

Community colleges pitch benefits, hope to grow numbers

Posted: Tuesday, December 10, 2013 12:00 pm | Updated: 12:29 pm, Tue Dec 10, 2013.

By KAITLIN MULHERE Sentinel Staff

Posted on December 10, 2013

Despite increased enrollment at community colleges in the past five years, New Hampshire has one of the lowest statewide percentages of students enrolling in the colleges.

That's something the Community College System of New Hampshire board of trustees, chancellor and college presidents aim to change with a new campaign to increase enrollment rates by 25 percent over the next three years.

Since 2007, enrollment in the state's seven community colleges has increased 14 percent, to roughly 27,000 students.

Yet in New Hampshire, fewer than 30 percent of the higher education population attend community colleges, compared with more than 40 percent nationwide. Among all states, New Hampshire ranks second to last in its percentage of community college students, said Angela Roussel-Roberge, a member of the system's board of trustees.

Roussel-Roberge said the system wants to combat a perception that community colleges are only for people pursuing careers in the trades.

"We needed to really let them see the face of what the community college looks like now," she said.

That face is a majority of young — between the ages of 18 and 24 — daytime learners, Nashua Community College President Lucille Jordan said at a Conval Regional School Board meeting last week.

It could be a student who wants to join the workforce but would like to increase his or her earning potential, Roussel-Roberge said. New Hampshire workers with associate degrees will earn 28 percent more than workers with only a high school diploma, according to a report from the Community College System.

That face also could be a student with strong grades in high school who doesn't perform well on the SATs, Jordan said. Or it could be the right choice for a top-notch student who is struggling with the financial burden of attending a four-year school.

At a time when New Hampshire consistently ranks as one of the states with the highest student debt, spending two years at a community college can save families thousands, Roussel-Roberge said.

She attended New Hampshire community colleges, as did her two children, who both will graduate with very little student debt. Costs at community colleges are one-third lower than any other public, four-year New Hampshire school and 75 percent of students still receive scholarships and financial aid, Roussel-Roberge said.

"I don't know why people are so reticent about not putting that on the table for their kids, like we did in our house," she said. "I'm just tickled pink that my kids will be able to purchase a house by the time they're 30."

And for those students looking to earn a bachelor's degree, the community colleges have a simple transfer agreement with several New Hampshire schools, Jordan said. This year, 673 community college students transferred into University System of New Hampshire colleges, an increase of 64 percent since 2007.

As River Valley President Alicia B. Harvey-Smith says, the school's motto is "you can get there from here." Whether that's the workforce or a four-year degree, community colleges can accommodate all, she said.

Harvey-Smith is scheduling a meeting to talk with Keene board members and administrators.

Right now, the rate of Keene High students enrolling at River Valley is 8.7 percent. The high school also offers six "Running Start" courses, where students can earn college credit. Thirty-nine students currently participate in that program.

River Valley wants both of those numbers to grow, and as a whole, the community colleges want to increase participation in Running Start courses by 33 percent over the next three years, Harvey-Smith said.

Jordan and Harvey-Smith said they want to improve their presence on high school campuses. Nashua Community College has an academic adviser visit Nashua South High School every week to get to know students and help recruit those who could be a good fit for community college. That's something Jordan said she's willing to do at Conval High as well.

Conval High is eager to work with Jordan to share the benefits of the community college path, such as transferable credits and financial savings, with parents and students, Principal Brian S. Pickering said.

The number of Conval graduates planning to attend community colleges has increased slightly over the past three years, from 17 percent to 20 percent, he said.

To help that number continue to grow, the school has organized field trips to Nashua Community College and hosted speakers from local businesses who spoke to their desire for workers with post-secondary degrees.

Kaitlin Mulhere can be reached at 352-1234, extension 1439, or kmulhere@keenesentinel.com. Follow her on Twitter @KMulhereKS.