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Here In College Valley, Community Colleges are Difference Makers

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When SUNY Chancellor Nancy Zimpher spoke Thursday night at the Genesis Group's Celebration of Education, she stood right in the heart of College Valley. It's an honor to have the Chancellor of the nation's most significant statewide higher education system visit the Mohawk Valley and our rich tradition of diverse community colleges, polytechnic institutes, private colleges, and other educational partners.

We appreciate that our Chancellor knows that here in College Valley, like in the rest of New York State, community colleges are making a huge difference in the educational and economic prospects of our citizens.

Across New York, SUNY community colleges educate more than half of the 64-school system's undergraduate students. Closer to home, Mohawk Valley Community College, and Herkimer College combine to educate more than 10,000 students—LOCAL students—annually, the largest concentration of college goers between Syracuse and Albany. We attract hundreds more students from other regions, states, and nations too, enhancing our communities' diversity.

What we do for our students is remarkable and it is different from what other colleges do. We are here to help people at any point along the academic journey, with honors students studying and succeeding alongside with those in most dire need of academic and social supports. For those who want to directly enter the workforce we offer programs whose academic rigor provide graduates with skills that industry is looking for. For those who want to transfer we maintain agreements and partnerships with hundreds of SUNY and non-SUNY institutions providing a smooth pathway for students to realize their academic goals. And our recent efforts to create totally seamless transfer opportunities in SUNY are already saving our students money and time. Our proud community college alumni are workers, leaders, economic drivers, and well-informed citizens of our communities.

This narrative resonates and is well understood by our students and their families. As students vote with their heads, their hearts, and their wallets about where to attend college, the stories they tell us about why they choose community college increasingly emphasize our institutions' academic quality, efficiency, and cost effectiveness.

That said, the narrative is not reflected with regard to our funding. When New York State sought to balance its budgets in the mid-2000s, one of the places cut deeply and repeatedly was state base aid for community colleges. Even the modest increases since have failed to restore our state aid back to 2007-08 levels. The current year's budget is a case in point. The legislature's and Governor's agreement on a \$100 per student increase in state aid looks nice in headlines, but it is actually a system-wide cut to colleges' funding as the state's demographics drive enrollment down. The "increase" actually cost local community colleges hundreds of

thousands of dollars in state aid. We appreciate our government's attention and argue that more of it is warranted if community colleges are to provide the services and programs that our citizens expect of us.

At a time when the state is investing hundreds of millions in revving up the Upstate economy—with especially bright prospects here in College Valley—it's important for legislators and the Governor to continue to remember that community colleges are one of the most important parts of the economic engine. Investments through competitive grants, performance improvement funds, and other mechanisms are welcome and MVCC and Herkimer College are well poised to cooperate to secure those. And such investments should be accompanied by rational, predictable investments in base state aid so that community colleges can expand our core academic offerings to keep pace with the changing needs of our citizens and employers.