



## **PRESIDENT'S REPORT**

**TO:** Members, OCC Board of Trustees

**FROM:** Pamela Monaco, Ph.D.  
President

**SUBJECT:** Items of Interest for the January 29, 2026, Board Meeting

**DATE:** January 26, 2026

### **Spring 2026 Colloquium**

The Spring 2026 Colloquium, *Building Opportunity, Strengthening Community*, took place on Thursday, January 15, 2026. The day began with breakfast at 8 a.m. in the Student Center, and everyone moved to the Gym at 9:15 a.m. for an in-person Capacity Café, a structured table top discussion format facilitated by Achieving the Dream coaches and key administrative staff. Using the results of OCC's 2025 Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT), an anonymous survey distributed to employees in November, discussions focused on identifying strengths and opportunities for growth across seven key capacity areas essential to students achieving success. At least 240 faculty and staff were able to participate in at least some of the discussions.

Following lunch, at 2:15 p.m. I shared my state-of-the-college address with the members of the college community. My report is attached for your review. It may also be found with accompanying slides at <https://www.ocean.edu/about-us/news/spring-2026-colloquium/>.

### **Presentations**

- Ms. Kaitlyn Light will share her experience as a Communications Intern in College Relations, where she focuses on interviewing OCC students and telling their stories. Kaitlyn joined the department in August 2025 as a part-time communications intern with an emphasis on student-centered storytelling. By participating in OCC programs, attending student events, and conducting interviews with people across the campus, Kaitlyn has demonstrated a strong ability to connect with students and highlight their unique experiences. Her work will appear in the upcoming issue of Ocean Views, and she will also be developing a new edition of our

student-centered publication, The Breeze, this Spring. With an academic background in Creative Writing from Bucknell University and a talent for narrative storytelling, Kaitlyn's contributions extend well beyond the typical scope of an intern role, directly supporting outreach efforts and promotion of student success.

- Dr. Neil Lavender, Professor of Social Sciences, will attend the Board meeting to report on his Fall 2025 semester sabbatical leave project, "Traditional Marriage and Its Impact on Society," based on the declining rates of traditional marriages, thereby negatively affecting our society. He developed a customizable module of his project that can be adapted for use in classes by OCC faculty.

Dr. Lavender began at OCC in 1980 as a full-time faculty member and taught General, Personality, Child, Social, and Abnormal Psychology. He founded and led the establishment of the Psi Beta Honor Society.

After forty-five years, Dr. Lavender retired on January 1 of this year. The Board of Trustees will honor him at Thursday's meeting.

### **Information Technology**

As part of the College's annual audit, CliftonLarsonAllen (CLA) conducted an evaluation of OCC's Information Technology (IT) environment. The objective of this IT Review was to assess the computer processing environments and general controls that support the reliability of OCC's business and financial systems in connection with the financial statement audit for the year ending June 30, 2025.

This review was performed using a high-level, risk-based approach and was not intended to serve as a full-scope network security assessment of the organization's IT infrastructure. The scope focused specifically on identifying the internal controls and security measures implemented by management to safeguard the integrity of transactions and data that directly impact financial reporting.

During the course of the audit procedures, CLA noted that the College has effectively established security controls addressing operational, technical, and managerial aspects of its IT environment. CLA also provided recommendations to further strengthen OCC's control posture, and these recommendations will be implemented.

### **Faculty and Staff Publications/Presentations/Accomplishments**

- Ms. Kate Sanchez, College Lecturer II in Spanish, was nominated for the Donald Award for her paper, "Post-Borderlands: Anzaldua's Spiritual Legacy," that she presented at last year's annual Mid-Atlantic Popular and American Culture Association (MAPACA) Conference in Philadelphia. The Donald Award is the "best in show" award given to the overall best paper or presentation at the conference. Award winners will be announced in the Spring and honored at next year's conference in Baltimore, Maryland.
- Ocean County College was notified on January 8, 2026, that the Associate in Applied Science Dental Hygiene Program was approved by the New Jersey Academic Issues Committee and the New Jersey Presidents Council.

The Delta Dental Foundation has approved a grant of \$285,462 to support the development and implementation of Ocean County College's Dental Hygiene Program. The award includes \$90,000 for year one, starting in January 2026, with additional funding of \$144,239 in 2027 and \$51,223 in 2028 for years two and three, contingent upon satisfactory outcomes reports. The multi-year grant will support program accreditation, workforce development, and long-term program sustainability.

