

# MCC to require course to prepare students for college work, dean says

By David Huck

Journal Inquirer

MANCHESTER — When students enroll in the general education program at Manchester Community College in the fall they will take part in a first-year experience class in an attempt by officials there to increase the retention rate.

That “college success” course is common at four-year institutions but has been lacking at MCC. But part- and full-time students who choose general studies, the college’s most popular program, will be required to take the one-semester, three-credit course.

College officials say that upwards of three-fourths of all students who enter MCC are academically unprepared.

“They can’t read, they can’t write, and they can’t do math,” said the newly named provost and chief academic officer, Sandra Palmer.

With urging from state higher education officials, Palmer has focused on ensuring students are prepared and stay enrolled at MCC since coming to the college on an interim basis last July. She was named to the staff full time in March. Palmer, who previously worked at Naugatuck Valley Community College, replaces the former dean of academic affairs, Joanne Russell.

In time, all students will have to take the first-year experience class that officials hope will quickly familiarize students with the campus, create a go-to person for a student when a question arises, and make students less likely to drop out.

“It’s like intro to college. They learn time management, study skills. They learn about the college. They learn about who to go to for what,” Palmer said. “And then there



Manchester Community College

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is a little bit of academic involvement as well.”

Over the last few months Palmer worked to finalize a reform of the college’s general education program, a change that’s been in the works for several years. But at the top of her list is finding ways to keep students enrolled at the college and graduating.

“That’s how we’re judged,” Palmer said, adding that the assessment is “really not fair” since a majority of MCC students transfer to another school.

Officials say the first three or four

weeks of a semester for new students are often when the decision to complete their studies or drop out is determined.

In June, the college’s retention rate was 18 percent, an increase from the college’s low of 12 percent several years ago. Nationally, around 22 percent of students who enroll at community colleges graduate from their school.

Prior to the passage in 2012 of Public Act 12-40, legislation aimed at reducing non-credit remedial classes, MCC long had offered 15-week “developmental” courses for

students who aren’t performing at the college level. Legislators say the classes are costly.

Palmer said students look at the label “developmental” as negative and so they start their college careers with a low self-esteem. Students end up becoming frustrated and either not completing the remedial class or leaving the college, Palmer said. Students, who must pay for the developmental courses, do not receive credit for those classes.

“A lot of them, but not all of them, are maybe not motivated and they are struggling to begin with,” Palmer said, noting that many of the college’s students have families or full-time jobs. “Their lives are very complicated, so that plays a role too.”

By 2016 the state wants remedial classes gone, but Palmer says she doesn’t think they will totally disappear. There is a movement toward shorter classes that are more “intensive” or “embedded” classes that offer students additional academic support.

“The idea behind PA 12-40 is that there’s got to be a better way because remediation is really dead the way that it was being offered,” Palmer said. “It’s not working across the country.”

The college will have to report to the Board of Regents, which oversees the state’s 17 colleges and universities, on how it is making progress in responding to the requirements of the new legislation.

A small percentage of MCC students who enter the college below an eighth-grade level aren’t able to take remedial classes and are offered “transitional strategies.” These are supposed to be at either low cost or no cost to students, with the state paying most of the amount. The town’s adult education department is working on providing

some of these services, but the college will offer one section for these students in the fall, Palmer said.

MCC officials say they are also working with math and English teachers at neighboring high schools to ensure students are better prepared.

One of the goals in the college’s new strategic plan includes adding more full-time faculty over the next five years. Officials say that full-time faculty are more engaged with students, offering support like office hours and advising — which helps with keeping students active in the college.

Currently, around 32 percent of MCC faculty members are full-time, while the remainder are part-time. That ratio had been reversed but has changed over time with less funding, Palmer said. The college recently received additional money from the state and plans to hire five new faculty members.

The college has an annual operating budget of \$53 million, and more than 15,000 students are enrolled, a slight decrease from last year. There are 10,800 students taking classes for credit, while the remainder are taking continuing education and certification-preparation classes.

Under a recent change, the college will now be able to keep tuition it collects from students, rather than having it go to the community college system and be redistributed. Officials are working to boost enrollment through avenues like a new advertising campaign that seeks to attract different types of students, such those who might want to join the college’s new honors program.

“We’re a jack of all trades. That’s how I think of community colleges,” Palmer said. “We do so much for so many people in so many different ways.”

# Directors to cut \$900,000 from school board spending increase

By Kym Soper

Journal Inquirer

MANCHESTER — After crunching numbers all day Monday, directors say they intend to cut between \$700,000 and \$900,000 from the school board’s requested budget increase tonight in an attempt to hold down the increase in the tax rate.

The Board of Directors will meet at 7 in the Lincoln Center Hearing Room to adopt a spending plan for the next fiscal year.

Town Manager Scott Shanley had proposed reducing the school board’s request by \$100,000, but Republican directors said today they want as much as \$900,000 in reductions.

That would bring the Board of Education’s spending increase to 1.89 percent, which is more “in line with what our seniors receive as their 2015” cost-of-living adjustment, Republican Director Cheri Pelletier said. It also recognizes the future capital costs and bonding for school projects that taxpayers will also have to bear, she said.

Deputy Mayor Jay Moran, a Democrat, said his party was agreeable to making significant cuts to the school budget, and that both parties “were in the same ballpark.”

Talks were to continue today and there’ll be some discussion tonight, “but by the end of the day, it will probably be a little lower,” he said. Democrats were more comfortable

with a \$700,000 or \$800,000 cut, he added.

“Our taxpayers are out there, and we hear from them all the time that they want us to lighten up on their taxes, but we also hear from others that education is worth it and that they’re willing to pay for it,” Moran said. “We need to find something we can all be comfortable with. There are two groups screaming: one to not raise taxes and the other to not cut the Board of Ed. We’re trying to find a balance.”

In March Shanley had proposed a \$175.3 million budget that increased overall spending by 2.8 percent, or \$4.73 million, and would require a 3 percent tax hike to fund it. School spending

accounted for \$108.7 million of that, an increase of \$2.79 million over the current year, or 2.6 percent.

Most of the increase is due to salaries and benefits; those increase \$3.5 million in the combined town and schools budget.

Overall the Republicans’ plan would require a 33.94 mill rate, a 2.75 percent increase over the current 33.03 mill rate.

Shanley’s budget proposal had required a 34.13 mill rate to fund it. Under that plan, a homeowner whose property was assessed at \$118,300 would pay about \$130 more a year in taxes.

If the budget is reduced by \$900,000 the tax increase would be \$108 for the same property.

Pelletier said that \$900,000 seems like a large reduction, but said the school board budget could handle it without affecting educational programs.

Both parties have agreed to reduce Shanley’s proposed 9.5 percent sewer rate to a 6 percent increase in each of the next two years, followed by 4 percent in the third year.

Water and sewer rates have gone up in recent years to pay down debt on required infrastructure improvements. According to the planned fee schedule, rate increases were due to start going down, but Shanley had proposed a onetime 9.5 percent rate for next year to make up for lower than expected water consumption.