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Viewpoint: Public higher education can aid workforce woes

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Image: Greg Bialecki

Greg Bialecki

Greg Bialecki is a principal at Redgate and was Secretary of Housing and Economic Development for Gov. Deval Patrick

Employers across Massachusetts are struggling with a shortage of workers. People are leaving the commonwealth at alarming rates. The challenge is vast and pressing for a state whose economy runs on brain power. One major policy initiative stands to make meaningful progress in ensuring that our state has the

prepared, diverse workforce we need to thrive: immediate and substantial investments in public higher education in Massachusetts.

While our acclaimed private institutions of higher learning contribute mightily to the commonwealth's economy, our state schools educate large numbers of our high school graduates. And significantly more graduates of public colleges and universities in Massachusetts stay and work in our state than graduates of private schools, as the President of Worcester State University recently pointed out. When high school seniors attend UMass Boston, Salem State, or Berkshire Community College, they're likely to go on to build their lives in Massachusetts.

But too many prospective students never matriculate, missing out on opportunities for themselves and leaving the needs of employers across Massachusetts unmet. The soaring costs of higher education — even at public schools — can be an insurmountable hurdle, and foster inequity in our state. Of those Massachusetts students not transitioning into our college classrooms, the majority are students of color. Students from low-income backgrounds are also advancing into higher education at lower rates.

Only transformative investments in our public higher education system will meet this moment, educating engaged citizens, addressing inequities, and supporting our economy.

Investments in affordability will open the doors of higher education to more students.

Our current system fails students of color and low-income students. By investing in need-based debt-free public higher education Massachusetts would both right a moral wrong and prepare more students to join the workforce.

Investments in student supports will get more students to graduation.

Enrolling in school is one thing. Graduating is another. Funding additional advisors, counselors, and other safety nets will increase the likelihood that a student earns their degree — especially for

students of color and students from under-resourced communities.

Investing in educators and staff will keep the best talent in the classroom.

Like nearly every other economic sector, higher education has a talent shortage. In our public colleges and universities that is due in part to pay that isn't competitive. For example, salaries for community college faculty in Massachusetts lag behind compensation for their peers in New York, California, New Hampshire, Connecticut, New Jersey, and Maryland — among others. How can the best and brightest be expected to teach in Massachusetts when they can make more elsewhere?

Investing in our campuses will build the training grounds the future demands. Crumbling, outdated buildings are no place for the leaders of tomorrow to learn. And yet, that's what so many of our students face on our public campuses. We must invest in the facilities that the next generation of scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs need to launch their careers.

Where would the major industries in Massachusetts be without talent? Healthcare and life sciences, finance, clean energy, technology, engineering, and more all depend on the existence of an educated workforce — and are all at risk as we face a growing workforce crisis. Lowering the barriers to entry for students, and supporting public higher educational institutions, will ensure that our workforce is strong, prepared, and diverse for generations to come.

Greg Bialecki is a principal at Redgate and was state Secretary of Housing and Economic Development for Gov. Deval Patrick. Mark Walsh is senior vice president and New England regional director at Amalgamated Bank.

[Back to Top](#) ▲

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