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**Mohawk Valley Community College
Education Reform Commission Testimony
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Community colleges are positioned at the nexus of the educational and workforce pipelines that fuel our economy and shape our society. The unique view from this position reveals sobering realities along with abundance and optimism from leveraging partnerships with local schools, non-profits, businesses, and government agencies. Mohawk Valley Community College (MVCC) experiences many of the same challenges as other community colleges in New York State and has developed some exciting local initiatives that are focused on leveraging our resources to make our youth college and career ready to learn, earn, and live right here in the Mohawk Valley. We appreciate the Governor's initiative to establish this Commission and to host this hearing today and hope our efforts inform your important work. The issues we face are daunting, but at least they are clear. As echoed by the Gates and Lumina Foundations, we know what works – we just need to figure out how to bring things to scale.

The results of our educational system in New York State produce unacceptable consequences that surface here locally. Of those students who take our placement tests, more than 70% test below college-level in math and more than 25% test below college-level in writing. A disconnect exists between learning and career development. Despite the best efforts of the schools and MVCC, we still have a significant number of 18-20 year-olds who have not yet identified much form to a career path. Even as we've made curriculum adjustments, we still have local employers who indicate their most significant needs for entry-level workers are in the basic areas of critical thinking, problem solving, and interpersonal communication skills – the gaps are too frequent and too frustrating for our employers and our communities to thrive. In addition, we continue to see elements of intolerance and incivility among our students along with limited worldviews and global understanding.

Based on my experience and our current work at MVCC along with our education and business partners, I offer the following recommendations to inform your important work:

1. Make the connection between literacy levels and math achievement.
2. Make math fun.
3. Connect to careers to make learning relevant.
4. Change minds and change the world.
5. Change behavior by changing choices.

In an effort to help schools produce graduates that are both college and career ready, MVCC provides annual reports to local high schools on their graduates and has become very intentional in helping local schools provide programming as well.

Make the Connection between Literacy and Math

Research has demonstrated the high correlation between literacy levels and math achievement. This important connection has prompted MVCC to get involved with literacy issues in the community. MVCC has focused on early literacy levels by partnering with agencies like the Boys and Girls Club to redirect their summer programming dollars to provide a summer reading program for youth entitled “Reading Rangers” to minimize the drop in student literacy levels that occurs for low income youth while they are out of school over the summer. In addition, MVCC helped facilitate a partnership between the local Literacy Coalition and Duffy Books USA to provide 30,000 free books to the Rome City School District and other school districts in western Oneida County to help stop *booklessness* in homes.

Make Math Fun

Something happens in school with student attitudes and performance in math. Research shows a significant drop in student achievement and perceived connection with math between 3rd and 8th grade. Rather than treating math as a four-letter word, math needs to be seen as a way of training the mind for critical thinking and problem solving – the very skills employers are desperately demanding. As part of the Gear Up program, MVCC and Utica City Schools offered Math Corps, a 4 week summer math program modeled after the nationally acclaimed program at Wayne State University in Detroit, MI. Wayne State’s program was developed 22 years ago by faculty trained by Jaime Escalante (the inspiration for the movie Stand and Deliver). Their six week program moves students from a pre-test average ACT math score of 13 to a post-test average score of 17. MVCC’s first pilot effort with MathCorps provided interactive and engaging day-long math instruction and student success programming, that resulted in students’ pre and post test scores jumping 20% in just four weeks of intensive math instruction. The overall numbers were influenced by English Language Learners whose results jumped 25% from pre to post test.

Connect to Career Clusters to Make Learning Relevant

I moved to New York State in 2007 from Omaha, Nebraska where I served on a statewide workgroup called Futureforce Nebraska. This multi-agency effort helped guide the Nebraska state department of education to develop a statewide plan for career education. Based on the national career cluster framework, career education across the state was focused on career awareness in elementary school, career exposure in middle level grades, and career experiences in high school. This required creative partnerships with businesses and postsecondary education. Upon arriving here in the Mohawk Valley, I personally visited every school district superintendent in Oneida County and found the current curriculum standards having very little room for career education outside of BOCES programming. So we are working to fill in the gaps where we can.

Five years ago, MVCC redesigned our College for Kids summer programming and began offering career camps. The intent of this move was to provide youth (ages 9-14) with weeklong educational experiences that expose them to careers and help make the connection between learning in school and pursuing a career. We take advantage of local business partners to help expose students to careers that are available locally. During the 2011-12 academic year, MVCC offered more than 45 career camps and served more than 700 youth.