- On Wednesday, January 7, 2026, Ms. Pam Bogdan, College Lecturer II in Engineering, was a speaker at a Women in Science and Engineering (WISE) event in Hillsborough, New Jersey. During this event, women in science and engineering fields share their career experiences and insights, helping to encourage high school girls to pursue education and careers in STEM.
- On Thursday, January 8, 2026, Dr. Mark William Westmoreland, College Lecturer II in Philosophy, gave a lecture, "Professional Ethics, Institutional Integrity, and the Necessity of Philosophical Thought" at the annual conference for the eastern division of the American Philosophical Association in Baltimore, Maryland, the preeminent philosophical learned society in North America. Dr. Westmoreland also facilitated a roundtable for undergraduate philosophy and pre-law students who were interested in careers in law or criminal justice.
- On December 12, 2025, Ocean County College was recognized by the DART Prevention Coalition of Ocean County for the "2025 Excellence in Community Impact Award" as a result of collaboration with the Institute for Prevention and Recovery on initiatives for community engagement and providing necessary resources and education across campus. The Counseling Center was recognized for providing students with free and confidential access to life-saving medication to reverse an overdose, as well as other items to increase safety in potentially high-risk situations and resources to support recovery. Through this partnership, Counseling Center staff were also trained in recognizing signs of an overdose and effective intervention, as well as how to provide this education and helpful community resources to students.

### **Professional Development**

- Ms. Heidi Sheridan, Executive and Artistic Director, Grunin Center for the Arts, and Ms. Laura Westmoreland, Assistant Director of Operations and Production, attended the global Association of Performing Arts and Arts Professionals conference in New York City, where they met with agents, saw showcases, and enjoyed professional development activities.
- On January 8, 2026, Ms. Melissa Gutzmore, Counseling Support Coordinator, attended the New Jersey Mental Health in Higher Education Summit at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. This activity provided the opportunity to connect with higher education professionals across the state and learn best practices to support student mental health.
- Three new Clinical Instructors joined the School of Nursing and Health Sciences this Spring. Orientation for new Clinical Instructors was held on January 12, 2026.
- Two trainings were held in December 2025 for 24 high school partners and 8 OCC employees to become certified or recertified as proctors for the College Board's Accuplacer Test. This certification allows for high school personnel to administer the Accuplacer on-site, as well as for OCC staff to proctor at the high school in collaboration with the College Readiness Now XII Grant and the Early College Team.

## **Student Accolades**

- OCC's Athletic Department was extremely successful both on the field and in the classroom during the Fall semester. Men's and women's soccer, cross country, and women's volleyball teams all competed in their respective Region 19 championship finals. Our Fall semester student athletes were similarly outstanding in the classroom, with 52 of them earning Academic All-Garden State Athletic Conference honors with grade point averages of 3.0 or higher this past semester, and 47 earning Academic All-Region accolades with 3.25 or higher grade point averages. Additionally, 12 Fall student athletes completed the semester with 4.0 grade point averages while participating in their respective sports. We could not be prouder of all of our student athletes for their outstanding achievements.
- Of the 133 graduates who sat for the 2025 National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN®), OCC's passing rate was 95.49%. Scores remain above the national passing rate for Associate Degree Nursing programs (86.1%) and for all types of nursing programs, including Associate, Baccalaureate, and Diploma (86.7%). An additional 55 students completed the Nursing Program in December 2025 and are now eligible to take the national licensure examination.
- Students completed 42 Bloomberg certifications in the last year. A Bloomberg Certification exhibits entry-level skills on the Bloomberg terminal, which is a financial data and software platform. The students gain the fundamental and valuable skills they can use to take part in a junior- or senior-level Finance course. The certification is an asset for students looking to transfer to four-year business programs, as most New Jersey business schools have Bloomberg terminals.

## **Student Clubs and Activities**

- On December 8, 2025, the Honors by Contract Fall 2025 Student Project Showcase took place in the Instructional Building Atrium. Twenty students showcased the Honors by Contract projects they were working on with their instructors. Students, faculty, administration, and family members attended the event to see firsthand the amazing projects and the hard work of OCC's Honors students.
- The Engineering Club had multiple fundraisers for their scholarship fund throughout the Fall 2025 semester. The Engineering Club kicked off its fundraising with a co-event with the Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), Hospitality Club, and Fashion Club. This fundraiser allows students and local small businesses a marketplace to sell goods. Later in the semester, the Engineering Club held additional sales events for items that the club manufactured using the micro-manufacturing lab. Club members look forward to continued fundraising during the Spring semester.
- Three Ocean County College teams participated in the 2025 Bloomberg Global Trading Challenge, making mock investments and tracking investment performance. The teams were captained by Business students Trevor Cicco, Kaydin Easton, and Nick Salzano and advised by Ms. Katherine Toy, College Lecturer II in Economics. Each team is provided one million dollars of hypothetical funds to invest in stocks, making the mock trades using the Bloomberg terminals in the business lab. Throughout the competition, which began in October and ended on November 14, 2025, OCC students competed against students from around the world.

