

ECONOMIC DOWNTURN IMPACTS COLLEGE APPLICATIONS



Ellen M. O'Connor, Marguerite Dennis, Robert Lay, Carole Berotte Joseph, and Paula Rooney

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The economic downturn has led to increased applications at community colleges and at institutions perceived as elite, according to panelists discussing "Trends in Higher Education in Massachusetts: Five Perspectives."

Panelists discussed issues their respective institutions are facing—fiscal responsibility, the perception of educational value, communications plans, and technology—and applied them to larger-scale trends seen throughout the higher education community during the Feb. 25 discussion at Suffolk University.

Marguerite J. Dennis, vice president of Enrollment and International Programs at Suffolk University, moderated the program, offering a thought-provoking presentation on higher education trends and expectations for the future.

Applications trends

Economic uncertainty in the college decision-making process has led to increased "quality sensitivity," according to Robert S. Lay, dean for Enrollment Management at Boston College. He said that many of the top schools have seen an increase in applications as families choose to pay more for the perceived benefits of an elite institution.

Carole M. Berotte Joseph, president of Mass Bay Community College noted that community colleges also have seen an increase in applications from bargain-seeking Bay Staters. With layoffs in the workforce, community colleges' affordable options for learning new skills means higher enrollments, with a 35 percent increase in applications and financial aid this year. Yet legislative budget cuts create challenges when it comes to maintaining courses and programs.

Staying the course

The standing-room only crowd was given a glimpse into the administrative side of higher education, as both Ellen M. O'Connor, vice chancellor for Administration and Finance at the University of Massachusetts Boston and Paula M. Rooney, president of Dean College, emphasized the importance of "knowing your mission" and maintaining financial integrity despite economic challenges and difficult times.

Dennis, stressing the importance of technology now and in the future, said: "Social media have forever changed the landscape of how we do things." She also predicted the biggest trend of all—that change itself will be our constant companion.

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