

ADINA GIANNELLI | GUEST COLUMN

State not playing fair on community college pay

MY GRANDFATHER, a first-generation American and U.S. military veteran, enrolled as a student at Bunker Hill Community College, care of the GI Bill. While family obligations (six children) and the three jobs that arose from those commitments meant he was not able to complete his education, he believed ardently in public education and what it meant.

He was proud when his children completed their associate degrees at Massachusetts community colleges in adulthood, and proud of his grandchildren, six graduates of state public higher education among them.

As a first-generation college graduate, I too had a particular understanding of what college meant. While I am not a product of the Massachusetts community college system, I am a graduate of the University of Massachusetts. I went on to become a professor at Holyoke Community College, where I teach today. The community college system is the lifeblood of Massachusetts. You find there students like my grandfather — veterans, student parents, new Americans — full of promise, brilliance and hope.

You will also find people like my colleagues — people who

work tirelessly to educate the next generation of nurses and teachers, paralegals and small business owners, ASL interpreters and artists. People who have left careers in industry, law, veterinary medicine, and the private sector because they believe fundamentally — like Alfredo Giannelli did, and like I do — in the power of public education and its ability to transform lives.

No one enters this profession for the money. But I think we all can agree: community college employees deserve a living wage. Our faculty are leaving, pulled by economic forces. Can you blame them?

I spoke recently with one colleague who is teaching nine courses to pay medical bills. I know others who are working second and third jobs in order to make ends meet. In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts — a place which values education and benefits immensely from it — no educator should have to choose between running themselves into the ground working multiple jobs or going into hock.

My grandfather died four years ago, just before the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. He would have been disgusted by the fact that community college staff and faculty have gone three years in a context

of pandemic inflation without even a cost of living raise. He would have been infuriated at the failure of the Massachusetts Legislature to fund the Massachusetts Community College Council contract, months after its authorization, when plainly and at minimum, it is the right thing to do.

Our alumni run local businesses. They are our first responders. They serve in uniform, and teach our children, and form the frontline of public health. They are educators and artists, social workers and accountants, entrepreneurs and veterinary technicians. They care for our animals and our elders; they staff our medical centers and bring art to our communities; they fuel our economy and keep us safe.

We are their educators, and we are three years without a raise. My grandfather would have been “arrabiato” — or as we say in English, mad as hell — about that. If you are reading this, and a person of conscience, I trust you are, too.

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