

Community colleges growing quickly

Pace just right for many at two-year schools

By PAT WALTERS, The News Journal
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Bobby Otwell graduated third in his class at Laurel High School. He was in the honor society. He played three sports.

After graduation, he headed to the University of Delaware to study physical education. Then he changed his mind.

"I got up there, and it was just too much city for me," he said. "I couldn't stand the fast pace."

Instead, Otwell moved home to his parents' chicken farm and enrolled at Delaware Technical & Community College as a poultry science major.

Education experts call what Otwell did a "reverse transfer," a move they say is becoming increasingly common among college students. More high school graduates are choosing community colleges than ever before, forcing the schools to find ways to deal with an increasingly large and diverse pool of students.

Today, nearly a third of all undergraduate college students are enrolled at community colleges, a number that has grown by about 20 percent in the past decade to 6.5 million, according to the American Association of Community Colleges.

In Delaware, the state's single community college system is growing faster than most. Nearly 14,000 students are enrolled in Delaware Tech, an increase of about 35 percent since 1995.

Arthur Cohen, professor of higher education and organizational change at the University of California, Los Angeles, said community college growth has been caused largely by a nationwide surge in the number of 18-year-olds. As baby boomers near retirement, their children are coming of age -- and flooding America's universities.

"Community colleges are picking up what the four-year universities can't handle," he said. As the number of students interested in attending college outpaces size limits for universities' freshman classes, and as the cost of tuition at four-year schools continues to rise, those not making the admissions cut or unable to foot the bill head toward community colleges.

The cost of tuition at public universities has grown by nearly 60 percent in the past decade, according to the College Board. The equivalent cost at public two-year colleges also has increased, though at a slightly slower rate. Last year, for instance, the average cost of tuition and fees at a public two-year college grew 5.4 percent, while the equivalent cost at a public four-year university grew 7.1 percent.

In Delaware, people can save more than \$5,000 a year in tuition by going to community college.

The lower cost, combined with community colleges' traditional open-door admissions, makes them attractive to a wide range of students.

Various types of students

Since the community college boom of the 1960s, most such schools serve three main types of students:

- Those who want to use the community college as a springboard to a university, such as Farai Mashongamhende. A computer systems management major at Cecil Community College in Maryland, he intends to transfer to Texas A&M University-Commerce when he finishes his associate degree. There, he plans to complete a bachelor's degree and, one day, return to his home in Zimbabwe to open a computer store or Internet cafe.
- Those who want a two-year professional degree, such as Otwell, the chicken farmer. He lives at home, where he raises roughly 32,000 broilers every week. He is going to college to earn a technical degree that will qualify him to work for a major poultry producer inspecting chicken houses.

- Those who want professional training, such as Joanne Chilcote. At 43, she had worked as a manager at Wendy's, Toys R Us and Bank of America. She made a career change without quitting her job by enrolling in a noncredit certification program at Delaware Tech. Now, she's a certified nurse assistant working for Delaware Hospice. The college served about 12,000 students like her last year, offering professional training and certification in professions ranging from charter boat captaining to massage therapy.

There are others, too: Elderly people who go to college one night a week to take computer classes. High school students who pick up college-level courses to get ahead. And immigrants who take English classes.

Kent Phillippee, senior research associate for the community college association, said that while the three major categories of students have remained stable for nearly 40 years, the composition of these groups is changing. There have been slight increases in the number of women, minorities and part-time students at community colleges.

But most profound -- and most obvious -- among trends in enrollment, he said, is its sheer growth.

A money crunch

Community college officials nationwide are struggling to find the money to accommodate increasing numbers of students, said Marilyn Amey, president of the Council for the Study of Community Colleges.

"Enrollment is not a problem in itself," she said. "But community colleges can only serve a given number of students with the resources they have."

Delaware Tech officials said increased enrollment has not strained the college's facilities -- not yet, at least.

"I'm not worried about the next 300 students that come through the door, I'm worried about the next 3,000," said Delaware Tech President Orlando George.

He said the state does a great job of supporting the college's operating budget, which covers the cost of faculty, staff and financial aid. The school got \$71.5 million -- its full request -- for its operating budget this year, up from \$65 million the year before.

Delaware Tech's capital budget is a different story. That budget, which covers things like building maintenance and expansion, is "not quite adequate" George said. The college requested \$14 million in the fall, but received \$4.5 million, said Jerry McNesby, Delaware Tech vice president for finance. That compares with a request of \$12 million and a receipt of \$7 million last year.

The lack of funds will slow development projects, including plans for a \$20 million health sciences center that is nearing the final stages of design. The success of that project, McNesby said, hangs on next year's budget request.

"We need to start planning now for some expansion so we can be prepared for the students who will be coming to us in the next three to five years," George said.

He considers an investment in the college an investment in the state economy. Last year's graduates became computer engineers, customer service representatives and nurses. They were trained, specifically, to fill the jobs the state needs.

Tied to the job market

Delaware Tech student Rob Strain is studying to be a registered nurse. In the midst of a nursing shortage -- hospitals nationwide have almost 120,000 empty positions to fill, according to one recent study -- he doesn't expect trouble finding employment.

Delaware Tech's health care program is growing in response to the job demand. Since 2002, the number of students in that field has grown from 350 to nearly 800, and the health sciences center expansion was planned to accommodate them.

George said all academic programming at the college is guided by the job market.

"No matter how sexy a program is, if there aren't jobs, we're not going to run it," he said.

Teri Mangini is studying electrical engineering at Delaware Tech -- but she fully expects to have a bachelor's degree from UD hanging on her wall three years from now.

Mangini, who is at the college as part of a connected degree program with UD, decided to start her education at Delaware Tech for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was price.

According to the Delaware Higher Education Commission, in-state tuition for the 2005-06 academic year was \$2,196 at Delaware Tech, compared with \$7,318 at UD and \$5,459 at Delaware State University.

Delaware Tech offers 49 in-state and 10 out-of-state connected degree agreements with universities including UD, Wilmington and Wesley colleges in programs that range from elementary education to occupational therapy.

About 1,600 students graduated from Delaware Tech last year, and of those who chose to look for full-time employment, nearly 90 percent found an in-state jobs in their fields of study, George said.

"What that is saying to us is that we are preparing our students for the world of work in our state," he said. "They're not getting a degree in X, Y and Z and having to tend bar."

Otwell expects to find a job in his field and in his state. Every week he meets with a service manager from Mountaire Farms. The man checks his birds for disease and gives them medicine if they are sick.

When Otwell finishes his degree, he said, that job will be his.

"I've been in the chicken houses since I was an infant," he said. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

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BY THE NUMBERS

14,000: Students enrolled in Delaware Technical & Community College -- an increase of about 35 percent since 1995

6.5 million: Undergraduates enrolled at community colleges nationwide, a 20 percent increase in the past decade

\$2,196: In-state tuition for Delaware Tech for 2005-06

COLLEGE TRANSITION

In the early 1900s, junior colleges were relatively prevalent, offering a liberal-arts education focused on preparing students to transfer to universities.

But after World War II, the instruction at junior colleges became more technical. A thriving industrial economy demanded skilled workers, and a junior college education no longer had to end with a university transfer. It could lead to a job.

In the 1960s, community colleges -- the new name was chosen to reflect the connection to local industry -- boomed, their numbers doubling to nearly 1,000. Delaware Tech was established in 1966.

Jim Jacobs, director of operations for the Community College Research Center at Columbia University, said that as numbers grew, each community college based its educational programming on the needs of local industries, training workers to fill vacant jobs.