

Good morning, Colleagues.

As we find ourselves halfway through national Community College Month, I am particularly grateful to serve alongside you. Thank you for all that you do to engage, teach, support, and encourage our students and community members.

Your actions help make our college a place for everyone to feel welcome and valued. Providing that sense of belonging in higher education is a theme in my commentary that follows.

With gratitude for your service,

Dr. Bambara

Finding a Place to Belong in Higher Education

By Dr. Cynthia S. Bambara, Allegany College of Maryland President

What do you value in higher education and where do you belong in higher ed? If your mind wandered into a community college classroom, you are in good company.

Your thoughts mirror what research data from [Varying Degrees 2023: New America's Seventh Annual Survey on Higher Education](#) suggests. One finding was a leap forward for two-year colleges. Those surveys "agreed" or "somewhat agreed" that community colleges are a place "for people like me" 14% more than they did five years prior. This indicates a small but monumental shift in where Americans feel that they belong in higher education.

Even in uncertain times, Americans see higher education's value in terms of financial and societal benefits. The Varying Degrees 2023 report offered found that most Americans believe that individuals who have certificates, associate or bachelor's degrees earn more and have greater financial stability. It also revealed that 70% of Americans associate undergraduate credentials with lower unemployment rates, better civic engagement, and improved public health within their communities.

All of this gives me hope for higher education, our region, our small college, and those we serve. As Allegany College of Maryland's president, I believe our college holds promise for every lifelong learner because of its student-focused approach to career and transfer education, workforce development and community engagement. **This approach empowers learners to find their place to belong in higher education.**

If you will indulge me, I can share some of what I know about our current students and their Allegany College of Maryland experiences. There is the high school student who realized that her early college classes put her a semester ahead in college. Or the first-year English major who found her confidence, a community of helpers, and her name on the Dean's List. The second-year forest technology major who developed his "other family" at ACM, taught a project on trees at his elementary school, and will transfer to continue his studies after graduating in May. A nontraditional medical laboratory technician alum who returned to ACM to add more skills to his repertoire. Or the first-year business administration major who found endless support almost 1,000 miles from his island home.

These five individuals are emblematic of the “normal” community college student’s journey. They show us why community colleges were the first to see increased enrollment after the global pandemic—**we simply offer more ways to learn and more support.**

After a few semesters of small increases in enrollment, ACM saw a 11.3% increase in academic enrollment over its 2023 spring headcount. At present more than 3,100 unduplicated students attend ACM with the chance to enroll in more than 80 degree, certificate, and letter of recognition programs. These academic students are joined by over 7,088 noncredit unduplicated students enrolled in classes and programs through our workforce development, personal enrichment programs, and adult education and literacy services. These programs had a 60% increase in the number of registrants from 2022 to 2023 fiscal years. Whether these 10,000+ students learn through in-person or online through our two campuses and five education sites, there is no limit to what they can achieve.

Like these students, my place to belong in higher education is a community college campus. During this Community College Month, which is my last to celebrate as Allegany College of Maryland’s president, **I invite you home to ACM.** Join us for a softball or baseball game, tour our Cumberland or Everett campuses, meet with one of our Student Recruiters, or attend commencement. If ACM has helped give *you* a place to belong in higher education, share your story with us by emailing info@allegany.edu or calling 301-784-5005.