

Letter to the Editor

May 5, 2021

Higher education shines in time of need; encourages community COVID-19 vaccinations

One year ago, our communities came together to meet the needs of the emerging pandemic. We reaffirmed our strong community partnerships with first responders, health care providers and local businesses around one mission – to protect and support our community members through these unprecedented times.

Although we could not predict how long the pandemic would last or the tragic toll it would take on so many lives, we knew there was an urgency around finding answers and developing solutions. Historically, our public universities and colleges have been valuable community resources that come through in times of need. The CONNECT Partnership, consisting of **six** higher education institutions in *Southeastern Massachusetts: Bridgewater State University, Bristol Community College, Cape Cod Community College, Massachusetts Maritime Academy, Massasoit Community College, and the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth* did not disappoint.

Our dedicated faculties and staff have continued to connect students to the services and resources needed to support their goals, in a holistic, collaborative manner, while mitigating any barriers that may hinder success. Student services continued remotely and without interruption. When we moved to hybrid classes, our technology services, facilities and campus police ensured our on-campus safety and preparedness. Our students have had continued access to Chromebook computers, Wi-Fi hot spots and online tutoring.

As soon as the pandemic hit, our institutions stepped up to support our community by taking inventory of our personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies, once used for our on-campus health services programs, and quickly donating them to our local health care providers. Our skilled nursing students served on the frontlines in local hospitals. These dedicated students are assisting their communities while gaining real-life experience in their field.

We must continue to support our region with an urgency to stop the virus. The way to get back to our lives and campuses is by continuing to practice the 3Ws (wash your hands, watch your distance, wear a mask) and by getting vaccinated.

As our family, friends and colleagues are eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, we must again step up with the same urgency. We ask that you continue to stand with us to increase vaccine awareness and equity across our region, to help the most vulnerable members of our community access the COVID-19 vaccine when eligible. Massachusetts is reported to have one of the lowest vaccine hesitancy rates in the country although our portion of the state, Bristol County, comparatively has the state's highest hesitancy rate at 8.68%.

We know that the steps we are taking to prepare for the summer and fall semesters must be flexible. **The more people that are vaccinated, the quicker we can return to our on-campus locations and activities.** All members of our college community, students, faculty and staff, are strongly encouraged to get the COVID-19 vaccine as soon as possible to protect themselves and others from the effects and spread of the virus.

A number of our communities have been disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and it is our mission now, one year later, to continue to usher our students, faculty, staff and community members through this time and get them safely to the other side when we can all be together again.

We know that we can return to our campuses safely, though it takes commitment from everyone to get there, together.

This is the first in a series of letters to the editor from the CONNECT Partnership.

CONNECT is a partnership of the six public higher education institutions in Southeastern Massachusetts: Bridgewater State University, Bristol Community College, Cape Cod Community College, Massachusetts Maritime Academy, Massasoit Community College, and the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. Established in 2003, CONNECT has two primary goals: to improve the quality, accessibility, and affordability of higher education; and to advance the economic, educational and cultural life of Southeastern Massachusetts. CONNECT realizes its mission by focusing on four major areas, with activities and initiatives that enhance academic programs and ease transfer of students among the institutions; foster economic development through the region; promote cultural programs and projects; and share expertise and resources. The executive officers of the CONNECT institutions act cooperatively to strengthen their institutional missions and to enrich the life of the region.

If you would like more information about this initiative, please contact Stacey A. Kaminski, Ed.D., executive director of the CONNECT Partnership at 508-531-1440 or via email at stacey.kaminski@connectsemass.org.