- On December 13, 2025, the Math Club held its annual scholarship fundraiser during *The Nutcracker* performance at the Jay and Linda Grunin Center for the Arts and raised just over \$900. The Math Club faculty advisors, Ms. Julia Kim, College Lecturer II in Mathematics, and Mr. Frankie Mennicucci, Adjunct Assistant Professor, four Math Club officers, and members of the club participated in this event.
- The annual Spring Club Fair was scheduled for on Wednesday, January 28, 2026, in the Student Center. Because of the snow storm, it has been rescheduled to February 4, 2026. Leaders from the various clubs on campus will promote their clubs to prospective new members and share information on the events and activities they are planning this semester.
- The Engineering and Industrial/Technical Studies program held its end-of-semester celebration in December. Students, faculty, alumni, OCC administration, and academic and industry partners gathered to acknowledge the hard work being done by OCC students. Outstanding students and design competition winners were announced. New, transfer, and graduating students were acknowledged, and outstanding faculty and industry partners were announced as well. Additionally, the Engineering Club COG awards for Networking, Community Service, and Projects were given to students.

### **Student Support Services and Activities**

- During the Fall term, the Student Success team made over 12,000 outgoing calls to students, including calls for a faculty-generated alert on a low course average. More than 3,000 students, or more than 50% of the enrolled Fall students, had an alert raised during the Fall term.

The Student Enrollment Building had 2,083 visits in the month of December. The average wait time was just over 7.5 minutes. The majority of the students were visiting for Enrollment Services (1,360), followed by Academic Advising (555) and Financial Aid (45).

The HUB completed 2,430 outgoing calls in the month of December. They spent over 119 hours on the phone, in total, reaching out to students to encourage Spring registration, inform them about Winter payments, and remind new applicants to complete their on-boarding steps.

In addition to the HUB's outgoing calls, noted above, the Enrollment Services team facilitated calling 395 students for course cancellations, 73 students for a change of course schedule, 85 students for a pre-requisite issue, and another 3 students for lab/lecture mismatch for Spring 2026 science courses.

Three Express Enrollment Days were held on December 11 and 16, 2025, and January 7, 2026, supporting 16 new students in completing onboarding steps for the Spring term.

- Student leaders joined members of the Student Life team on January 7 and 8, 2026, at the annual Trailblazers Leadership Retreat. The retreat workshops provide students the opportunity to develop their leadership skills by exploring their values, practicing empathy, developing their strengths, and encouraging connection with others.
- The Counseling Center has been working diligently to provide services to students and the campus community, serving 111 students since the last report. The staff continue to offer services through multiple access points in the Counseling Center, virtually, and within the Veterans and Military Resources Center. Student utilization rates increased in Fall 2025 by

41.4% compared to Fall 2024. Student engagement and retention with the Counseling Center has also increased, as the number of individual students attending three or more counseling sessions nearly doubled from 27.6% in Fall 2024 to 51.2% in Fall 2025.

- On December 3, 2025, the Counseling Center hosted “Pawse and Play,” encouraging the campus community to take time out of their day to find joy and stress-reduction through playful interaction with puppies from a local animal rescue. Over 40 students, faculty, and staff were in attendance.

### **Student Outreach**

- Enrollment Services Advisor for College Pathways, Ms. Lauren Simon, facilitated a Career Workshop at Lacey Township High School for 50 freshmen and sophomores. The event took place on December 3 and 4, 2025.
- On December 4, 2025, student worker Kate Ibarra and Multilingual Language Navigator Carolina Newman presented College 101 in Spanish to 30 ELL students at Southern Regional High School. Ms. Newman also presented College 101 and led a campus tour for 30 Manchester High School students at OCC on December 5, 2025.
- Helping Hands had scheduled an awareness event on January 28, 2026, but it will be rescheduled because of the snow and ice on campus. The event will promote the campus Food Pantry and help students learn about the resources that are available to them on and off campus. The Ocean County Board of Social Services Mobile Outreach team is scheduled to be at this event to answer questions and to help students sign up for county and state resources. A similar event will be held on Wednesday, February 18, 2026, to help decrease the stigma associated with food insecurity and to help promote a hunger-free campus community.
- The Robert J. Novins planetarium launched "Calm in the Cosmos" during the last week of the Fall semester to give students and staff a quiet place “in space” to relax around finals.
- From December 15 to 18, 2025, the Grunin Center hosted the Grunin Performing Arts Academy's Winter Vocal and Dance Showcases.
- Over 600 students from nine Ocean County schools and three community groups attended two Schools ‘n Stage performances of *Layer the Walls Midcentury*, which tells the story of three immigrant families whose lives shaped New York City.
- Orientation for new nursing students was held on campus January 8, 2026. During the program, students were introduced to the faculty, policies, and procedures of the program, electronic textbooks, as well as strategies to enhance learning.
- On January 8, 2026, Ms. Anais Mompont, College Lecturer II in Social Work and Social Work Program Chair, along with Field Outreach Coordinator Heather Lignelli, facilitated the Spring 2026 Match Day for the Social Work program. Match Day is a time set aside for the OCC Social Work students to participate in a two-way interview with community organizations. This process allows them to explore their interests and find the best fit for them to complete their 60 practicum hours as required for the A.S. degree in Social Work.

