

TASK FORCE ON IMMIGRATION
AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN
CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FEBRUARY 2008



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In August 2007, the Colleges of Worcester Consortium, Inc. created a task force to examine the issue of immigration and higher education in Central Massachusetts.

It has become increasingly clear from recent demographic and economic studies and projections that the population in the northeast, and certainly in Central Massachusetts, is showing very limited growth. There is evidence that a decline in the “native-born” population is caused by significant out-migration due to a number of factors, including the high cost of living, limited career opportunities and a declining birth rate. The limited population growth that is evident is due primarily to the recent influx of immigrants to this area, with the largest numbers in Worcester coming from Ghana, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Kenya, El Salvador, Albania and Liberia.

It is also clear that the area’s economy is becoming more knowledge-based with an increasing percentage of all new jobs requiring some form of postsecondary education. According to the 2007 Massachusetts Department of Workforce Development’s Job Vacancy Survey, 38 percent of current job vacancies in Massachusetts require an associate’s degree or higher. This represents an increase from 30 percent in 2003. Consequently, the level of education that the immigrant population attains is of vital importance to everyone—not only to immigrant students and their families, but also to the economic well-being of the entire region.

The Task Force was charged with researching the barriers to higher education faced by this new wave of immigrants and suggesting recommendations to address those barriers. The 36-member Task Force was made up of representatives from Consortium member institutions; federal, state and local governments; community and faith-based organizations; the Worcester Public Schools; the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education; and the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy (MIRA) Coalition. Meetings were held over a six-month period, during which the Task Force identified three main barriers faced by immigrant communities in accessing higher education, and sub-committees were created to work on each of these. Speakers were invited to present on topics of interest. Two public hearings were held, the first of which was conducted at Worcester State College in October. It attracted community representatives, as well as college and high school faculty and administrators. The second hearing, held at the downtown branch of Quinsigamond Community College (QCC) in December, was attended by immigrant (English for Speakers of Other Languages – ESOL and GED) students as well as QCC staff.

Barriers

The three main barriers to higher education access identified by the Task Force are:

- **Insufficient information** on higher education and lack of appropriate modes of information dissemination;
- **Insufficient academic preparedness**, due to language barriers as well as low enrollment and/or achievement in core academic subjects; and
- The **high cost of college** attendance and the inability of many immigrant students to access financial aid, either due to regulations or the complexity of the aid process.

Key Findings and Recommendations

The first barrier, the dissemination of information, recognizes the many challenges of informing a diverse, multilingual immigrant population of the distinct and somewhat cumbersome process of gaining admission to U.S. colleges and universities. The Task Force recommends the creation of a centralized, well-publicized multilingual Web site which would serve as a clearinghouse for immigrant families and those aiding them in the college search and admission process. Effective community outreach to local immigrant groups and the creation of peer mentoring programs utilizing immigrant students who have successfully completed the college admission process could be valuable tools. In addition, college campus front-line staff should be adequately trained to provide consistent information to immigrant students once they arrive on campus.

The second barrier, in the area of academic preparedness, remains English proficiency for both school-aged youth and adults. The Task Force recommends additional ESOL instructional programs for Limited English-proficient (LEP) students in grades K-12, as well as for adults. Sufficient funding must be made available to meet the needs of school departments and communities. When feasible, core academic courses at the K-12 level should be offered in a native language while students make gains in English proficiency. Additional support and professional development must be provided so more teachers can obtain ELL (English Language Learners) licensure.

The third barrier, the cost of higher education, is one of resources and communication. Ongoing financial aid trainings should be offered to college counselors and agency representatives to keep them apprised of changes in financial aid eligibility for the numerous immigrant statuses. Additional resources should be explored for those immigrants in process of obtaining permanent residency awaiting final approval for a green card. The Task Force is mindful of the position of Governor Deval Patrick and his administration on providing in-state tuition rates at state colleges and universities for undocumented immigrant students, as well as the ongoing debate within the Massachusetts Senate and House and awaits the outcome of those debates.

The Colleges of Worcester Consortium will now take the findings and recommendations of the Task Force and work with its member organizations, elected officials and other government and community agencies to identify resources needed to implement these recommendations and to better position immigrants for higher education opportunities and to be active participants in our increasingly knowledge-based economy.

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ABOUT THE COLLEGES OF WORCESTER CONSORTIUM

The Colleges of Worcester Consortium, Inc. is a 40-year-old not-for-profit association of public and private accredited colleges and universities located in Central Massachusetts. The Consortium is committed to working cooperatively both to further the missions of its member institutions individually and to advance higher education regionally, helping to position Worcester and the region as a premier destination for undergraduate and graduate students as well as college and university faculty and staff. Member institutions are: Anna Maria College, Assumption College, Atlantic Union College, Becker College, Clark University, College of the Holy Cross, Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University, Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences, Nichols College, Quinsigamond Community College, University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Worcester State College.