

CONNECT's
Legislative Gathering and
Awards Dinner

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University of Massachusetts
Dartmouth



Senator Mark C. Montigny

Senator Mark Montigny is a senior member of the Massachusetts Senate, representing a district of approximately 180,000 constituents, including the City of New Bedford, Acushnet, Dartmouth, Fairhaven, and Mattapoisett. His career began with the New Bedford Chamber of Commerce, and he later became one of the youngest chamber of commerce executives in the country when he assumed the role of President at the Fall River Chamber of Commerce. Today, Senator Montigny is the Chair of the influential Senate Committee on Steering and Policy, and he has previously served in numerous Senate leadership roles, including Chair of the powerful Senate Committee on Ways and Means, Chair of the Senate Committee on Rules, and Assistant Majority Leader.

Throughout his legislative career, Senator Montigny has been the lead sponsor of progressive legislation concerning human rights, health care, and economic issues. He created a first-in-the-nation universal healthcare program for children that insured over 160,000 Massachusetts kids and served as a model for the national Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP. Senator Montigny also created the senior prescription drug assistance program for thousands of bay state residents and established the Fishing Partnership Health Plan to provide health insurance to thousands of fishermen and their families across Massachusetts. In 2016, his legislation to ensure life-saving AED devices are readily available at schools was signed into law. Montigny has also worked extensively to improve the quality of care within nursing homes, lower the cost of prescription drugs, protect animals from abuse, and championed the

Commonwealth's first law to combat human trafficking. In 2020, the Senator's bill prohibiting the use of cell phones while driving became law.

Senator Montigny has also led the economic revitalization of his district with a particular focus on the resurgence of downtown New Bedford. His legislation created the UMass Dartmouth Star Store Campus and has provided millions of dollars for projects resulting in the development of museums, cafes, restaurants, and housing in downtown New Bedford. Further, the Senator's leadership helped to save the historic Zeiterion Theatre, and he continues to lead the regional effort to connect a revitalized State Pier to the bustling downtown district through his legislation directing MassDevelopment to transform the central waterfront venue. Among his most recent efforts is the creation of his Children's Equality and Empowerment Fund, which provides underserved New Bedford children with access to critical after-school and summer programming with a heavy emphasis on arts, culture, and recreation.

Access to education is an important priority for the Senator. During his tenure as Senate Chair of the Committee on Ways and Means, chapter 70 school funding levels increased by almost 25 percent despite an economic recession. During that time, he also supported higher education funding and need-based scholarships. Today, he continues to advocate for legislation to increase college access and affordability, including his bill to create a "Bridge the Gap" scholarship that would enhance access to a debt-free community college education and link graduates to local workforce needs.

Beyond Beacon Hill, Senator Montigny has traveled extensively on various international political and educational exchanges. During 2010 he spent extensive time doing relief work in Haiti following the devastating earthquake that struck that country. In total, he has visited over 85 countries on six continents including Cuba, Iraq, Turkey, Belarus, Romania, Nicaragua, Columbia, Cambodia, Vietnam and South Africa.

Most importantly, Senator Montigny is a proud father to his eight-year-old son, who is the center of his universe and his greatest blessing.



Representative Sarah K. Peake

Elected in 2006, Representative Sarah Peake is currently serving her ninth term representing the 4th Barnstable District on Cape Cod. Sarah is a fierce advocate for her district and all Cape Codders. In 2021, Sarah was appointed Second Assistant Majority Leader, by Speaker Ronald Mariano. She also serves as the House Co-Chair of the Regional Transit Authority caucus and helped found the Rural caucus. Previously, Sarah served as the chair of the Joint committee on Municipalities and Regional Government and Joint Committee on Tourism, Arts, and Cultural Development. She has been serving as the MA Legislative Commissioner to the Atlantic State Marine Fisheries Commission since 2009.

Sarah and her wife, Lynn Mogell, ran a bed and breakfast in Provincetown from 1993-2015. In addition to running the inn, Sarah became involved in her community, serving on the Provincetown High School Site Council, Charter Enforcement Commission, and in 2002 was elected to the Provincetown Board of Selectmen. She is an honorary board member of the Lower Cape Outreach Council, Cape Rep Theater, and is a member of the Provincetown Chamber of Commerce.



Dr. Noe Ortega

Massachusetts Commissioner of Higher Education

Noe Ortega most recently served as Secretary of Education for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, a position he held since the fall of 2020. Prior to accepting his appointment as secretary, Dr. Ortega held the role of Deputy Secretary and Commissioner for the Office of Postsecondary and Higher Education (OPHE) at the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE). As commissioner, he led the work of the agency aimed at closing the postsecondary attainment gaps that have persisted among historically underrepresented populations and communities of color in Pennsylvania. Additionally, Dr. Ortega facilitated the efforts of the department to improve the diversity of Pennsylvania's educator workforce and to ensure that every student of the Commonwealth has access to educators who have been trained in culturally responsive and culturally relevant approaches to teaching and learning in the classroom.

Prior to joining PDE, Dr. Ortega spent eight years at the University of Michigan, where he held several academic and administrative roles. During his tenure he worked as the Assistant Director and Senior Research Associate at the National Center for Institutional Diversity and as the Managing Director for the National

Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good. While most of his research has focused on postsecondary access and success for historically underserved students, his most recent publications examine how public investment in higher education influences decision-making at colleges and universities. Additionally, Dr. Ortega spent nearly a decade working in the areas of financial aid and enrollment management at both public and private universities in Texas, and he also served as a P-16 Specialist for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). Dr. Ortega also spent nearly seven years as director of a language institute in Japan where he trained teachers in the area of early childhood language acquisition.

