

For Achievers, a New Destination

By BETH FRERKING

YOU'VE heard the threat; you may have made it: "If you don't pull up those grades, you're going to a community college." It's not without reason that community colleges are often considered the schools of last resort. They have long offered low-cost local schooling for students who couldn't attend four-year colleges because they lacked the requisite grades or the requisite funds, or were looking for specific job training. "Open admissions" has been the guiding principle, and the colleges work with large populations of students who are underprepared, notes Terry O'Banion, president emeritus of the League for Innovation in the Community College.

But as four-year universities have become more expensive, good students who want to save money are turning to community colleges to earn their core undergraduate credits. And save money they will: according to a report in October by the College Board, community colleges charge an annual average tuition of \$2,272, compared with \$5,836 at state universities and \$22,218 at private institutions.

Many two-year colleges are now recruiting students who fit the traditional profile of baccalaureate undergraduates: 18- to 24-year-olds who have strong high school records and are moving directly into higher education full time. Such students are helping to lower the average age of community college students, which has steadily declined: 42 percent taking courses for credit are under 22, compared with 32 percent a decade ago, according to a 2005 federal study. No longer wed primarily to a work force-training mission, these colleges consider it a major, if not predominant, goal to prepare students to transfer to four-year institutions.

"I'm one of the biggest critics of the focus on work force development," says Margaret B. Lee, president of Oakton Community College in suburban Chicago. "You don't prepare someone in this time of rapid change for a single job. You prepare them for a working life. The old academic skills are the new vocational skills."

The two-year colleges most committed to funneling students into four-year colleges tend to have some or all of the following: learning communities (in which students attend classes with the same small cohort of classmates), honors programs (noted for curriculum that crosses disciplines, teachers who hold advanced degrees and smaller classes taken with similarly talented peers) and articulation agreements with four-year institutions in the state (typically synchronizing basic courses with a university's requirements and guaranteeing admittance to transfer students who have kept their grades up). These colleges focus on liberal arts and the sciences, responding to increasing demand for math and science teachers, health professionals and high-tech experts. The best community colleges also have what experts call "a culture of evidence," meaning they extensively assess students' academic performance and adjust teaching practices accordingly, says Kay M. McClenney, director of the annual Community College Survey of Student Engagement, based at the University of Texas, Austin.

They attract students like Rachel Patrick, 20, who graduated from high school in Clarksburg, Md., with a 4.0 grade point average and a 1380 on her SATs. She was accepted by several four-year colleges but surprised friends by choosing Montgomery College, a community college that admitted her on full scholarship in a selective two-year honors program.

Ms. Patrick has not regretted her decision, she says. The small classes foster a close rapport with teachers and classmates. She traveled to Cambridge, England, last summer in a study-abroad program. She will graduate this spring with an associate of science degree. To hedge her financial bets, she has applied to transfer to 14 four-year colleges. Her top choices are Johns Hopkins, Georgetown and Dickinson College, in Carlisle, Pa.

The community colleges below are considered successful in preparing students to transfer, and typically perform well on national assessments like the Community College Survey of Student Engagement. In interviews with more than a dozen scholars who have examined the practices and results at two-year colleges, these were among those frequently named as models.

Monroe Community College (Rochester)
Kingsborough Community College (Brooklyn)
Montgomery College (Rockville, Md.)
Valencia Community College (Central Florida)
Santa Fe Community College (Gainesville, Fla.)
Oakton Community College (Des Plaines, Ill.)
Kirkwood Community College (Cedar Rapids, Iowa)
Richland College (Dallas)
Community College of Denver
City College of San Francisco
Seattle Central Community College

Seattle Central Community College

Full time: 3,491. Part time: 3,289.

Transfer favorite: University of Washington, Seattle

The commitment to the sciences is evident in bricks and mortar. Last fall, Seattle Central opened a \$27 million math and science building. The college's Rocket Club recently traveled to the Johnson Space Center in Houston to conduct a NASA-approved experiment in microgravity. And each year, a handful of students are selected for 10-week fellowships working with top scientists in the engineered biomaterial research group at the University of Washington.

Students at Seattle Central — Time magazine's "college of the year" in 2001 — do well when they move on. A study of transfers to the University of Washington showed that they performed slightly better than "natives" (students beginning as freshman), with an average G.P.A. of 3.26.

Almost half of Seattle Central's students are minorities; 9 percent are international students, primarily from Asia, intent on transferring to four-year colleges. They pay out-of-state tuition and fees of about \$8,000 a year (in-state: under \$3,000).

"The city of romance, the city of art, Seattle is filled with beautiful music and the sweet smell of coffee," writes Jayoung Jung, a student from South Korea, in a testimonial on the college Web site. "Moreover the mood of rainy days in Seattle makes me feel like I'm seated in a jazz bar."

AND The Seattle Maritime Academy's survival course requires students to suit up in protective gear in the water. A few years ago, someone thought it would be fun to scare newbies with fake shark fins; the tradition continues today.

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