

The Community's Colleges

JOAN MENARD



Interest in state colleges and universities, and especially in community colleges, is surging thanks to the economic downturn. And why not? The average annual tuition and mandatory fees for state residents at New England community colleges is \$3,698, compared with \$8,602 at in-state public four-year colleges and \$31,680 at the region's private four-year institutions, according to the latest data from the College Board.

The average family pays 25% to 34% of its income for a year of tuition at a New England community college and 29% to 39% at New England public four-year institutions, compared with 78% to 96% at private four-year institutions.

In New England, 43 community colleges enroll nearly 200,000 students. These "open door" institutions educate New England's "underserved" students, including high school dropouts, GED-earners and underprepared high school graduates, first-generation college students, low-wage workers and adults seeking "retraining" or a few classes for a job promotion.

Dual-enrollment programs between high schools and community colleges and transfer agreements between community colleges and four-year institutions present an education continuum that puts students on a path to knowledge and good jobs and saves families money.

Among examples of the hybrids, Connecticut's Great Path Academy is a "middle college high school" offering students in grades 10 to 12 the opportunity to earn college credits tuition-free in state-of-the-art facilities at Manchester Community College and through internships at local companies.

Half of undergraduates who start at a community college with the intention of one day earning a bachelor's

degree and one-fourth who start with the intention of obtaining only an associate degree go on to transfer to a four-year institution within six years, according to the U.S. Department of Education. In fact, some Midwestern four-year liberal arts colleges look to New England community colleges specifically to recruit transfers.

It makes good economic sense for many students to fill general education requirements at lower-cost public institutions and then complete their majors at institutions that offer the best academic programs for their interests. One approach is to guarantee students admission to a four-year college at the time they are admitted to a community college. Massachusetts public four-year colleges and universities provide a tuition discount for Massachusetts community college students enrolled in a designated transfer program.

Community colleges are essential not only to their communities, but to the region's businesses.

At Bristol Community College in Massachusetts, the One Family Scholars Program helps mothers at risk of becoming homeless to attend college or training with the hope of obtaining jobs that will allow them to earn a family living wage. Northern Essex Community College has been a pioneer in helping returning veterans access college, while Mount Wachusett Community College will house a privately funded, live-in rehabilitation center for wounded combat veterans and their families.

In February, Connecticut Community Colleges supported National Entrepreneurship Week with special activities such as "preliminary elevator speech" competitions to develop concise descriptions of a business idea to potential investors, sessions on "Getting Green in Business" and credit-awareness seminars.

Affordable tuition prices, however, don't cover costs at community colleges. In Maine, for example, where community college enrollment grew 20% this spring, tuition covers only 25% of the cost of education. Community college officials hope the recently enacted federal stimulus bill will help them cover the full cost of education by providing funds for equipment, curricula and faculty in high-demand technical fields.

To be sure, community colleges face profound challenges. A recent Center for American Progress report calls the two-year colleges "stepchildren" of higher education, though they account for almost 40% of total college enrollment. The paper notes lagging degree completion among two-year college students, more than half of whom work jobs while they go to school. It also finds two-year college students are less likely than their peers at four-year colleges to be of traditional college-going age of 18 to 24, more likely to be minorities and more likely to come from poorer families.

And in some states, the same economic forces that are leading new students to community colleges in droves are also hampering state funding, forcing some of these "open door" institutions to reject thousands of applicants.

These are our *community* colleges. Community spirit will be required now more than ever to keep them vibrant, forward-looking and open to all who are willing to learn.

Joan Menard is chair of the New England Board of Higher Education. She is a Massachusetts state senator representing the First Bristol and Plymouth district and has served in the Massachusetts Legislature for 30 years. Email: catherine.donaghey@state.ma.us