From the upcoming graduating cohort, 19 of 24 students who registered for the Social Work Seminar and Practicum class were in attendance. Representatives from 10 community

organizations were also in attendance. Mr. James Hadley, Dean of the School of Business and Social Sciences, welcomed all students and partners. OCC Social Work Alumna, Raven Moore, who also serves on the Social Work Advisory Committee, shared tips and best practices with the new cohort as well.

### **Community Outreach**

- The Grunin Center welcomed back the Ballet for Young Audiences production of *The Nutcracker* on December 13, 2025, for two well-attended family shows.
- A production of *Baile: a Celtic Christmas Celebration* brought in the award-winning dance company DarrahCarr Dance to the Grunin Center on December 20, 2025.
- Despite the snow, the Novins Planetarium had a very successful holiday show season, with nearly 2,000 visitors in December alone. Staff once again hosted POAC Autism Warriors for *A Cocoa and a Show* and had a full house for the revamped *Noon Year's Eve* show for families.
- In January, the audio system upgrade was completed for the Grunin Center theater's main stage.
- The OCC Repertory Theater held its smash, *Broadway for the Holidays 5*, for the fifth year to sold out audiences from December 15 through 21, 2025.

### **Grants**

- This Spring 2026 is the final semester for the FIPSE Basic Needs grant project. The program is currently surpassing the retention goal of 70% with an overall program retention of 71%. The program has served 266 students who are either active or have graduated.
- The Helping Hands Food Pantry recently received a grant to help stock the pantry and support other food security initiatives. Much gratitude is extended to Stop & Shop for the monetary and gift card donation of \$12,500 to help support the students at Ocean County College.

### **Center for Holocaust, Genocide, and Human Rights Education**

Dr. Ali Botein-Furrevig, Part-Time Director of the Center, will participate on January 27, 2026, in a webinar and interactive panel discussion hosted by the National Association of Scholars focused on higher education reform and institutional policy review.

### **Workforce Development and Strategic Partnerships**

#### **Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grant (SCC5)**

- The SCC5 team has implemented a structured student enrollment and onboarding process for grant-funded workforce training programs. To date, 73 individuals have expressed interest, 55 have completed eligibility screenings, and 41 are currently registered in programs using SCC5 grant funds, including EKG Technician (6), Phlebotomy Technician (12), Certified Clinical Medical Assistant (10), Patient Care Technician (2), Medical Billing and Coding Specialist (10), and Google Data Analytics (1).

- The SCC5 consortium has also fully implemented AGS Prime, a centralized data and case-management system, to securely track participant records and support consistent reporting across Ocean County College, Middlesex College, and Atlantic Cape Community College.

### **Workforce Education (WFED)**

- In December, Workforce Education hosted two Civil Service Commission training courses on the OCC campus for Ocean County public employees, supporting regional workforce development and community partnerships.

### **Ocean County Achievement Center (OCAC)**

- On December 18, 2025, an End-of-Year Holiday Gathering was held for OCAC students, with approximately 100 Title II and Work Readiness Assistance Program (WRAP) participants in attendance. Participants played games geared towards teambuilding and language skills.

### **Adult Education, Civics, and Workforce Preparation Program (Title II)**

- On December 4, 2025, Title II hosted a Family Literacy Book Event with 37 attendees, including students and family members. On the same date, staff attended the *Meeting the Moment* convening at Rutgers University, focused on collaboration and strategy sharing for Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) programs.
- In December, six students in the High School Equivalency (HSE) math course made measurable skill gains, one high school diploma was earned, and new student registration included 43 HSE students and 72 ESL students, all of whom completed the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) assessments for class placement.

### **Connect & Learn: Work First New Jersey (WFNJ) Digital Literacy**

The Work First New Jersey Connect & Learn is a collaborative initiative between Ocean County College, Mercer County Community College (grant lead), Middlesex College, and Monmouth. On January 26, 2026, four participants will begin digital literacy training in the Middlesex location, while Mercer County Community College has 17 participants enrolled, and three participants have passed their Internet and Computing Core Certification credential (IC3).

Connect & Learn is becoming mandatory for all WFNJ recipients in Middlesex County.

### **Work Readiness Assistance Program (WRAP)**

- One Work Readiness Assistance Program participant attended a career exploration event at the Ocean County Mall, where a mock interview led to a part-time job offer while the participant continues working toward their high school diploma.
- On December 10, 2025, WRAP students participated in a career exploration field trip to the Liberty Science Center, engaging with staff from various departments to learn about careers and ask questions about employment pathways.

