

## A Degree is more than a Piece of Paper

By Dr. Mark Fuller

A decade ago, Erin Costa Noonan found her passion for nursing as a student at Bristol Community College. After graduating and serving as a Registered Nurse for many years, she decided to take the next step in her journey and pursue her doctoral degree at UMass Dartmouth.

She could never have imagined what her life would look like today as an ICU nurse at St. Luke's Hospital. But despite the challenges of completing her coursework while working at the frontlines of healthcare during a global pandemic, Erin's future has never been brighter. In May, she will graduate with her Doctorate in Nursing Practice, launching a new chapter of her career that reinforces the tremendous value of public higher education. Erin's story is powerful, and it is one of many examples of student success, movement, and empowerment across the membership of CONNECT, a consortium of public higher education partners in Southeastern Massachusetts.

Yet, many people across the country do not believe in the value proposition of college.

The data clearly shows that a college degree is a positive force for social mobility and economic security, especially within marginalized communities. Particularly in a post-COVID economy, where the employment opportunities are constantly changing, higher education is still a game-changer for many. The demand for college graduates is at a fever pitch, and when students persist through graduation, it has a tremendous impact on their lifetime earnings. At the CONNECT institutions, we see firsthand these kinds of positive outcomes. Across our network, our graduates are bringing vibrancy, talent, and innovation to the region. The contributions of our graduates are hugely significant to the economy and our communities.

But the barriers to entry and persistence are still too high, and we must collectively do more to increase access into and through higher education.

That work cannot begin early enough. Students in PK-12 classrooms need to get excited about and interested in the possibilities that await them. An effective strategy must improve pathways from the high school into the college environment, and CONNECT partners are working to strengthen our relationships with area superintendents to find new and creative ways to link our learning communities.

CONNECT is already doing so much to ease the transition from high school to community college to four-year institutions. UMass Dartmouth has a unique partnership with Bristol Community College and Diman Regional Vocational Technical High School in Fall River to create a college access pathway in engineering that allows students to work toward a college degree while completing their high school requirements for graduation simultaneously. These types of innovative and integrated approaches that expand our collective reach and make it easier for students to advance their educational journey will be essential as we look to increase the number and diversity of talented students that graduate each year.

For these students—for students like Erin—a degree from a public institution like ours is a gateway for opportunity. Let's open the door for more students to come through.

*Dr. Mark Fuller is the Chancellor of the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth and a 13-year veteran of the University of Massachusetts system.*