

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Bristol Community College Layoffs Target the Heart and Soul of Services for Students

Members of the faculty and professional staff union at Bristol Community College were dismayed last week when the Douglas Administration announced nearly 140 layoffs-of part-time employees. Employees were blindsided when they received a call from Human Resources and a follow up email, informing them that their position will be suspended until “the pandemic subsides.” Further, in a separate letter to the union leadership on April 14th, the Massachusetts Community Council Office of the General Counsel listed 35 union positions at Bristol that are to be retrenched.

The notification letters sent to the employees by Bristol’s Human Resource director explains the rationale for the layoffs: “It has become necessary for the college to make this determination due to budgetary constraints related to the COVID-19 Pandemic.” The letters included information about applying for unemployment benefits. However, many of those laid off will not be eligible because they serve in other part-time roles at the college.

While the college budget may have been negatively affected by the current crisis, there was no clear rationale for why certain positions were targeted, nor how the Douglas Administration decided on this particular collection of employees. Additionally, it is not clear if the potential impact of layoffs on the students was ever considered. Supervisors were not consulted in this decision, and neither was the union.

The decision to lay off employees due to budgetary constraints is particularly puzzling given that Bristol Community College will receive 4.6 million dollars as part of the CARES Act. Part of this Act requires the money to be spent on students affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It would seem that Bristol now has additional incentives to keep employees that support student success.

The positions chosen for layoff and/or retrenchment include library staff, advisers, coaches, health services, student services staff and culinary arts staff. Although crucial to the college mission, these part time employees were already among the lowest paid on the campus. It is important to note that many of the people laid off were required to remain working, putting themselves at risk during the early weeks of the COVID-19 crisis in Massachusetts, as the college slowly transitioned to remote learning. It appears

they were deemed essential not long ago by the same college that now sees them as expendable.

This move to lay off key employees is in direct opposition with the College's oft-touted student-centered philosophy. In fact, just a few months ago, the college was celebrating an award that ranked the college #1 in Massachusetts based on these student supports. The actions last week deliver one more major blow to areas that have already been gutted by previous reorganizations by the Douglas Administration that ultimately led to the union's vote of no confidence in her leadership late last year.

Calling this massive layoff "another example of failed transparency and shared governance by the Administration," a spokesperson for the Bristol Chapter of the Massachusetts Community College Council (MCCC) union summarized: "The most disheartening and incomprehensible aspects of this action is that the positions targeted are needed the most in this chaotic time of remote learning, due to COVID-19 restrictions. This is the time of the semester when students need extra tutoring support to clear the final hurdle to complete their coursework and exams. At the same time, they also must pay attention to registering for classes for the Summer and Fall semesters. And, if they are graduating, they must be preparing to select and transfer to a four-year institution. The advisers and tutors who are essential to guide them through this difficult time are the ones who were laid off. While the college has made a practice of hiring expensive outside consultants to fill key positions in Administration, they are eliminating the heart and soul of our support system for students and for our community in this difficult time."

The union is calling on the Douglas Administration to reconsider the decision to lay off important employees at this very challenging moment. Further, it asks that the Administration use this as an opportunity to bring stakeholders together to collectively strategize ways to address the potential budget shortfalls without further negatively impacting our students. Students, faculty, staff, supervisors, deans and administrators must all be part of this important conversation. The challenge to the Administration is for them to live up to their ubiquitous catchphrase "We will get through it together."