

May 8, 2020

Dear Bristol Community College Board of Trustees,

The faculty and staff of Bristol Community College are reaching out to you as the body appointed by the governor to be responsible for long-range planning, financial resource planning and organizational structure — the stewardship, if you will — of this great SouthCoast educational and community resource. We, like you, are well aware of the challenges that colleges and universities are facing now, and will face in the future, because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite all of the talk about transparency and shared governance, we trust that the Douglas Administration has more candidly shared its vision for our college both now and moving forward with you than with those of us working at the college.

The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed unprecedented challenges for all institutions — from small businesses to our colleges and universities. And, on the personal level, the alarming statistics and stories of those struggling with this disease, those caring for the ill without proper protection and those who have lost their lives or loved ones to this pandemic are heart wrenching. That's just part of the impact of this pandemic. We have also seen a spike in unemployment claims nationwide, which vividly illustrates the desperate realities of our fellow Americans in these uncertain times.

Unfortunately, more than 130 of our colleagues at Bristol Community College have joined these ranks of unemployed, even though many of them had been effectively working remotely and efficiently supporting students and faculty.

On April 14, just as faculty, staff and students were settling in from the tumultuous move to remote learning mid-semester due to COVID-19, the Douglas Administration blindsided the college community with layoff and retrenchment notices for 136 part-time employees. These notices coincided with the announcement of the award of \$4.6 million from the federal CARES Act — half to help students directly, the other half to help colleges maintain service during this tumultuous time.

Tutors, library staff, advising staff, and admissions placement testing staff were deemed “expendable,” even though virtually everyone who was targeted for layoff worked directly with our students and provided vital support for success for this term and beyond. It's immoral to leave our students without the help they need and have come to rely on.

These decisions were made at the highest level of the organization — without consulting the direct supervisors of those impacted. It has come to light that some of the individuals were laid off based on inaccurate coding in the payroll system that indicated they were not working remotely. This is absolutely false in many cases. The origin of this code is unclear.

The issue is that the Vice President of Academic Affairs and Human Resources made the decision that disrupted countless lives, without conducting even minimal diligence or following basic management principles of informing the supervisors. This is just one more example of the disconnect between Administration and those working at the college, even those in supervisory roles.

The relatively few hours worked at a low rate of pay by these targeted individuals will not significantly affect the college's finances or ability to navigate the COVID-19 crisis, especially if the college is in a "strong financial position," as Laura Douglas stated in a recent email to the college community. However, it will have a devastating effect on the students who are losing their trusted adviser or tutor. It can make the difference between success and withdrawal for vulnerable students at this crucial time.

It also has a devastating impact on these dedicated employees who have put in years of service helping students and the entire college. The remaining staff and faculty will be left without the essential support of lab technicians, admissions pre-testing counselors, advisors and tutors. President Douglas qualified her statement about the college's financial condition with "as long as we continue to make thoughtful and strategic decisions." We assert that these layoff decisions are neither thoughtful nor strategic.

These dedicated employees still could — and should — be at their jobs. Many of those laid off are unable to even apply for unemployment due to the unique circumstances of their work with Bristol Community College or because of other part-time jobs. The implication and long-term impact of these layoffs do not justify the minimal savings the college reaped by laying off some of the lowest paid individuals on campus.

We respectfully submit that you know only one perspective of our college, that from the bird's-eye view of President Douglas and the President's Leadership Team. As you know, this has led to conflict in the past year, including a vote of no confidence in November from the two unions that represent the dedicated faculty and staff at Bristol. The College administration has done such an effective job of board management, restricting access to the board and limiting the dialogue that is so important to understanding complex issues, that you may not be aware of the impact of what looks like a simple line item on a budget spreadsheet. These issues are complex and impact our students and the future of our college directly, far more than a five-minute presentation to the board can convey.

While none of us can know for sure what the post-COVID-19 outbreak world will look like, we do know it presents unique challenges for higher education as families are struggling day to day for food and shelter and not able to even think of college for themselves or the young adults. On the other hand, it presents an opportunity for Bristol Community College. Historically, times of low employment and uncertainty are when the community college is needed the most to help our neighbors and friends move on to better paying and fulfilling employment.

This is our time to step up and be there for those in need. We cannot do that effectively if we are scaled to the bone and eliminating vital support services for students. The difference of whether a student succeeds or struggles is often traced back to one or two relationships with faculty or staff who really cared and supported that student when it was most needed.

This gets back to the bird's-eye view of Bristol that you may have from your boardroom, rather than the view from those with boots on the ground, namely the faculty and staff. We have persevered through multiple short-sighted, disruptive and expensive reorganizations; we have watched talented people be escorted off campus or chose to leave for other positions in higher education institutions where their talents were appreciated; and we have done Herculean work to move everything to the remote environment with virtually no warning. We see a very different Bristol Community College from where we stand.

We ask that the Board address these concerns, as our community has come together to ask that these layoffs stop. The Board has also chosen to not address the concerns raised by the Vote of No Confidence in the fall of 2019. The concerns submitted to the board included the large number of layoffs already occurring at the college, even before COVID-19.

To date, the college has not disbursed any CARE Act funds to do what they were intended to do. Instead, valuable employees were laid off or retrenched. These layoffs and delay in disbursement are just the latest examples in a pattern of disorganization, reorganization and staffing changes that have had an adverse impact, often the exact opposite of what the administration seemed to intend, and led to both unions issuing a Vote of No Confidence for the Douglas Administration.

For the good of Bristol Community College, this board would benefit from listening to and working collaboratively with the employee unions, the Faculty/Professional Staff Senate and the Staff Senate to stem the tide of unnecessary layoffs and to work strategically to ensure our college remains a strong resource for the SouthCoast community. We are not the problem. We can be and want to be part of the solution in the true spirit of transparency and shared governance.

Sincerely,

Paulette Howarth
MCCC Bristol chapter president

Melanie Johnson
AFSCME Steward, BCC