

For Many, Community College Is the Ticket to a Better Life



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In the summer of 2012, Ashley Andreas moved to Vermont with her boyfriend, whose family lived in the state. Born and raised in Pennsylvania, Andreas left Millersville University, near Lancaster, at the end of

fall semester 2011. Her tuition at Millersville had been paid in full by her high school, Milton Hershey School, which was founded by the Hershey family of chocolate fame to offer both a K-12 and college education at no cost to children from low-income families. But college was more difficult than Andreas had anticipated.

“I always felt scattered and confused and lost,” Andreas said. Her grades, and confidence, suffered.

She wasn’t the only one. Some people she knew from high school went on to four-year colleges and “flunked out. There were so many parties and freedom, they got off track,” Andreas said.

After leaving college she and her boyfriend, whom she’d met at Milton Hershey, moved to Florida, where she made and sold jewelry and crafts, and then to Philadelphia, where she did the same. After they moved to Vermont, Andreas became pregnant, and gave birth to her daughter, Daliah, in October 2013.

Andreas was grappling with all the issues that new parents do, but still wanted to continue her education. For pragmatic and financial reasons, and because she didn’t feel ready yet to return to a four-year college, she said, “once I’d started thinking about school again, I knew it would have to be community college.”

She enrolled in the Community College of Vermont in the spring of 2014. She took two classes her first two semesters, and is now carrying four classes a semester while working toward an associate degree in general business.

Andreas, who lives in Quechee (she and her partner have ended their relationship), earns money through a variety of sources. She works at Vermont Interactive Television, on the CCV campus, has a cleaning business in Quechee and also dog-sits from time to time. She’s lucky, she said, that there is a day care facility near campus so that she knows Daliah is secure while she’s at school.

Milton Hershey continues to pay her CCV tuition, as well as giving her a stipend to pay for food and textbooks, which can run as high as \$1,000 per semester.

Andreas, now 22, has long ash-brown hair, and an open, thoughtful manner. Ideas bubble up as she talks: start a campus vegetable garden and compost pile, maybe work for Sen. Bernie Sanders, dream up a program to help teens in Hartford, and start her own business one day. She was recently awarded a student leadership scholarship from CCV, which also helped pay her tuition. Advisers are there to help her design a curriculum, and plan for her future after college.

“Here I never feel like I’m drowning,” she said. “Other people are in the same boat.”

In 30 years of working in the Community College of Vermont system, its president, Joyce Judy, has met hundreds of students with stories similar to that of Andreas.

“They come in with the expectation and the hope of getting a degree,” Judy said. “How do we help them find the grit and persistence to complete (their education)?”

There are 12 colleges in the CCV system, with a total enrollment of some 11,000 students. They tend to be older, with an average age of 28. They may have left a four-year college for financial or personal reasons, but then wanted to go back to get a degree. They may be coming in directly from high school. They may have been laid off from a job and are seeking to enter a new field altogether, but need training.

Significantly, about 63 percent of CCV students, many of whom hail from small rural towns, are, like Andreas, the first in their immediate families to go to college, Judy said.

While there may have been a time, two to three decades ago, when matriculation at a community college was seen as less prestigious than completing a four-year college, community colleges are now regarded as “the on-ramp to higher education,” Judy said.

Last month, President Obama proposed that the federal government, and participating state governments, pick up the tuition cost for students to attend community colleges for two years. (Community colleges typically graduate students with an associate degree after two years.) The stipulation is that a student must maintain a 2.5 grade point average, attend school at least half-time and plan to go on to a four-year college, or pursue occupational training.

Obama’s proposal is based on a state program in Tennessee called the Tennessee Promise, which, according to The New York Times, has attracted 58,000 applicants, about 90 percent of the state’s high school seniors graduating this spring.

The White House estimated that the bill would cost \$60 billion over 10 years, and if all states participated, would enroll some 9 million students. Whether such a bill would pass a Republican-controlled Congress is questionable.

There is recognition, however, that community colleges can pave the way to a four-year college, while also reducing the overall cost of a four-year college’s tuition, which has become increasingly expensive, even with loans and scholarships to help pay the way.

The 2014-2015 undergraduate price tag at Dartmouth College, including tuition, room and board, and fees, is \$65,523. At the University of New Hampshire, it is roughly \$28,000, and at the University of Vermont, around \$27,000.

