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Mass. community colleges seek funding to weather coronavirus crisis

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Presidents of the 15 community colleges across Massachusetts now speak on the phone daily to discuss updates during the COVID-19 pandemic. The leaders have been busy orchestrating a transformation to online learning for roughly 150,000 students enrolled in community college courses across the state.

The presidents lean on one another to share best practices, resources and news during the coronavirus pandemic. They also agree on the largest challenge facing the community college sector at the moment — these institutions need more funding to weather the coronavirus crisis.

Collectively, Massachusetts community colleges have spent \$17 million dollars so far on training faculty to transition to remote learning, buying laptops for students in need and cleaning buildings. That number could increase to \$47 million by summer, said [Tom Sannicandro](#), director of the Massachusetts Association of Community Colleges.

“The biggest challenge is money as we move ahead,” Sannicandro said. “One of the things to think about is everybody who is on the frontlines, most of those people have been community college students at one time. Fire fighters, nurses, respiratory therapists, healthcare workers — all those people were trained at community colleges. As we move out of this, we are best place for the state to invest money in to drive the economy forward.”

Community colleges will likely receive some relief from the federal stimulus program but is unclear how much at this point, according to Sannicandro.

Individual community colleges are doing their best to get by and help their students during the difficult time.

Bunker Hill Community College, for example, has distributed 400 chromebooks to students who do not have laptops or tablets at home to continue their classwork remotely. The college received a cash infusion from its foundation to buy the computers, said [Pam Eddinger](#), president of BHCC.

“We were hearing about students reading textbooks or writing papers on their phone,” Eddinger said in an interview. “These stories are ubiquitous of our environment and shows how aspirational and inspirational our students really are. They are struggling with food, housing and security and yet they come (to class).”

[Valerie Roberson](#), president of Roxbury Community College, said the school will be fine in the short-term, but if the crisis lingers into the summer months and beyond, RCC’s challenges “could become a little more complicated.” Roxbury



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The campus of Bunker Hill Community College.

Community College's summer semester starts in May, so those courses would be delivered online, Roberson said.

The transition to online learning has gone smoothly for community college campuses, several presidents said. Most of the 15 colleges extended spring break to give faculty and students time to adjust to remote teaching and learning. The schools offered training sessions, resources and bought new software and technology, including Zoom licenses, to ease the transition.

Communicating all of the changes caused by the coronavirus pandemic to large, diverse student bodies has been a challenge, said [Patricia Gentile](#), president of North Shore Community College. Her team sent out thousands of personalized emails over one weekend in March explaining the changes and sharing how they could reach faculty members. They also used social media channels, phone calls and their website to spread the word.

"I have to give a shout-out to all the folks across the state who have the scarcest of resources of any higher ed institutions but have reached out to students to make sure they are okay," Gentile said. "We have college employees who needed to go remote but didn't have internet or the technology they needed. It's been a big challenge but it's truly inspiring how people across the state are reacting out and supporting each other to the best of their ability."

Hilary Burns

Associate Editor

Boston Business Journal

