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College Presidents Try To Boost Enrollment With Personal Calls To Students



A Manchester Community College graduate waves to family and friends during the start of the forty-ninth Commencement Exercises at the Bicentennial Band Shell on the campus lawn. (David Butler II / Hartford Courant / May 30, 2013)

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BY KATHLEEN MEGAN, kmegan@courant.com

The Hartford Courant

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Faced with declining enrollment this semester, at least two community college presidents have taken to the phones — along with faculty and staff — to call students who had not re-enrolled for the spring semester.

Gena Glickman, president of **Manchester Community College**, who has made 40 calls, said in an email, "I felt that if I made calls, I could learn directly what the enrollment barriers were."

In early January, Glickman learned that 2,200 students who were enrolled in the fall had not yet registered for the second semester.

In a Jan. 10 email to faculty and staff, she asked for their help in contacting those students, warning that if



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enrollment did not improve, the college would lose \$1.6 million in revenue for the spring semester.

"A few hours of your time could make all the difference," Glickman wrote. "We want to see our students return to complete their education and we need to have the resources to support them."

At one point, enrollment for the second semester for Manchester Community College was down 7 percent compared with the previous year. But with all of the effort of faculty and staff, that figure has been steadily shrinking. As of Friday, it was at 3 percent, representing less than \$1 million in revenues.

At Norwalk Community College, President David L. Levinson was also faced with a larger-than-expected decline in enrollment for the second semester — registration was running 7 percent behind last year at the same time. The college had planned for a 3 percent decline in the spring semester, Levin said, but each percentage point more represented a \$90,000 hit in revenue.

"What I did first of all was to put on an immediate budget freeze," Levinson said. "Then [I] basically said: Everyone start calling students because it's a real problem."

Levinson said that enrollment has been fluctuating in the past few days, running about 4 percent to 5 percent lower than last year at this time. With the semester starting Jan. 24, he said, any reduction in the number of classes will have to be considered next week.

Board of Regents President Gregory Gray, who oversees the state's 12 community colleges and four regional universities, said that declining enrollment is a systemwide problem and that the college presidents "are taking it very seriously and coming up with creative strategies."

The decline across the system has been about 2 percent, which Gray noted just about mirrors the shrinking population of 18-year-olds in Connecticut. State officials say that the number of high school graduates is declining at a rate of 1.8 percent each year and is expected to continue to do so until 2020.

"Enrollment is a very significant issue for us," Gray said. He said that many of the colleges and universities have embarked on localized efforts to shore up enrollment, but that the regents have also hired a consultant to develop a long-term strategy for enrollment for the entire system.

In the meantime, colleges and universities in the regents system are focusing on both recruitment and retention of students as part of their efforts to maintain enrollment.

At **Naugatuck Valley Community College**, President Daisy Cocco De Filippis, said that her staff does outreach for students wherever they might be — bodegas, health clinics, medical offices, auto repair centers and car dealerships. She said that they plan to add barber shops and beauty salons to their list, too.

Western Connecticut State University President James Schmotter said that the university has had success boosting the percentage of freshmen who return for sophomore year. In the fall of 2013, 74.8 percent of freshmen returned, compared with 69 percent in the previous fall.

"Increased financial aid and improved advising helped this," Schmotter said. With a decline of enrollment of 3 percent in the fall compared with the previous year, Schmotter said, "We realize how critical this is to our future."

Both Glickman and Levinson, who has reached some of the 50 students he wants to contact, said that the calls gave them greater insight into why students weren't returning, as well as offering a bit of a surprise to students.

Glickman said that one student responded to her, saying, "Oh my God, you're the president." Another said, "Wow, I always wanted to meet you."

She said that several students told her they would come in to register, while others said they were postponing enrollment until the fall for reasons related to finances or child care. She was able to disentangle a financial problem for another student who can now enroll full-time.

"A personal touch — an individual who cares about you is very motivating for a student, many of whom are first generation and really are at a loss on how to navigate the process," Glickman said in an email. "... I had the opportunity to tell them about institutional and financial aid and scholarship, and to encourage them to work towards

completing their education."

In the week since Glickman and her faculty and staff began making calls, they have seen enrollment edge upward, but at least one Manchester Community College department chairman has had to cut class sections because of the drop in enrollment. The semester starts Thursday.

At both Manchester and Norwalk community colleges, officials said they weren't exactly sure why there seemed to be an especially sharp decline in enrollment for the second semester compared with the second semester last year.

Glickman said she thought that it might be partly because the holidays fell midweek this year and also because of bad weather.

"That on top of a slightly increasing better employment market," Glickman said in an email. "A decline in employment leads to higher enrollments and vice versa." She said the college is also looking closely at demographics and programs of study to see if there are any patterns that account for the decline.

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