The Science Technology Entry Program (STEP) is a New York State grant funded program that takes low-income, first generation students in grades 9-12 and exposes them to

programs and careers in the STEM areas. We have always had a waitlist for this program and the individual and overall student success results are inspiring. Clearly, more needs to be done in the area of STEM education throughout the state.

In addition, MVCC received support from the Rome Community Foundation to partner with the Rome City School District to develop and pilot the Rome Futures Academy. School district guidance counselors identified 18 rising 9th graders who had potential but risked graduating high school due to various barriers in their lives. During the four week program, students experienced literacy-focused instruction that addressed common core standards in addition to touring a number of local business operations and hearing from local professionals about job and career opportunities in the area.

Change Minds and Change the World

Federally funded grant programs like Gear Up and Upward Bound allow MVCC to partner with the Utica City School District to provide wrap-around support services for youth. Upward Bound focuses on low-income, first generation college students and follows them through grades 9-12. Gear Up offers similar programming and follows the entire class of 2017 from 7th grade through 12th with the intent to retain, graduate, and see as many completers as possible continue on to college. Students are provided with after-school tutoring, mentoring, field trips and other experiences that help them develop and internalize a positive and aspiring future for themselves that will help break the multi-generational cycle of poverty in our community.

Our rapidly changing world and society requires students to have a more expanded world view and the temperament to productively participate in a civil society. Six years ago, MVCC implemented a Diversity and Global View (DGV) graduation requirement. To receive an associate's degree from MVCC, students must complete at least one course with a DGV designation, attend four DGV events (lectures, films, performances, etc.), and complete four online DGV modules and successfully pass the related online assessments. This nationally recognized effort provides students with exposure to experiences and content that they might not otherwise receive in the natural course of their educational experience.

Going to college is an inherent part of the American Dream. However, a great myth in our society is that going to college means obtaining a bachelor's degree. However, less than one third of adults age 25 or older actually have such a degree – in Oneida, Herkimer, and Madison counties less than one fifth of adults have a four-year degree or more. However, the fastest growing occupations and projected high demand job growth areas require more associate degrees than any other – we are where the jobs are. To help change these perceptions and get the information in the right hands, MVCC is partnering with local school districts to host our first-ever Guidance Counselor Summit on October 19th. This all-day event will occur on a superintendents' day and provide professional development for all guidance counselors in the area to allow us to share what we have learned from our unique perspective at the nexus of education and the workplace.

Change Behavior by Changing Choices

Research demonstrates that students who complete at least one college course while still in high school are three times as likely to graduate from college. Four years ago, MVCC received national accreditation for its concurrent enrollment programs that offer dual credit. With more than 1,000 qualified high school juniors and seniors enrolled, dual credit students

comprise close to 15 percent of our total headcount. We continue to work with local school districts to identify qualified teachers that meet the educational requirements of the schools and the College and expand our offerings wherever possible.

At our annual Superintendents' breakfast, we agreed to actively pursue closing the gap in math preparedness at MVCC. A curriculum team comprised of math teachers from multiple districts worked with MVCC math faculty to develop a new mathematics course to fill in the gap. This year we are running a pilot with Westmoreland School District to have every high school junior and senior take MVCC's math placement test. The results will inform course taking behavior for students in their junior year. Seniors testing below college levels will be offered a new math course designed to have MVCC's placement test as the pre-test and the post-test – making these students college ready for math. We believe this is a scalable design that will be brought to all school districts in Oneida County next year.

If we want to change the college-bound behavior we need to change the choices students have. Following the lead from the San Marcos School District in Austin, Texas (as described in the book *Nudge*), MVCC is partnering with a local school district who has agreed to pilot an interesting concept – add a completed MVCC admissions application as a high school graduation requirement. San Marcos Schools saw an 11% increase in college attendance in the first year of adding this requirement, as it was supplemented by a series of communication efforts on the part of the local community college – including placement testing, financial aid workshops for parents, etc. MVCC intends to continue to pursue this effort and hopefully bring it to scale to increase the college-going rates of our high school graduates in the future.

The future of New York State's workforce lies in the number and capacity of our Associate Degree holders. The need for students to have critical thinking, problem solving, and interpersonal skills cannot be overstated. Along with our partners, MVCC is aggressively pursuing programming and change efforts wherever possible to increase student achievement. Although we have a few initiatives we hope to bring to scale, more help is needed at the state level. Resources must be leveraged to move beyond limited grant funded boutique programs and targeted toward those programs with the greatest potential for scalability. The result will be the needed structural and programmatic changes that will move the needle on student achievement and insure that our students graduate high school ready to succeed in college and ready to prosper in a productive career right here in the Empire State.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Randall J. VanWagoner". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Randall J. VanWagoner, Ph.D.
President