By contrast, a year's tuition for full-time enrollment at CCV is around \$6,000, which does not include the cost of housing. At River Valley Community College in Claremont, a year's tuition, depending on the number of credits, ranges between \$4,800 and \$6,000.

The CCV tuition increase for the next two years, said Judy, is 3 percent, and is anticipated to be 0 percent the year after. Last year, tuition at River Valley Community College was lowered by 5 percent, and this year there was no increase, said Valerie Mahar, vice president of student services, community and workforce affairs. It is the objective of both colleges to keep tuition affordable.

Even before the 2008 economic downturn accelerated the number of people enrolling in community colleges, more students were looking more closely at the two-year option.

“What we've seen in the last decade is a transition to more students who are coming immediately out of high school to strengthen their academics, and also to help with family economics,” Mahar said.

River Valley is part of the Community College System of New Hampshire, which comprises seven independent colleges and local academic centers. About 27,000 students are enrolled statewide, and 1,100 of those, mostly from the Claremont and Keene areas, are on the River Valley campus or taking classes online. Some 44 percent of River Valley's first-year students are first-generation college students, Mahar said.

Students have realized that they can no longer expect to graduate from high school and find and keep a good-paying job for most of their career, Mahar said.

“Everything in our society is changing, everything is computerized,” Mahar said. “This is paralleled in every aspect of industry, whether it's health care or machine tools. You have to be open to change, and open to continuous learning. Those messages are being shared and encouraged at the high school level and people are learning it in their workplace. Those are the individuals that come to us to learn new skills.”

Until 2011, Amedee Locke worked at Thermal Dynamics in West Lebanon in a number of different jobs, from shipping to assembling plasma cutters, which are used to cut metal. Locke was laid off just before Christmas, when her job was outsourced to Mexico.

As part of her New Hampshire unemployment benefits, Locke applied for retraining through the U.S. Department of Labor's Trade Readjustment Allowances program, which is available to workers who have lost their jobs due to a shift in production overseas.

Locke decided to go back to school and enrolled at CCV in the summer of 2012 with the ambition of going into the fast-growing field of medical services. “I didn’t really know what to expect,” she said. “Here I am, 42, going back to college.”

She’d studied business at CCV when she was younger but “life happened” in the form of marriage and children.

Locke lives in South Royaltown with her husband and their four children from previous relationships. To incorporate her college schedule into family life, she said, “takes dedication and structure.”

After a brief stint working with patients in a clinical setting, Locke decided she would prefer to work with patients in the area of human services and case management, helping them navigate the complex health care system.

Her CCV education is paid for by the Trade Readjustment program and a federal Pell grant, which is awarded to students who qualify based on need. Because it is a grant and not a loan it need not be repaid. The maximum grant for 2014-2015 is \$4,860.

Locke graduates in June, but she has already begun sending resumes to area hospitals and recently began an internship at The Haven in White River Junction, working two days a week in the food bank and at the front desk.

She’s been impressed by the range of students and faculty she has met at community college. “It’s a level playing field. You feel an equal,” she said.

For each class she’s taken, the college has charted what jobs students can expect to find after graduation, as well as the pay and advancement possibilities.

Locke has concentrated on jobs in the fast-growing health care field. But community colleges also offer courses and certificates in such specialized areas as advanced machine tool training, hospital billing and coding, certified indoor air quality management, website design, environmental science, criminal justice and software development, among others.

Community colleges, said Mahar, are also being asked to train students in what she calls “soft” but essential skills: dependability, integrity, showing initiative, being ready to work and able to communicate well.

Access to community college is one half of the story. The other half is completion.

“If a student leaves with a degree or certificate, it’s much more marketable in the job market than a bunch of courses,” said Judy.

A 2013 report, The American Dream 2.0, released by a coalition of educators, business representatives and politicians, among others, found that 46 percent of students nationally who

enrolled in institutions of higher learning do not receive a degree within six years of entering, largely due to high tuition and the debt load upon graduating.

That percentage rises when evaluating community colleges, according to data from the American Association of Community Colleges. About 60 percent of students who enter community college do not receive an associate degree.