## **Career Services**

- During November and December, Career Services remained actively engaged in employer outreach, student support, and career readiness programming. The department hosted five employer tables, promoted six events through Handshake, shared seven local job and internship announcements via the OCC Career Services App and Canvas, and conducted 15 individual student appointments focused on career exploration and planning.
- Key partnerships and programming included a Career Services collaboration meeting with Kean University (November 10, 2025), a Manahawkin Campus visit (November 11, 2025), and internship engagement with the Barnegat Bay Partnership (November 18, 2025). Additional initiatives included coordination and student vetting for the Netflix Production Accounting Clerk (PAC) Program (November 24, 2025), followed by interviews on December 12, 2025, with eight students advancing. Career Services also hosted a FOCUS2 workshop on December 2, 2025, and a Criminal Justice Job Fair on December 9, 2025.

## **Security**

In accordance with New Jersey Public Law 2015, Chapter 220, and College Policy #2332, Reporting of On-Campus and Fire Events, attached is the monthly statistics report of crimes, fires, and other emergencies on campus for the reporting period of December 6, 2025, through January 23, 2026.

## SPRING 2026 COLLOQUIUM

January 15, 2026

Welcome Back! If I have not had the opportunity to speak with you yet, I hope you enjoyed a restful and fun holiday break and return with renewed energy and stamina for the spring semester. Commencement will be here much faster than we anticipate. Welcome back, also, to the Grunin Center. As you can see, the construction of both the Grunin Center expansion and the new admin building moved forward, and I am sure everyone is happy for these seats over the bleachers.

Congratulations to all the recipients of the service awards and the president's awards. Your commitment inspires us all. I also want to thank College Relations for putting the event together, including providing refreshments and helping me prepare. I also must acknowledge the outstanding work of the Colloquium Team and the Achieving the Dream team, who together made today possible:

Alexa Beshara Blauth--Jan Kirsten--Donna Rosinski-Kauz--Debra Lee-Vasquez--Anthony Jordan--  
Melanie Parker--Dottie LaPosa--Kristen D'Amico--Casey Pellegrino

And the ATD Co-Chairs: Mark Westmoreland, Ana Wilson, Briana Cardinale, and Alexa Beshara Blauth

We have two sign language interpreters with us today, Katie Harrison and Amanda Mancinelli. Thank you for helping us today with your fabulous skills.

I would like to acknowledge and thank some special guests in the audience today:

- Mr. Mr. Steven Zabarsky, Chair of the Board of Trustees, Ocean County College
- Mr. Hunter Mantz, Alumni Trustee

This is my third spring colloquium speech, and I would like to continue what I have done previously by sharing some highlights from this academic year to date. We continue to work on how best to foster good communication across campus—unless the information is a rumor, and that seems to fly on its

own—so these highlights provide an opportunity for campus-wide acknowledgement and celebration. I will go through these very quickly, but they will be available by early next week for more leisurely appreciation of some of the great work occurring on the campus. I encourage you to read through these slides and celebrate the good work happening throughout the campus. This is just a fraction, even of what was shared with me.

- The Foundation— \$2M in support
- Helping Hands
- Tutoring
- Collaboration—School of Arts and Humanities
- Grunin Center
- Novins Planetarium
- Early College
- Recruitment
- Success and Retention
- FIPSE
- Transfer Services (multiple slides)
- School of Nursing
- Purchasing
- School of Business and Social Sciences
- VMRC
- TriO
- Grants
- Athletics
- School of STEM
- Institutional Research and Planning

While I have a captive audience, I would also like to share here some of the details about Commencement Week, May 18-21:

- The Sports Award Banquet on Monday, May 18;

- Tuesday, May 19, we will celebrate the Scholarship Awards, in the Grunin Center;
- The Nurses Pinning will occur on Wednesday, May 20;
- On Thursday, May 21, we will celebrate our graduates at two commencements to be held at the RWJ Barnabas Center. The first will occur at 4:00 p.m., and the second will occur at 7:00 p.m.

Student Life and the Registrar's Office are coordinating to determine how best to divide our student body in order to accommodate the most guests and the identify the clearest rationale for the division. Working with College Relations, the Registrar will send out clear and personalized information to students and their families. Faculty will not be required to attend both commencement exercises, and staff will not be required to attend in order to accommodate the families of our graduates. You are, of course, always welcome.

We continue to make steady progress in advancing the goals of our Strategic Plan. This work is supported by the Institutional Effectiveness Committee, comprised of colleagues who serve on our Goal Committees, who meet regularly to share updates, align efforts, and coordinate expertise across the campus. We also recognize the importance of communication to keep the campus informed and engaged. To support this, we are launching digital briefs that highlight progress on specific goals and objectives while creating opportunities for feedback and continued dialogue.

In addition, we are intentionally overlaying the focus areas of Achieving the Dream with the Strategic Plan to reinforce and accelerate progress toward our institutional goals. The alignment between these efforts is deliberate and strengthens the long-term sustainability of the College. Based on the feedback shared this morning, we will further refine the strategies developed to advance our goals. These conversations are ongoing and I hope you will continue to be engaged in this work.