Dr. Ortega received a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science from St. Edwards University, a Master of Science in School Counseling from Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, and his Ph.D. in Higher Education Policy from the University of Michigan.



Cindy Nalani Mack

Bridgewater State University

I am the oldest of four kids and I was born in Trinidad. When my father passed away at age 31, I was six years old. When I was about eight, while helping my mother care for my siblings she taught about family and responsibility. My mother insisted that a decent education was a must and the best way to guarantee the opportunity to create your own path in life to become anything you want to be. As a single mother, she supported our academic progress at every turn and proud of us all. I had modest achievements, and I intended to go further, but having a job came first.

I decided to apply to Massasoit Community College, unsure of what to expect, I was certain I would not fit in because I was 46 years old, a non-traditional student, and the first person in my family to graduate. Yet, I did, and it changed my life.

I excelled academically, through the support of financial aid, my professors, staff, and my classmates who recognized potential in me inspired me to be a dedicated leader and advocate on behalf of students on many platforms. I held several positions including Parliamentarian Policy Chair at SAC (Student Advisory Council), Segmental Advisor for State Universities, OER executive member, Student Trustee for two terms, executive member Commonwealth Sexual Misconduct Campus Climate Task Force, and most recently met with SAC the US Secretary of Education Dr. Miguel Cardona on the needs of students and our fierce advocacy for students. I have the honor and opportunity of serving my community, to represent my peers through SAC with the encouragement, support, and my Bridgewater State family. Upon graduating I plan to pursue my master's in criminal justice at Bridgewater State University and continue to advocate for student representation in Massachusetts.



Aim Benson

Bristol Community College

Aim was born in Connecticut but spent their summers with their cousins in Fall River. They grew up going on walks and playing tennis at Bristol's Fall River campus. Aim and their family moved to Somerset around 2015. After a brief stint at Somerset Berkely Regional High School, Aim started at School One, a more artistic and open institution in 2016. Aim graduated high school in 2020 and took a gap year to figure out what they wanted to do. Aim chose to enroll at Bristol Community College in January of 2021 due to its affordability and proximity to home. Aim is now a student ambassador for Student and Family Engagement, a work study for the Multicultural Student Center, and the President of the LGBTQ+ HEROES Club at Bristol Community College. As the president of the LGBTQ+ HEROES Club, Aim is interested in LGBTQ+ rights and advocacy. As a nonbinary person, Aim knows firsthand the struggles of the LGBTQ+ community. Aim is committed to try to help members of their community by finding local LGBTQ+ friendly resources and offering support. Aim volunteers at a cemetery in Providence, and they are interested in becoming a Cemetery Archaeologist.



Zaria Cain-Williams

Cape Cod Community College

Zaria Cain-Williams, or “Zaria The Artistt” is a 21-year-old student entrepreneur in her first year at Cape Cod Community College. She is a Multimedia Artist interested in pursuing film, animation, music, graphic design, art therapy, and more. Zaria is the author of a poetry book titled “The Wings Of A Butterfly,” and the Co-Founder of a business called Recovery In Poetry that she and her Mom founded at the height of the Covid-19 Pandemic. She has her artwork hanging up at the Falmouth Public Library and is currently working on two art murals for a Pediatric Office.

Coming from a low-income family, who have faced many trials and tribulations, Zaria is dedicated to speaking up for those who often feel unheard or silenced. Her artwork in all its forms manages to be timeless in its ability to bridge the gap between faith, culture, and authenticity. Whether she is rapping, filmmaking, writing, producing, creating digital art, or studying her college courses, Zaria puts her all into what she believes in and gives God the glory for her story! She intends to transfer to a four-year University after completing her associate degree at 4C’s and continue advocating the importance of Community Colleges. Her website is www.zariatheartistt.com



Kolby Barbieri

Massachusetts Maritime Academy

I am a current senior at Massachusetts Maritime Academy. I am from Haverhill, Massachusetts. At the Academy, I serve as Student Government Executive President and President of the Student Athlete Advisory Committee. My success as a student can be attributed to the importance of communication.

Communicating to family, friends, and faculty is once of the best ways to positively influence your life as a student. Having outlets to decompress on the struggles of student life is essential to success which was amplified during COVID.

My parents have been my rock throughout my journey and have supported me in all my endeavors. They are my role models who have shown me what true perseverance is. My success as a student is directly attributed to the love and support they have given me throughout these past four years.



Kehinde Agbeleye

Massasoit Community College

Kehinde is an international student studying Nursing at Massasoit Community College. She is also a STEM scholar, Presidential Student Ambassador, a peer tutor, a peer mentor and a Participatory Action Researcher at Massasoit. She was one of the recipients of the 2022 Massasoit Kew Award.



Cameron McAlpine

University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

Cameron is senior from Dartmouth, MA. He is a Commonwealth Honors Student majoring in Computer Science major and an artificial intelligence minor with a 3.83 GPA. He served as an Honors College and community service director of the Honors Council. Cameron organized the annual veterans 5K run, and serves as a Commuter Assistant, member of the Commuter Student Advisory Board, Orientation Leader, and works as a SAIL Program Coordinator.