their family, their children, their jobs (and there is usually more than one), are priority. Schooling happens when they can afford it, often a class or two at a time. Our students are one car battery, one pediatric visit, one small disaster away from dropping out. Yet, they are courageous enough to enroll and persist. Our students take an average of 4 to 5 years to complete their associate degree. And slightly shorter for certificate training.

If we know that the adult learners have good work ethic, are serious about getting ahead, and will be the key to the labor force, what’s holding up progress? What is needed? I suggest to you two things:

One: We give up the notion that students be college-ready, and insist that colleges be student-ready. We must meet students where they are – physically and metaphorically. Give up the mental model of the 4-year college model, and align financial and college policies with the reality of a working adult student.

Two: We count basic needs of food, housing, transportation and childcare as *essential* education costs, and fund them. It’s true that Pell grant pays for tuition and fees, but the average unmet need come close to \$4,500 per student on my campus. There is no mom and dad to call. It is not a coincidence that all 15 community colleges in Massachusetts have food pantries and emergency aid offices. Make applying for aid simpler, by simplifying the federal application for aid, and covering the full essential costs for our adult students.

One last story of persistence: A student in his late 20s. Let’s call him Steve. Steve was homeless, spending his nights at Terminal C of Logan Airport because he had a job there, and

there was heat, water, bathrooms, and WIFI to do his homework. The shelters won't have him because he was going to school full time, and he would not relent. Many of us would have given up. Fast forward 3 years. He graduated from us and successfully transferred. But with a *full ride* at Tufts University. But there are many Steves in my world. And I know if you go to any other community college across our country, it won't take you long to find out very similar stories of Steves and people just like Steve that face *real challenges*, but nevertheless are committed to an education because of what it'll mean for them and their family.

Tuition, fees, basic needs – those are the keys to the future workforce, and the restoration of our middle class.

Thank you.