New MassBay president sees school's growth potential

John O'Donnell is the new president of MassBay Community College in Wellesley.

WELLESLEY — New MassBay Community College President John O'Donnell says the school must expand and modernize its facilities, as well as boost technology education, in the next three years to keep up with an ever-changing economy.
But O'Donnell said the college must achieve growth without losing the affordability that has helped make MassBay the choice of more and more students in recent years.

At stake is the continued growth of a school that O'Donnell said is a key engine for the local economy, especially as a producer of the skilled graduates the state needs to replenish its expanding technology-based work force.

"I believe as MassBay goes, so goes MetroWest, economically and socially," he said.

O'Donnell wrapped up his first week on the job yesterday, a time during which he met with staff and gathered general information on the college.

He replaces Carole Berotte Joseph, who led the school for six years before accepting a job as president of Bronx Community College in New York.

O'Donnell did not speculate about how potential growth at MassBay would compare to the expansion he oversaw for the past seven years as president of Stark State College in North Canton, Ohio, where enrollment nearly tripled to more than 15,000 during his tenure.

"I think MassBay has the potential to grow, both in access - that's enrollment - and academic programs," he said.

The school must prepare to meet the demands of an economy that needs more workers with science and technology skills, O'Donnell said. To help accomplish this goal, MassBay needs to expand its Wellesley Hills main campus and satellite facilities in Framingham and Ashland, and explore the possibility of additional outreach campuses, he said.

O'Donnell also said the college may need to offer more science- and technology-based programs, such as clean energy and information technology.

Growth costs money, and O'Donnell said he does not want to see tuition increases form the foundation of that expansion. He said the college's fee hike for 2011-2012 - MassBay's first in three years - was judicious at the time. He said he will follow the board of trustees' goal of not making increases an annual occurrence.

Instead, O'Donnell said MassBay will rely on revenue from increased enrollments and seek other forms of state and federal funding.

"You can’t minimize finance," he said. "MassBay is strong financially, but our needs outstrip our resources."
One of O'Donnell's first steps will be to put in place a three-year strategic plan for the college by November. He also wants to boost outreach to local high schools, as well as call on alumni to share their stories with MassBay's students.

Ultimately, O'Donnell said he wants the college to be able to meet the needs of a student demographic that is becoming more diverse and less sheltered from the realities of the nation's poor economy.

"Many of our students have complex lives," he said. "They're taking care of their family, they're working."

As high school diplomas become increasingly devalued in the state's skill-based economy, community colleges are taking on a lot of the responsibility for making sure those students are getting the training they need to succeed, O'Donnell said.

"Label it what you will," he said. "You can't navigate this economy without the skills that higher education gives you."

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