



Photo by Cheryl Senter

"I was on the fence about whether or not I wanted to go to college for financial reasons, and this was a good nudge in the right direction."

Riley graduated from Bedford High School and took his free class at Lakes Region Community College. He is the first in his family to attend college and hopes to complete a certificate in culinary arts. His goal is to become a head chef.

The Class Gift: What we can learn

Two foundations teamed up to offer a free community college course for all New Hampshire high school grads to help get students back on track.

As New Hampshire's high school Class of 2021 prepared for graduation, the **New Hampshire Charitable Foundation** and **The Foundation for New Hampshire Community Colleges** offered every member of that class an early graduation gift in May, 2021: one free class at any of New Hampshire's seven community colleges in the fall of 2021. The class gift was made possible by the generous contributions of New Hampshire people and businesses to the two foundations.

The gift was offered to every student graduating from a New Hampshire high school or home school program in 2021 with a goal to encourage college-going among students who were affected by the disruptions of the

pandemic, especially students from families that struggle financially. The Foundations' gift covered tuition and associated fees (up to \$755) for every student. The colleges also offered help with course selection and other types of advising.

The gift focused on community colleges because they are most accessible geographically and economically to the greatest number of New Hampshire residents; because community college programs provide a wide range of efficient pathways to high-demand careers in New Hampshire; and because community college credits can be transferred toward four-year degrees at schools in the state's university system.

By September 2021, more than 1,200 graduates of the Class of 2021 had enrolled in their free course.

25%

of students who responded to a survey said that the class gift was the reason they decided to enroll in their local community college.

84%

of students enrolled had some form of financial need, according to Community College System of NH (CCSNH) data.

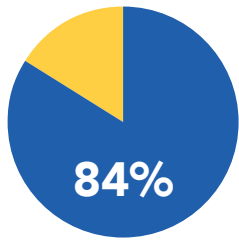
1.3%

CCSNH enrollment increase in the year of the class gift, compared with a nationwide decline in community college enrollment of -3.4% in the same period.

30%

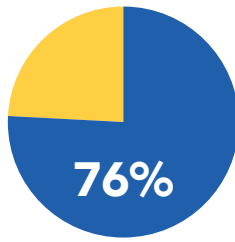
of survey respondents said they would be the first in their families to complete a college degree or certificate program.

Student experience and success



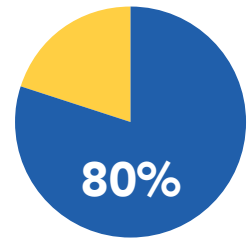
84% COURSES COMPLETED

Of the 4,459 CCSNH courses in which students enrolled, 84% were completed successfully compared to 73% for the overall student population. 91% of students took more than one class during the fall semester.



76% ENROLLED IN PROGRAM

76% of students enrolled in Spring Semester 2022 with 88% in an associate degree program and 12% in a certificate program. The top 10 degree programs selected include high demand fields such as professional/business services, healthcare and early childhood education.



80% BENEFITED FROM ADVISING

80% of student survey respondents said that they found support services at CCSNH to be helpful. Of those 80%, just under half specifically mentioned the benefit of having advising services and the great help of their advisor.

Data is from CCSNH reporting (February 2022) and CCSNH/OEC survey of class gift recipients (May 2022).

"I work full-time as an LNA, and I pay for college directly out of my savings, so having a free course really helped me choose my local community college."

Keene High School graduate Kaitlin from Surry is attending River Valley Community College to become a physical therapy assistant.



Enrollment across the community college system

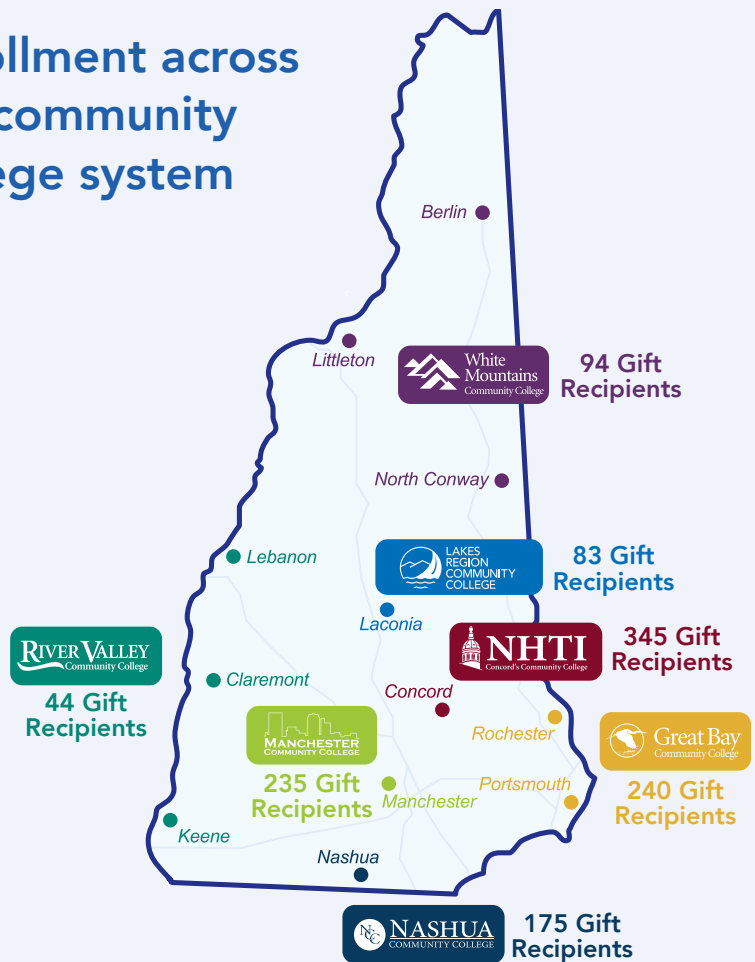


Photo courtesy of CCSNH



"It really helped. It took a lot of stress off of me. I am majoring in early childhood education. I grew up in the foster system and was always taking care of kids of all ages, and caring for kids is something I really like to do. I plan to go on for a bachelor's and I am hoping to start off as a K-3 teacher."

Savahna graduated from Londonderry High School and is enrolled at Manchester Community College.

Reflections and implications for New Hampshire

- 1. Cost is a barrier to community college attendance.** New Hampshire has the highest community college tuition in the country. When barriers to attending community college — including financial barriers — are lowered or removed, more students can get the education and training they need to enter high-demand fields in New Hampshire and move up the economic ladder. Despite the fact that New Hampshire has the third-highest median income in the U.S., 84% of students attending community colleges have financial need, a figure which exactly mirrors the national average. We also know that tuition is not the only barrier for many students from families who struggle economically. Associated costs like transportation, housing and childcare can put college out of reach for many.
- 2. Lessons from neighboring states.** In Maine and Vermont, community college is currently free. After a successful "Class Gift" program in 2021, Vermont expanded that program and offered free community college for two years to any student with a family income of less than \$75,000. Maine has made community college entirely free for students with economic need, and has seen an 11% spike in applications statewide, with almost 77% of new students qualifying for free tuition. In both states, the programs seek to help students get the education they need to thrive while bolstering the states' economies and meeting workforce needs.
- 3. More investment needed.** The Charitable Foundation offers scholarships specific to community college degree and professional certificate programs. The Foundation for New Hampshire Community Colleges also offers scholarships and support to students. But such investments are not enough to cover the need and to remove barriers for New Hampshire students — in particular, for low-income students and students of color. Increased state investment and use of federal resources could remove financial barriers, drive up enrollment and benefit New Hampshire students, employers, communities and the economy.

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