

Community colleges offer hope, opportunity

BY DANIEL ASQUINO

Editor's note: The column is in response to an Associated Press article about Massachusetts community college graduation rates being below the national average that was published recently in the Community College Times.

Since their creation nearly 50 years ago, Massachusetts' community colleges have become synonymous with hope and opportunity, and this legacy demands we play a unique role in higher education today.

People from all walks of life and with an assortment of interests, goals, skills and obligations can pass through our doors. Some come to start their college education; others enroll in a class or two to learn a new skill. Still others, with bachelor's or master's degree in hand, want an entire set of new skills to take their professional life in a new direction.

At Mount Wachusett Community College (MWCC) and our sister colleges throughout Massachusetts, we understand that to provide hope and opportunity to our students we must identify their needs, show them the benefits of furthering their education and help them reach their goals. Above all, we must be flexible.

We do this through our open enrollment

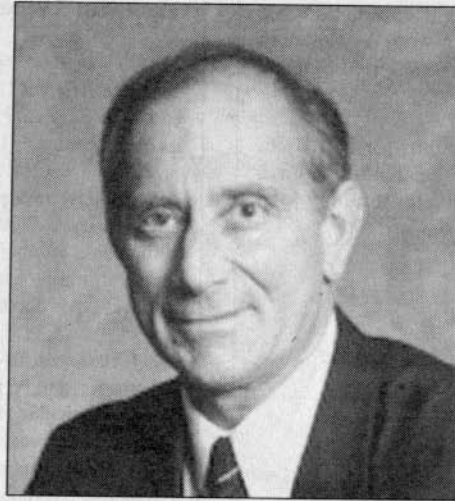
policy. We do this by offering developmental courses and English as a second language courses to those who need them. We do this with our accelerated and evening courses. We accomplish this by providing an honors program for students with high grade point averages. (And this is just a snapshot.)

Students attending community colleges typically balance school and homework with family and work. Often the only way to achieve this is by going to school part-time. That may mean taking one, two or three classes each semester.

Silvia Woodgett, who graduated last May on the dean's list, is just one example of how MWCC gives people with a variety of commitments a sense of hope and opportunity. In combination with the staff at the North Central Massachusetts Educational Opportunity Center, we showed Silvia, who is raising four young

grandchildren, that if she worked at it, she could succeed in college.

"If I could do this, I could do anything," Silvia said back in May. She's now pursuing her bachelor's degree.



Daniel Asquino

Back in 1975, after earning her GED, Susan Suchocki Brown balanced studying at MWCC with her family and work responsibilities.

"I was scared to death," she recalled. "But I remember immediately feeling comfortable."

Susan ultimately earned her associate degree from MWCC, her bachelor's degree from the Univer-

sity of Massachusetts-Amherst and both her master's and doctorate degrees from Andover Newton Theological School. Today, she teaches a comparative religion course for us.

In a perfect world, I would love to see

every one of our students return semester after semester until they graduate and/or transfer to a four-year college. But I know that life can throw us curves. Sometimes, it is college that takes a backseat and students "stop-out."

What is critical in these situations, I believe, is these students can return when their lives are back on track. Because of the nature of the community college system, they can pick up their studies where they left off.

At the Mount, we're addressing some of the underlying reasons students "stop-out." One common dilemma is child care. With \$1 million from a generous donor, we can now provide child-care stipends to students who need this assistance.

While we continue to fulfill the community college mission and meet the myriad needs of our students, policy makers must embrace community colleges' uniqueness and important purpose of offering hope and opportunity to all. The majority of our students cannot be pigeon-holed into an unrealistic graduation metric. Instead, they should be encouraged to meet their higher education goals, whatever they are, at a pace that makes sense to *them*.

Asquino is president of Mount Wachusett Community College (Massachusetts).