

# Kennedy stops by MCC to soak in STEM education success firsthand

By Chelsea Feinstein, Lowell Sun

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From left, Lowell Mayor Rodney Elliott, U.S. Reps. Niki Tsongas and Joseph P. Kennedy III visit with Shan Ramos and Vini Proeung Friday during a tour of the United Teen Equality Center in Lowell. Watch video on this story at [lowellsun.com](http://lowellsun.com). Sun / Bob Whitaker

LOWELL -- Lowell's leadership on initiatives to promote STEM education and workforce development prompted a visit from U.S. Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy III and U.S. Rep. Niki Tsongas to two local programs Friday.

During a visit to an immunology lab at Middlesex Community College's downtown Lowell campus, Kennedy praised MCC for providing students a pipeline to higher education and critical jobs in a way that is both affordable and flexible. Training a strong workforce, he said, is a backbone of the Massachusetts economy.

"We are not a low-cost state. Our labor rates are high, our energy rates are high, our taxes are high, regulations are high. Companies need to make up for that with a better work product than they're going to find anywhere else," Kennedy said.



U.S. Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy III, center, visits with Middlesex Community College biotech professor Mariluci Bladon, right, as retiring MCC President Carole Cowan, right rear, U.S. Rep. Niki Tsongas and incoming MCC President James Mabry look on. courtesy MCC

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"You only do that if you've got the best talent that you're going to find anywhere in the world. We're only going to do that if we can attract the best talent and educate you guys with the skills that you need in order to compete in those jobs."

Students in the class said that the college had provided them with a lower cost alternative to four-year universities. They praised the school's internship program and hands-on classes, as well as its flexibility in accommodating different schedules.

Reputation, though, was something one student said he had seen fellow students struggle with as they looked to transfer to four-year universities, a goal many said they shared.

Building up that reputation, Kennedy said, was an important goal.

"If you can actually show that you're getting a much better education or just as good an education in a lab like this as you are at a four-year institution that's charging you five or 10 or 15 times as much, then that's going to be something that we want to shine that light on at Middlesex Community College," Kennedy said.

Tsongas called community college "invaluable," but said that it was sometimes poorly understood. Schools like MCC, she said, were slowly changing that perception.



U.S. Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy III listens to presentations at UTEC Friday.

Over the last few years, MCC has pushed enrollment in STEM programs, retiring President Carole Cowan said. That led to a 169 percent increase in enrollment in life sciences over that time period, and a 31 percent increase in STEM enrollment, as well as plans to construct a new biotechnology building at the school's Bedford campus.

Earlier in the day, Kennedy was a guest speaker in a course at UMass Lowell on Congress taught by Chancellor Marty Meehan.

And Tsongas and Kennedy also had visited the United Teen Equality Center earlier, an organization that helps at-risk youth overcome violence and poverty and work toward successful careers.

Programs like UTEC, which was founded by young people, exemplify the innovative work being done in Lowell to promote workforce development, Tsongas said.



U.S. Rep. Niki Tsongas, left, with United Teen Equality Center Executive Director Gregg Croteau, board member Jim Gaherty, of Westford, and U.S. Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy III during UTEC tour Friday afternoon.

"We tend to be very innovative and forward-thinking and hard-working, and in every instance you see a standard of excellence, a willingness to think out of the box, an understanding of how important especially our younger generation is," she said.

After speaking with students at both organizations, Kennedy said he had been impressed by both programs' understanding that the path to success is different for every person.

Rethinking traditional models, he said, was critically important.

Kennedy and Tsongas both praised President Barack Obama's proposal to offer students free tuition to community college.

Kennedy called the proposal "a great starting block," but said it was important to understand that community colleges need to be flexible in accommodating students with different schedules and other commitments.



U.S. Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy III, center rear, serves as a guest speaker in a course on Congress taught by UMass Lowell Chancellor Marty Meehan.

"If we want to incentivize this alternative pathway, which we absolutely do because we need those skills, we need that talent, we have to recognize the fact that that traditional model of education, that needs to be rethought," Kennedy said.

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