

Learning curve: More students are finding community colleges are the way to go

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Charlie Aquilina worked intermittently on small construction projects and was especially skilled at installing in-ground pools.

But six years of inconsistent paychecks and manual labor were enough for him. “I didn’t want to do that the rest of my life—and I couldn’t, because it was hard, physical work,” said Aquilina, who lives in Akron.

Broke and pining for change, he saw Niagara County Community College, with its low costs, as an attractive alternative. But he enrolled reluctantly, certain that two-year colleges offered subpar education and an overall no-frills college experience.

“But I was wrong; it’s nothing like I thought,” said Aquilina, 25, who started his second year at NCCC in August. “The classes are challenging, the teachers are knowledgeable, caring and they give you personal attention. And student life is great— there’s so much to do on campus.

“Coming to NCCC was the best thing that ever happened to me. Now I can look forward to the future.”

The protracted economic downturn has spawned an unprecedented spike in applications at local two-year colleges from people looking for a more affordable higher education option. Like Aquilina, many are surprised and impressed by the

academic offerings and support services they find there.

“I love it here; it’s been really enjoyable,” said Emily Patrick, 18, after three weeks of classes at Genesee Community College. “In contrast to what I thought, the work ethic is great and the staff and everyone is excited and happy to be here. GCC offers wonderful professors who are so kind and welcoming. It really feels like home.”

More than just low cost

These newcomers are discovering the long-standing benefits of community colleges, which include lower tuition, flexible class schedules, convenient locations, vocational training for fast job placements, ability to transfer and dedicated instructors. “It boggles my mind that people don’t take advantage of all these benefits,” said James P. Klyczek, president of NCCC.

“The recession forces people to take another look at community colleges, and they like what they see, especially for the price,” said Stuart Steiner, president of GCC. “It’s cheap, quality education.”

“I believe ECC is one of the best-kept secrets in Western New York,” said Jack F. Quinn Jr., president of the college. “You can find whatever program you want at ECC, and it’s just \$3,300 a year, or \$1,650 a semester. People pay more than that for books at some colleges.”

In-county tuition and fees average \$3,900 at the State University of New York’s 30 two-year colleges and \$6,170 at state-operated four-year campuses for in-state students.

There’s long been a correlation between a de-pressing job market and a crowded college campus, “but this recession has been so long and so deep, enrollments have surged even higher,” said Norma Kent, vice president for communication for the Association of American Community Colleges.

And with the tight job market, “New Yorkers are turning to our community colleges—now more than ever—to get an education, upgrade their skills or learn new skills to become competitive in the workplace and the current marketplace,” said Casey Vattimo, SUNY spokesperson.

A few years ago, Steve Schutt says, he realized he had “gone as far I could go with a high school diploma,” so he applied to GCC.

“I had visited a couple of universities, but as a nontraditional student I felt more comfortable here at GCC, where there are older students,” said Schutt, now 33. “The costs played a big role in my decision.”

Community colleges are also seeing a boom in students fresh out of high school.

“More parents are becoming aware of the huge amount of money they can save when their children start at a community college and get credits for their general courses and then transfer to a four-year college to finish their bachelor’s [degree],” said Marsha Jackson, ECC’s vice president of student affairs.

Danielle Kennelley took that route. “I chose Jamestown Community College, because financially it was going to be better for me,” said Kennelley, a 2010 nursing graduate of JCC, who enrolled right after completing high school. “I knew I wouldn’t have to take out loans, and I’d be able to pay out of pocket.”

Record-setting enrollment

The dramatic influx of these first-time students has set records here and around the country.

From fall 2008 to fall 2009, enrollment at SUNY’s two-year schools swelled by a dramatic 10 percent—an all-time high. Western New York’s community colleges—ECC, JCC, GCC and NCCC —have seen increases between 5 percent and 10 percent in enrollment or programs.

