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Dear Legislators,

Thank you to all who were able to attend the MCC/MxCC Joint Legislative Forum. It was a pleasure to meet you, if only virtually! MCC's delegation had good representation at the meeting. For those of our delegation unable to attend, I will provide you with a summary of our discussion, and I look forward to opportunities in the future to have discussions with you about the issues that are important to your constituents. Hopefully things will change soon, and we will all have the chance to meet face-to-face!

MCC of course is dedicated to the mission of serving the needs of the state and helping address issues in partnership with you. There is no doubt that higher education is at a crossroads, not only in Connecticut, as we discussed last week, but nationally. The college's current situation is representative of what is happening on a national scale.

Our enrollment is down 18% year over year as of this Spring 2021 semester. In addition, the pandemic and other factors have taken their toll. When we look more closely at the data, we see that it is more of the other factors -- which the pandemic has exposed -- that are responsible for MCC's loss of enrollment.

Let's take a closer look at these other factors. The case for community college right now, compared especially to private baccalaureate institutions, is strong. The cost of entry to the senior institutions due to application and testing fees, not to mention the logistical issues surrounding visiting colleges because of COVID-19, are obvious barriers to being accepted and enrolling. But conventional wisdom tells us that community college, a financially responsible alternative, should also be a more accessible alternative given our open enrollment policies and zero application fees.

The pandemic has revealed to us a lot about our students, who on average are not traditional straight-out-of-high-school graduates. In fact, the average age of an MCC student is 25. More than 50% are women. And most of our students attend part time. What are they doing the rest of the time? Most are working. Many are raising families or caring for aging parents. When the pandemic hit, and MCC Foundation generously allocated more than \$25,000 to emergency funds, the letters we received asking for help were heartbreaking.

Most of our students did not need help paying for tuition per se. They had lost jobs, or they had issues at home with expenses because more people were working or learning remotely in their households and food and utility bills were higher. They needed equipment and internet service-provider upgrades to attend classes online. In many cases, their plights were a combination of all three.

Some of our students reported that they were homeless, or had been depending on our on-campus food pantry to feed themselves and/or families. The pantry closed during the pandemic. As we meet today, it has not reopened.

MCC faculty and staff, and our generous donors, rose to the occasion to help our students to the best of our abilities. We pivoted quickly and delivered laptops and created hot spots using CARES funding or other funds. We expanded our course offerings to a range of online modalities to accommodate different learning capabilities. We changed our payment policies so that students who couldn't pay their tuition and fees were put on payment plans so they could still register. I am proud of what we did to deliver a quality education.

Enrollment up front is how we are measured. I understand that. But if students come in the front door but wind up going out the back door because of their issues with persistence, then a 100% uptick in enrollment would be meaningless.

The "traditional" MCC student now and for the foreseeable future is who we used to think of as "nontraditional" -- older, having been away from the classroom potentially for many years, first generation, people of color and other minoritized citizens of Connecticut.

As you heard from Stefan Hall at the forum, the business of MCC persists, but students who are able to persist represent a different story. If there is one thing I would ask of all of you today to ensure the success of our students -- YOUR constituents -- who are doing all they can to succeed in this new learning environment, it is that you consider broad legislation of the type you passed last year to help with tuition and fees. PACT represents a game changer for college affordability. Imagine what we could do if we could deliver a range of wrap around support services, free to our students and co-located right on campus, to help with food insecurity, housing, physical and mental health services.

Baccalaureate institutions have these services on their campuses because students live there. It's been previously assumed that community college students don't stay on campus. But there is plenty of data to support the argument that our campus is the best option many students have for a connection to a community. While we have them on campus, if we can assist them in finding solutions to their day to day needs, they have a greater chance of succeeding academically.

One of the questions that came up during last week's forum made an excellent point about how we serve the state's immediate and long-term workforce needs through our partnerships. MCC has always had a Continuing Education division that is the envy of the community college system. Our short-term certificates, such as our Allied Health and Computer Technologies non-credit programs provide, help people in the state boost their employability with skills that meet today's employers' immediate demand. The custom courses developed directly to companies and non-profit organizations, as well as the workforce training we provide state employees through our DAS course catalog, ensure that Connecticut's workforce continues to develop with 21<sup>st</sup> century skills.

These courses have always been developed with strong local input from our community partners – local government and private institutions – to ensure their relevance. They have a great track record, and the graduates of these programs remain local and help our state continue to thrive. In the new economy coming out of the pandemic, these non-credit certificates and custom workforce training will be more vital than ever.

I greatly appreciate your support of MCC, our faculty, students and staff –all of whom are very dedicated not only to their own success but to the success of Connecticut.

Kindly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicole Esposito", is centered within a light gray rectangular box.

Dr. Nicole Esposito  
Chief Executive Officer