

# COMMUNITY COLLEGES: TAKE ANOTHER LOOK!

by Heather Ricker-Gilbert, IECA associate member (CT)



As I walk down the hall of the community college where I work, I sense a new energy as I weave my way through crowds of students who are talking, flirting, text messaging, and sitting on the floor studying. This new energy emanates from 18-year-olds who are coming to community colleges in greater numbers than ever before. Fifty percent of all undergraduates in this country are enrolled in a community college. I am a college admissions consultant and I teach at Manchester Community College in Connecticut where, for example, 81% of the full-time students are 21 or younger. As the population of students at all public institutions increases, community colleges are becoming more popular. An article published in the *Washington Post* (March 2004) states: "Whether shut out of universities in a competitive admissions climate or turned off by their soaring costs and oversized classes, unprecedented numbers of ambitious, high-achieving students are shrugging off the '13th grade' stigma and going to community colleges." A community college used to be the last choice for students entering college. Now, for many students and their parents, it is the first stop on the way to a four-year degree.

What community colleges provide are extensive support services, reasonable tuition, the chance to mature and explore academic and career options, and the ability to transfer credits. By design, community colleges have an "open door policy." Students of all abilities are offered access to a college education. Therefore, the staff at community colleges work very hard to help students be successful through counseling and career services, tutoring and learning centers, developmental courses and ESL classes. Students who have not been academically successful in high school may find the extra support they need at their local community college.

In a January 28, 2007 article, the *Washington Post* writes: "As the price of college has skyrocketed, millions of middle- and upper-middle class families...have juggled to find ways to keep pace..." One of the ways is to attend a community college at a discount from what four full years at a baccalaureate institution costs. For example, annual in-state tuition at the campuses of Northern Virginia Community College is \$2,430. At The College of William and Mary it is \$8,490, plus room and board. An in-state Virginia student who chooses to first take his general education courses at the community college and earn an associate degree will spend approximately \$4,812 for two years of course work. If he is qualified, he can then go on to earn a degree from William and Mary having saved \$12,120 on his total tuition bill. Jess Batchelor, a columnist for the Manchester Commu-

nity College student paper the *Live Wire*, questioned... "Does going to a four-year college immediately after graduating from high school really make you thousands of dollars smarter?"

In addition to saving students from paying mounting tuition fees, taking on loans, and accumulating huge debts, community colleges allow students to explore and decide what they might like to do academically and professionally. Penn State professor Dr. Kenneth Gray, who spoke at the IECA fall 2005 conference and the author of *Other Ways to Win*, notes, "A four year college is an expensive place to make career decisions." For the 18-year-old who is not academically confident or who is not quite sure whether he wants a career in criminal justice, psychology, business, early childhood education, or electronic music, a community college makes sense. Most community colleges offer a wide array of both applied and Liberal Arts and Science courses and majors.

For some who did not excel in high school, coming to a local community college with small classes and personal attention will give them a chance to improve their grades and gain admission to a four-year college of their choice. Currently, many private colleges are looking for economic diversity, and they aggressively recruit capable students from community colleges. For example, Amherst, Mount Holyoke, and Wesleyan regularly attend college transfer fairs at my community college. Another advantage of community colleges is that they offer many programs that train students to go to work with a two-year associate degree in specialized areas such as hospitality management, computer programming, graphic design, surgical technology, or dental hygiene.

For those who eventually want to earn a bachelor's degree, community college credits transfer to most four-year colleges, and there are numerous established articulation agreements between state institutions. States such as California and New York have long standing "2 plus 2" transfer agreements between the community colleges and four-year institutions. In Arizona, all the community colleges have transfer agreements with the University of Arizona, Arizona State and Northern Arizona as well as articulation agreements with out-of-state institutions such as University of New Mexico and the Columbus College of Art and Design. In Connecticut, students in the "Pathways" program in engineering sciences can complete their first two years at a Connecticut Community College, then move on to an articulated engineering program at the University of Connecticut, the University of New Haven, Fairfield University, the University of Hartford or Central Connecticut State University. In September

2007 the governor of New Jersey signed a law requiring that an associate degree awarded by one of the state's community colleges will be fully transferable and count as the first two years toward a baccalaureate degree at any of New Jersey's public institutions.

Community colleges with extensive support services and small classes, low tuition, and easily transferable credits offer a great place to embark on an academic career. As educational consultants we know that community colleges are, of course, not for everyone. But for some of the young people we work with who may need a chance to explore, who are concerned about costs, and who want the ability to transfer to a four-year college later on, we should take another look at what community colleges can offer. Community colleges are no longer the last choice!

*Heather Ricker-Gilbert, D.Ed, specializes in college and graduate school admissions. She is an associate professor of communications at Manchester Community College.*