But the historic growth does come with a downside, as community colleges, already underfunded due to budget cuts, have to stretch limited resources to meet the needs of their burgeoning student bodies.

“Community colleges are doing a variety of things to accommodate surging enrollments,” Kent said. “They have added class sections by offering early morning, late night and weekend classes. They have expanded class sizes in some instances. When resources allow, they have expanded the capacity of their facilities and the number of faculty available to teach.”

At ECC’s City Campus, 30 more slots were added to its nursing program, along with evening and weekend classes. At GCC, the nursing program has been expanded and now admits 200 students a year, more than double the number two years ago. Also, GCC’s nursing courses start in the fall and spring, allowing more students to enroll.

Still a lot of colleges have waiting lists and it can be hard to find seats in required courses. In some cases, students have to wait for years, especially for programs such as the highly competitive allied health field.

“I got lucky because I started in 2008 before the big wave,” said Kennelley. “But I worked in the admissions office, and we got so many calls from people trying to get into the program, a lot from people with bachelor’s [degrees] who couldn’t find work in their fields were calling, too.”

Addressing needs

Community colleges are teeming with other degree and vocational training programs that can lead to jobs—from welding to restaurant management.

“With 98 degree and certificates programs, you have unlimited choices,” Quinn said. “So if you can’t find a job, you can come explore educational opportunities, and it doesn’t break the bank. Our One Stop and Workforce Development programs are invaluable; they retrain laid-off workers to update and improve their skills.”

Community colleges develop and offer programs based on the demands of their local job markets to increase the employability of their graduates.

“They are very responsive in their offerings to the changes in the job market,” Kent said. “They keep their ears to the ground to know what local businesses need and where the hiring is going on.”

For example, New York may soon require polysomnography technologists to be licensed. With knowledge of the impending requirement, GCC introduced the program this fall so students will be compliant. It’s the only school in the state that offers the degree, which could give its graduates a huge edge over the competition for positions at the state’s centers for sleep disorders.

Through its curriculum advisory council, Klyczek said NCCC became aware of the needs of businesses tied to Niagara Falls tourism. The school responded by expanding its tourism and

hospitality certificate and degree majors. The college also offers training in casino and gaming management and operations.

And with the Niagara Wine Trail in its backyard, NCCC is preparing students for entry-level positions with its winery operations and wine and beverage management programs.

As Buffalo's health care economy takes root with the Center for Excellence in Bioinformatics and Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus, ECC is researching the creation of programs such as bioinformatics technician, and plans are under way to construct a health science building.

Moving on

While community colleges' career programs are popular, many graduates continue their education at four-year colleges. More than 60 percent of all SUNY two-year college students transfer to other institutions to earn bachelor's degrees. The transfer major—called liberal arts and sciences or general studies—is the most popular at the system's two-year schools.

“Come here to GCC, do two years, transfer to a four-year college and in two [more] years you'll have a bachelor's degree, and there'll be no sticker on it that says only two years were earned here,” Steiner said.

Transferring within the SUNY system is almost seamless, said Vattimo. Local community colleges have transfer agreements with area four-year schools and a majority of credits carry over at others.

“The same classes taught at UB are taught here, and I'm taking them for much less money and I'm staying with my parents,” said Aquilina, who's majoring in psychology at NCCC but will transfer next fall to get his bachelor's degree.

Jackson of ECC has a son, Jordan Mangrum, 22, who is now a student at ECC. She encouraged him to enroll there first because its cadre of mentoring, tutoring and other student services, enables younger people to adjust easily to the college experience.

And she is a transfer success story herself. She began at ECC in 1981, graduated with an associate degree and transferred to Buffalo State College, where she earned a bachelor's degree. From there she enrolled at UB, where she received her master's and doctorate.

“I was one of 11 children, so it was easy for me to decide to go to ECC,” she said. “It was inexpensive and accessible. It's not a last resort but a great place to start. And I'm a great example of that.”

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