**As you look at this visual, I invite you to see how our work comes together.** Each initiative—across all goals, including Achieving the Dream—serves as a building block within the Strategic Plan. Together, these building blocks show how we are **building opportunity** and **strengthening community** through intentional, connected, and shared work across the College. (SLIDE)

This is also a good time to remind everyone of the important work regarding the Title II mandate on accessibility and compliance. Over the past year, a subcommittee of the IT Governance Council, made

up of representatives from across campus, has worked to address the Title II WCAG 2.1 mandate. This federal requirement calls for ADA compliance across all digital content by April, 2026, and it touches every area of our institution. Training and professional development are available to support this work, with centralized tools and guidance housed at [go.ocean.edu/WCAG](http://go.ocean.edu/WCAG)—see the card you received this morning. I ask everyone across our campus to work together to ensure compliance and to demonstrate our ongoing commitment to access, equity, and belonging, so that our digital spaces truly support all members of our community. Everyone received a card this morning that provides a link to assistance and support.

A topic that should be on our minds is the impact of artificial intelligence on higher education. Technological changes are transforming the basic understanding of teaching and learning. Institutionally, we must also embrace this new age, called, varyingly, the Experience Age, The AI Age, the Intelligence Revolution, or the Data Age. Except for the very young among us, most of us earned our education through reading books and articles, researching in libraries, regurgitating ideas through essays or exams-- often with ever-increasing assistance from computers, data bases, and such. That form of learning is from another century, and as a college, we are struggling to keep up with the impact of Generative AI on every part of education. One of the major initiatives we will pursue for this calendar year is exploring ***collaboratively*** how we can teach students how to use AI responsibly, ethically, and productively, and how we can challenge ourselves in how we engage students and rethink how students demonstrate learning.

Many of our students arrive at college aware of what AI is and how to use it as a crutch. Our obligation is to teach students that AI cannot be a method of avoiding writing or thinking. The former federal Office of Education Technology recommended that:

“Institutions should . . . begin equipping students from all disciplines with the AI literacy skills (i.e., the knowledge and skills to understand, use, and evaluate AI systems critically, promoting safety and ethics), and AI-specific courses they are likely to need for their careers.”

Purdue was the first US university to require students to demonstrate AI competency as a graduation requirement. The SUNY system has implemented both a civic discourse and an AI competency requirement beginning with the incoming class of 2026, and we see more colleges implementing this approach.

As noted by others, the Generative AI genie will not return to the bottle. We must recognize the impact of Generative AI on how people learn and how people work. Many scholars have written about the ways this new technology fundamentally shifts how students and colleges must think about what constitutes learning and the demonstration of learning. Jason Gulya, a professor of English and media communications at Berkeley College, recently wrote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* about how he works to push students away from “doing college” to actually learning:

“For my students, learning is rarely the focus of the classroom. Putting it front and center (talking about how they learn and why they learn rather than focusing on what would be due in the class) felt strange, like we were undoing decades of conditioning that repeatedly suggested that college is about acquiring degrees and certifications and, ultimately, jobs. After all, grades and degrees have been marketed as keys to social mobility and financial security. How could we do anything but focus on getting the highest grades possible?”

He links his concerns to the work of scholar Susan Blum and her assertions about “schoolishness,” a system that rewards the *trappings* of learning rather than learning itself. For students who have bought into schoolishness, which approaches education as a way to get the highest scores as efficiently as possible, and who experience education as a transaction, Generative AI provides the means to be highly efficient at “schoolishness.” We need to rethink how we help students genuinely learn as we determine how to get this genie to serve us. Thus, we have three committees that will differently approach Generative AI:

1. IT Governance Committee: Teaching and Learning Technology Committee (TLTC)
2. Senate Subcommittees: Instruction Committee (pedagogy and instruction) and Academic and Student Affairs Standards and Policies Committee (policies and academic integrity)
3. AI Community of Practice: comprised of faculty from all schools that started in the School of Arts and Humanities last summer. I will ask this community of practice to develop a list of the challenges and potential solutions to AI as educators. I would also like some people in student support positions to join this discussion. I also ask that we built a student group to generate the same list of concerns and possible solutions.

In addition, Kean University has assembled a team that is focused on what AI means in higher education, and we will reach out, at the Chancellor's suggestion, to Mike Fagioli, Director of Learning Design and Academic Technologies, and Dr. Charles Campbell, Associate Vice President for Transformational Learning and External Affairs, to share and learn with them.

I know many of you are frustrated, and so are students. I have heard that students may be questioned about their use of AI in the classroom and then stop attending. We are not talking about a faculty member accusing them of doing anything wrong—just sharing that half the students were flagged and wanted to help students use AI ethically. Other students are pushing back and fighting some charges. Other faculty have had extremely productive conversations with individual students to help them understand how to use AI appropriately. We have to help students from day one understand this technology and how they can use it appropriately. I anticipate the teaching and learning institute as well as our next Colloquium to focus on how we reinvent our approach to teaching and learning. We must address this critical opportunity to rethink education. From my perspective, we are facing a change as great to education as the GI Bill was almost 100 years ago with respect to the impact on all colleges and universities operations and our approach to education.