However, Judy cautioned, because a community college population is more fluid than that of a traditional liberal arts college, where most students hope to finish in four consecutive years, it can be difficult to pin down completion rates. Community college students may finish in two years, or they may come in and out over time, based on what is happening in their lives. The majority of students enrolled do so on a part-time basis because they already have jobs: 86 percent are part-time students, compared with a 14 percent full-time enrollment.

But data on the CCV Class of 2013 shows that 93 percent of its graduates reported being employed, continuing their education, or serving in the military within six months.

Mahar said approximately 61 percent of full-time students at River Valley Community College complete their degree. When students who've earned an associate degree transfer to a four-year institution and earn a bachelor's degree, Mahar said, "these B.A.s don't say in parentheses, 'Started at a community college.' "

Financial, geographic and cultural barriers can make college seem a distant possibility to students whose parents didn't go beyond high school. But these impediments can be overcome through a coordinated effort by secondary schools, colleges and states, said Kate Hughes, coordinator of academic services at CCV's White River Junction campus.

Both CCV and the Community College System of New Hampshire have programs that introduce middle and high school students in the region to college in a variety of ways.

In June 2013, Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin signed the Flexible Pathways bill, or Act 77, which expanded educational opportunities for students. Act 77 includes expansion of the dual enrollment program, in which high school juniors and seniors are eligible to receive two vouchers to take two college courses at no cost; expansion of early college programs, in which a high school senior can combine that last year with the first year of college; and increased access to job training and career and technical education.

The Community College System of New Hampshire offers the Running Start program, in which college courses are taught in high school by high school teachers. Students can use the credits for both high school and college. The "Catch the Wave" program encourages juniors and seniors in high school to take classes at River Valley Community College campuses. The college credits they earn also go toward their high school graduation requirements.

Cynthia Edson, a school counselor at Hartford High School, begins advising students and families as early as sophomore year. "That's when we start that conversation: What are you

looking for to do after high school?" It could be college, the military or vocational training, she said.

Beth Houde, an English teacher and school-to-career counselor at Windsor High School, has collaborated with both CCV and River Valley on how to expose students to a college curriculum and what that means for them in terms of the academic and social expectations.

"There's a lot of work on both sides of the river to include high school students in college offerings," Houde said. "We try to talk to them at younger ages ... just letting them know the options."

At the college level, a student in Vermont who completes two years at CCV is now guaranteed admission to the University of Vermont to complete the last two years of a bachelor's degree, Judy said. This is a significant savings: Four years at UVM would cost around \$101,000; two years at CCV, and then two years at UVM, would cost around \$60,000.

The University of New Hampshire, and its state colleges, have a similar arrangement with the Community College of New Hampshire.

Judy also has seen students from the upper middle class who enroll at CCV because they want eventually to earn a master's degree. "If they can save money on the front end, they can save money for that master's. College is expensive, but if you look at the earning power, people with a college education do much better than those without," she said.

Even if Obama's community college proposal fails, it still may help to bring about a national conversation, Judy said. While Pell grants are available, she said, not everyone qualifies for them. "Any time you can make it more affordable, you remove those barriers that make it difficult for people to continue," Judy said.

The cost of a community college, said Hughes, coupled with the process of applying for financial aid, can be intimidating. "A lot of people ... just see the sticker price and say it's a non-starter. But there is such a need for a skilled work force. Having an associate degree is really valuable as an economic driver, to take the jobs that become available and move (people) into that kind of work," she said.

Judy recalled talking to a woman who worked in a human resources department who saw hundreds of resumes. The people with an associate or four-year degree went into one pile, and the people without into another pile. The emphasis wasn't necessarily about where applicants went to college, but the fact that they'd finished.

The applicants with degrees had set a goal, and achieved it, the woman told Judy: that was what employers wanted to see.

For her part, Ashley Andreas has found that the community college experience spurs the kind of intellectual engagement that she didn't necessarily find the first time around. "I love the class

discussions. I've made a lot of friends. I'm able to find people who are the movers, and have their heads on straight," she said.

Perhaps as important, while she cares for her young daughter and finishes her course work, community college offers a base of support while she contemplates her future, and that of her child.

"I'm trying to buy some time, to see about an internship, and maybe get a B.A. in business," she said. "But I don't want to stop learning in the meantime."

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