Chairwoman Davis, Ranking Member Smucker, and Members of the Subcommittee,

thank you for the opportunity to brief you on the pressing issue of degree completion, its implications for our future workforce, and solutions we are implementing at Bunker Hill Community College.

Bunker Hill is a mid-size urban institution in Boston, serving 18,000 students annually from the metro area and a number of Gateway Cities. Community colleges educate over 13 million students, one out of every two undergrads around our nation. Middle- and lower-income students are more likely to attend community colleges than any other type of higher education institution.

We are the source for the future workforce, performing what we call “new-collar jobs.” Jobs that are middle-skills, requiring some college, and pay well. Jobs in IT, STEM, Health Care, Manufacturing, and the Creative Economy driven by the expansion of gaming and artificial intelligence. In Massachusetts alone, 65,000 middle-skills workers are needed by the beginning of the next decade. In fact, 80% of the jobs created now will require some college.

But our enrollments are not trending to meet this need. Our high school population will drop steeply in five years, and fewer college grads will reach the workplace. Our hope of filling
these new-collar jobs lies in educating our adult learners, who are becoming the majority at
community colleges.

Degree completion in two, or even three years has always been a challenge for
community college students, and now even more so with adult learners.

The first challenge is financial and social. College is not at the center of the lives of adult
learners. 3 out of 4 work. 3 out of 5 are parents. 77% earn at the lowest two quintiles of
income. They are often one small financial disaster away from dropping out. They are
financially fragile, but they also know college leads to economic mobility.

A majority of students who drop out were in good standing. 60% had a 2.5 GPA or above,
and 40% have finished a full year of classes. The pressures of Basic Needs: housing, food,
transportation and childcare are what derailed these students. Over 50% of students
experienced food insecurity on our campuses; 14% were homeless.

So Bunker Hill’s immediate answer was to open a food pantry, to fundraise for public
transportation passes, and to advocate for alignment of social benefits like SNAP with needs of
adult college students. Additionally, Open Educational Resources available online replaced
traditional textbooks, saving approximately $1.5 million to our students since the start of the
OER program in 2016.

The second challenge is academic preparation. 90% of entering students need
developmental math; 45% are below college level in English. We used to call Developmental
Education (Dev Ed) the revolving front door. The longer you stayed in Dev Ed, the more likely
you were to drop out. So we compressed and accelerated Dev Ed. Take math and English two
levels at a time (we call it a co-requisite), with tutoring services available at the student’s
request. It seems counterintuitive, but students did better, and can complete their Dev Ed work in one year. We are working on our sequences for English as a Second Language courses now with the same principles.

The third challenge is to map the shortest pathway to employment. This requires industry-aligned curriculum, apprenticeships, and internships from our business partners. We need certificates that stack toward a degree. We need fully paid experiential learning opportunities with transportation stipends. The best retention strategy is a promised job at the end of the program.

The final challenge is for the institution to shift from the traditional college paradigm. To retain and graduate every adult learner, we must craft policies, procedures, schedules, services, and mindsets that respect the complex lives of the adult student, and cater to it. Bunker Hill used to offer midnight classes to accommodate workers on the second shift. Now we offer hybrid and online classes for the same reason.

Meeting these four challenges will help retain, and graduate a larger and more prosperous future workforce. Thank you for an opportunity to share our strategies.