Another important initiative is that of inculcating a culture of civility on this campus. I have been stunned by the many exchanges and behaviors on this campus that fail to recognize the humanity of another person. People send emails and communication to others laced with accusatory and hurtful language, that lack common courtesy, and are more likely to create or escalate a situation rather than solve a problem and further good working relationships. This kind of uncivil communication and behavior happens in many forms, not just in writing, and it occurs student to student, student to faculty, faculty to student, staff to faculty, faculty to staff, and staff to staff. We are surrounded by this type of discourteous and harmful behavior in the world writ large, but we owe it to students and one another to model civility and respect. Cara Dubitsky is building a taskforce to assess our current climate and to recommend workshops, policy changes, and other approaches to creating a civil campus, one that demonstrates the OCEAN values so clearly part of our strategic plan.

Of upmost concern is the financial health of the campus. Our FY 2027 budget prioritizes new programs, providing support for faculty and student use of technology, expansion of current programs through better room utilization, using data to guide decisions about the structure of degree pathways, addressing the increasing costs of personnel-related expenses, and supporting the initiatives of the

strategic plan and Achieving the Dream. While many expenses are increasing without our ability to control them (e.g., healthcare premiums, energy costs), the College must contain other costs while being mindful of the need to maintain our excellent reputation. Realignment of our academic priorities and offering provides us one of the means to offset ever-climbing expenses.

Online programs continue to grow in response to student demand. 2025 was the first time that more US college students earned a degree entirely online as compared to being on a campus and earning the degree. OCC continues to see a steady increase in online enrollment. Building schedules for online offerings is easier than for campus offerings, but there are numerous considerations: length of the semester (e.g., 7.5 weeks, 15 weeks), the desirability of offering a number of courses or sections as hybrid (students take part of the course online and part on campus), and hyflex (students can take the course as online or on campus). This modality is not less expensive due to the increasing expenses of technology and student support, but it does require less campus classroom space. With fewer potential students, we must offer what they want and can build into their busy lives. We will work on how we help students understand these choices and monitor how their choices continue to impact how, when, and what we offer.

As we continue to see the growing percentage of the US population who do not see a college degree as part of achieving the American Dream, we must provide students the kind of education they see as important: the programs, policies, and degrees that lead directly to careers that provide a sustainable income. These programs tend to cluster in the health sciences: nursing, occupational therapy, dental hygiene, etc. Many of these fields do not require a bachelor's degree for career entry. These programs are expensive to build and expensive to run, as they require highly skilled and well-paid administrators and faculty, and they are taught in highly specialized, single-use classrooms and facilities. These are, however, essential programs that are responding to community demand and need.

The addition of healthcare and workforce ready programs marks a shift in how we position the college in the marketplace and how we are perceived. We will continue to offer strong transfer degree pathways, but as we attract new students and support new programs, we must focus on transfer programs that are aligned with student interest and demand and ensure students can transfer baccalaureate ready and with the appropriate sixty credit hours. We cannot continue to offer boutique offerings that faculty are interested in but serve few students, and we cannot continue to offer the plethora of courses that are

more appropriate to a university. We must streamline, and we do that by providing what students want and need. The good work you have done on the refined pathways for students will continue. We will monitor enrollments and adjust. This process of using enrollment data by course and pathway will continue, and we should anticipate additional streamlining of our curricular offerings while we simultaneously grow in high demand areas. I anticipate student demand will help us determine what gen ed courses to offer, and to offer those that serve multiple programs. We cannot afford to keep doing the same things when data can help us make better decisions.

Although greater confidence in a two-year degree persists, that, too, has shifted: students and families are interested in degrees that lead to defined careers with good lifetime wages. As Ocean County College responds to these market pressures through the development of new programs, the College must do so as state support continues to shrink. As operational costs continue to rise, particularly the cost of instruction, it is imperative that the entire mix of academic offerings, student support services, and administrative oversight also be reviewed to ensure that we continue to provide appropriate academic offerings in a fiscally responsible framework. The goal is to operationalize this realignment effective July 1, 2026. The strategic goals of this realignment include:

- Fiscal sustainability
- Academic alignment
- Operational efficiency

The need to change is driven by the need to restore our fiscal balance in light of declining enrollment, rising expenses, and shifting instructional delivery models. Enrollment has fallen approximately 15% since FY2020, with modest stabilization in FY2024–FY2025. However, more credits are now delivered through eLearning (35%+) and embedded high school programs (11%+), reducing traditional campus-based tuition revenue.

