

## ***Community Ties***

Community colleges can provide a wealth of opportunities for students looking for less expensive or less overwhelming college options.

By Pat Stanley

When we talk to young people about their choices for post-secondary education, it's important to remember community colleges are among the best options for many students and for many reasons. As *Washington Post* reporter Jay Mathews said, "The community college system in the United States represents an egalitarian approach to higher education that doesn't exist elsewhere in the world." The College Board in a recent report said, "[Community colleges are] the "Ellis Island of American Higher Education, the crossroads at which K-12 education meets higher education, and the institutions that give students the tools to navigate the modern world." Mathews and the College Board were both correct to bestow such praises on these institutions.

Community colleges do not have admission barriers such as a student's previous academic performance or his or her SAT or ACT scores. Whether 18 or 80, part-time or full-, the door is open for all students to attend. The same institution that plays a major role in workforce development for career-changers is also home to many first-generation college students. Community colleges exist to serve all, and they receive high marks when it comes to serving those who would otherwise not be able to attend college. However, this reputation for access may, at times, stand in the way of being the college of choice for many students.

Regrettably too many may view community college as "13th or 14th grade" or simply as an educational option for older adults who want to return to school. As former president of Frederick Community College (FCC), I can attest to the fact that Community College is a "Baccalaureate Level College" and that students can leave prepared for careers in such fields as nursing and information systems management or for transfer into four-year institutions. The college that serves "all" has been the starting ground for such notables as PBS news anchor Jim Lehrer, astronaut Eileen Collins, James Sinegal, CEO of Costco, and former Maryland Gov. Parris Glendening.

In 2006, the Bureau of Labor Statistics noted 90 percent of the fastest-growing jobs now require some form of post-secondary

education or training, but in an era when access to post-secondary education is vital, the cost of a college education continues to rise, making it less and less affordable for students and their families. According to the findings from the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education in 2006, the cost of attending a four-year institution has outpaced inflation, health care and family income levels. The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) and the Project on Student Debt released a recent national survey in which 78 percent of high school counselors say that students' and parents' concerns about loan debt affect whether or not and where students go to college. While these troubling statistics may be, by themselves, reason enough for every high school counselor to recommend community colleges to students, the low tuition at these institutions is only one of the many reasons to "think community college."

Many high school students who walk through your door don't know yet what they want to do in life. Community colleges offer many classes these students can take while they learn what programs they want to pursue without the overwhelming financial consequences of indecision pressuring them. For highly motivated students, on the other hand, who are focused on what they want to do and looking for more of a challenge, community colleges also offer honors programs or courses. At FCC, honors students who had strong academic records and had done well on the AP exams, SAT and ACT tests, or FCC placement tests were part of the special and challenging Honors College.

While the ultimate goal for many students is a bachelor's degree, there are those students with more career-oriented programs in mind. Many jobs in high-growth fields, such as computer technology, allied health care and construction fields require a certificate or associate of applied science (AAS) degree, which often are only available at community colleges.

Community colleges are flexible providers of education and workforce training. The nearly 1,200 community colleges across this country are adept at responding to the needs of the communities they serve as well as responding to the jobs trends in the United States as a whole. In the post 9/11 era, community colleges have been responsible for certifying nearly 80 percent of first responders (police officers, firefighters and emergency medical technicians) and have produced more than 60 percent of new nurses and other health-care

professionals, according to figures provided by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC).

I was honored to give this year's commencement speech at Waubonsee Community College in Waubonsee, Ill. This college is on the move. As a part of its "2020 College Master Plan – A Vision for the Future," Waubonsee opened a new state-of-the-art science building designed to enhance the learning experience of those studying biology, chemistry, earth sciences, geography and geology. The facility has several high-tech labs as well as a weather station and seismograph that allow students to access real-time weather and data relevant to earthquakes. Earlier I was introduced to the new Health and Science Center at Norwalk Community College in Norwalk, Conn. This facility, which was developed with the assistance of three local hospitals, has classrooms designed like patient-care rooms at each hospital and also includes the latest medical technology for students to use. Sophisticated learning facilities such as these are found on community college campuses across the country and yet the cost per year to attend them is still comparable to that of buying a new computer.

While class sizes at major universities may be overwhelming to some first-time students, at community colleges students benefit from smaller class sizes and teacher-to-student ratios. They also have increased access to professors whose primary function is to teach and help students succeed because research is not part of their mission as is the case for faculty at many four-year institutions.

### **Transitioning On**

Just as community colleges suffer from some of the misconceptions that I mentioned earlier, they also have to overcome students' fears that they will not make it at a four-year college should they choose a community college first. Research shows that while some community college students go through "transfer shock," much like a high school student first attending college, transfer students do just as well if not better than those students who began at four-year colleges. Others are concerned about transferability of credits from a two-year college to a four-year institution. There has been a growing movement among policymakers at the local, state and national levels to address this particular concern. Transitions have been a focus of our office. We have many dedicated professionals here working on career pathways designed to ease the transition from secondary to post-secondary and from two-year to four-year colleges. In pursuit of this goal, we have conducted a number of conference calls, Podcasts, forums and

summits specific to this issue of transferability, and our office is providing project funds to assist states in developing articulation agreements to ensure smooth and successful transitions.

Transferring from a two-year college to a four-year continues to be a priority of community colleges across the country. The original mission of the junior (now community) college was to provide the first two years of a four-year college, and although the mission has expanded, community colleges are still committed to ensuring the successful transfer of their students to four-year institutions. Invited to give the commencement address this year to graduates of Cumberland County College, in Vineland, N.J., I saw firsthand the work that the college was doing to this end through its University Center. Through a partnership with several four-year institutions and universities, Cumberland County College has offered its residents the opportunity to work toward a four-year or master's degree without having to leave the area. Community colleges across the country are providing similar higher degree programs on their campuses.

In 1901, J. Stanley Brown, superintendent of Joliet, Ill., Township High School, and William Rainey Harper, president of the University of Chicago, seeking to offer the opportunity for area residents to attend college without leaving the area, opened Joliet Junior College, generally recognized as the oldest continuously operating community college by the Encyclopedia of Education. A handful of students were enrolled at the college that would pave the way for an American tradition of offering post-secondary education opportunities to all.

Today, community colleges are meeting the needs of more than 11 million students of all ages with many different educational expectations. Forty-six percent of all U.S. undergraduates have taken advantage of a quality, affordable education at a location near them. Shouldn't community colleges be a top choice for your students too?

*Pat Stanley, is deputy assistant secretary, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education.*