The FY2026 budget was rebalanced in Fall 2025 to address unexpected revenue shortfalls and expense increases. This was done through a combination of expense reduction and use of fund balance. For several years, the College has relied on fund balance to close the gap between revenue and expense. While this approach has provided short-term relief, it is not a sustainable practice. Fund balance is a finite resource, and using it to cover recurring operating deficits does not address the underlying structural

imbalance between revenues and expenses. Over time, this erodes financial flexibility and weakens the institution's ability to respond to unforeseen challenges.

Moreover, the College's fund balance is fully allocated to projects and strategic initiatives that cannot be supported by the operating budget. These allocations include capital improvements, technology upgrades, and other long-term investments essential to maintaining institutional competitiveness and student success. Continuing to divert fund balance to cover operating shortfalls jeopardizes these commitments and undermine the College's long-term sustainability. **For FY2027, the College must reorganize, implement program consolidation, reduce electives, and optimize space to achieve economies of scale.**

Expenses continue to outpace revenue. The College continues to experience significant financial pressure from rising health insurance premiums under the State Health Benefits Plan (SHBP). In preparation for the FY25 and FY26 budget cycles, the college proactively informed all employees about how their plan selection would affect their personal contributions. This transparency led to a notable shift in enrollment: employees have steadily migrated away from the highest-cost plans. However, the overall upward trend in premiums across all plans, ranging from 30.7% to 37.4% increases in calendar year 2026, continues to challenge the college's financial planning.

Despite this shift, the overall cost of providing health benefits continues to climb. The projected FY27 gross premium cost is \$11.47 million, up from \$10.07 million in FY26 and \$8.58 million in FY25— that's a 34% increase in two years. After accounting for estimated employee contributions of \$1.2 million, the net cost to the college in FY27 is projected to be \$10.27 million, a \$1.42 million increase over the prior year.

This escalation in health benefit costs has a direct impact on the college's operating budget. With a total FY26 operating budget of approximately \$71 million, the projected FY27 net health benefit cost represents over 14% of the college's budget. This marks a significant increase from 12.5% in FY26 and 10.3% in FY25, reflecting the growing share of institutional resources required to maintain employee health coverage. In addition, utility costs have also trended upward, further straining the operating budget.

As noted above, revenues are projected to increase by \$1,276,195 and expenses are expected to increase by \$3,768,180 creating a FY2027 budget shortfall of \$2,491,985.

We must include personnel restructuring in meeting this budget shortfall. To date, we have taken certain actions:

- We are reviewing all vacancies and when possible, hiring part-time employees rather than full-time employees
- We have also not filled certain positions, particularly those positions currently or recently held by people who have elected to retire
- I have developed a restructuring plan for the college, working alongside Sara Winchester, to make sure the changes will provide the cost savings and efficiencies we must achieve. The Board has received and reviewed the plan. We will share the plan with the College by early February.

These are not easy times in higher education nor at Ocean County College. No president wants to deliver this type of message, but acting now will allow us to continue to thrive. OCC's reputation, being of and for the community, continues to be enhanced during a time when many colleges and universities are undergoing tremendous reductions in order to remain vibrant institutions. The costs of offering an academic experience that students need for success continue to increase: students today need many wrap-around services to discover their potential, and the expenses associated with technology, with personnel, with facilities, and with benefits increase year over year. We will remain vital to our community if we innovate, which means investing in new academic programs and technology. We will remain vital if we prepare our students for the changing workforce needs. We can innovate only through fiscal resiliency. Our fiscal resiliency depends on the willingness to review our academic offerings and structure, our current operations and expenses and make reductions as appropriate and realignments as needed. It will not be easy for anyone, and we must demonstrate our individual and collective willingness to embrace these changes and evolve into a college that has adapted while continuing to serve all residents of Ocean County. I look forward to working with you to emerge a stronger college.

I now ask for questions and conversation.

## REQUIRED REPORTING STATISTICS

Board of Trustees Meeting: Thurs, January 29, 2026

County College Board of Trustees, for its regular meeting. This report consists of all offenses defined as reportable crimes under the federal Jeanne Clery Act, fires, and other emergencies, which occurred on campus during the reporting period of 12/6/25 – 1/23/26.

1.) A count and classification of all criminal incidents (defined as reportable crimes under the federal Jeanne Clery Act) which occurred on campus and which were recorded by campus security, campus security authority (CSA) or local police departments.			
DATE	CRIME	SUMMARY	STATUS
Occurred: 12/16/25 Reported: 12/16/25	Harassment	Misunderstanding over a parking spot	Cleared/Closed
Occurred: Reported:			
Occurred: Reported:			
2.) A list of campus alerts, threats or emergencies which occurred on campus			
DATE	ALERT/THREAT	SUMMARY	STATUS
Occurred: Reported:		Nothing to report	
Occurred: Reported:			
Occurred: Reported:			
3.) A count and classification of all fire incidents which occurred on campus and which were recorded by campus security and local fire departments.			
DATE	FIRE INCIDENT	SUMMARY	STATUS
Occurred: Reported:		Nothing to report	
Occurred: Reported:			

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:

**Thomas DeSimone**