

Community colleges attracting people with college degrees

By David Koepfel, Fortune

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, thousands of students have learned the bitter lesson that the college degrees they paid for do not guarantee a steady job. In response, many have opted for grad school to give their status, pay, and job security a bump.

Then there are those who seem to be taking a step backward. It may seem counter-intuitive but some graduates are choosing to pursue community college associate degrees, after their bachelor's.

"There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that this is on the rise as a phenomenon," says Doug Shapiro, executive research director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

The National Post Secondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) estimates that during the 2007-2008 academic year, 8 percent of entering community college students had already completed their bachelor's degrees. This data was collected before the surge in enrollment at community colleges in recent years, says Norma Kent, senior vice president at the American Association of Community Colleges.

Some of the returning students are recent graduates who have found that their sociology or philosophy major has not been enough to find gainful employment. They are now training for careers as nurses, IT specialists, or medical technicians. Radiation therapists and registered nurses with associate's degrees earn median salaries of \$74,200 and \$63,800 respectively, according to a 2009 report from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“Many of these students have graduated fairly recently and the job market didn’t pan out the way they expected, says Felix Matos Rodriguez, the president of Hostos Community College in the Bronx. “Some say their initial choice of major was not the right one. For some folks that were laid off, it was a wake-up call.”

Baby Boomers are also among those returning for associate degrees to improve their marketability in their current careers, or to retrain for a new one after getting laid off.

Associate degrees often take two years or less to complete, cost considerably less than public or private graduate programs, and offer greater flexibility for those who work full-time. In 2010-11, the average public two-year college tuition was \$2,713, compared to \$7,605 at public four-year institutions, according to a 2011 report by the College Board.

Over the past three years, Matos Rodriguez says that each semester, between 35 and 60 college graduates have enrolled at Hostos to earn associate’s degrees, when previously there had been virtually none.

Matos Rodriguez believes that the economy has fueled this trend, but also credits the Obama Administration’s role in promoting and investing in community college programs. In September, the Department of Labor announced the second \$500 million grant to community colleges as part of a four-year, \$2 billion job training initiative. Since the recession, community colleges have seen a spike in overall enrollment.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, 849,000 associate’s degrees were awarded during the 2009-2010 academic year, a 50.4 percent increase from 10 years earlier. Associate’s degrees in health and related fields saw a 105 percent jump during that same period.

“Community college programs train people for more career-oriented fields, and that has resonated,” Matos Rodriguez

says.

In January, Camille McIntosh, 28 of Liverpool, N.Y. enrolled at Bryant & Stratton College in Syracuse to get an AAS degree in human resources. McIntosh graduated in 2006 from Devry College in Miramar, Fla. with a BS in technical management and a concentration in hospitality management.

McIntosh says she felt frustrated working a series of entry-level jobs at companies like Hard Rock and Marriott (MAR). She realized that she wanted to pursue a career in human resources. In 2011, she spent months searching unsuccessfully for an entry-level HR job. "The bachelor's degree without the HR experience didn't help me at all," she says. "This was the way to get my foot in the door."

She says she discovered that, with her college credits, she could complete Bryant & Stratton's HR specialist program in just under a year. Most importantly, the program offered her an HR internship with the Adecco Group, a staffing corporation that employs more than 500,000 people worldwide.

At first, she admits, she was embarrassed by the stigma of going back to get an associate's degree after her bachelor's. "Sometimes you have to take a step back to go forward," she says.

McIntosh says she still has \$40,000 in debt from her four-year college and will incur about another \$15,000 in her current program. The average debt for all student loan borrowers in 2011 was \$23,300, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. Ten percent owe more than \$54,000, while 3 percent owe more than \$100,000.

"A fair number of students with bachelor's are worried about the debt they've accumulated," says Robert Templin, the president of Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). He calls the combination of a bachelor's and associate degree "a powerful cocktail" and says he has witnessed this trend at his

own school for the last four or five years.

Depending on major and school, associate's degrees and post-secondary certificates can be more economically beneficial than a bachelor's degree. Mark Schneider, a vice president at the American Institutes for Research and the president of CollegeMeasures.org, recently compared the earning power of graduates with associate's and bachelor's degrees in Virginia, Arkansas, and Tennessee, and found that "an associate's degree can have a payoff that exceeds that of a bachelor's degree."

In Virginia, graduates of occupational or technical associate's degree programs with an average salary of just under \$40,000 "out-earned not only non-occupational associate's degree graduates, by about \$6,000, but also bachelor's degree graduates, by almost \$2,500 statewide."

Schneider says it's understandable for bachelor's degree graduates to return to school for associate's degrees. "It doesn't reflect badly on students who did something they loved at 18 years old, but five years later they can't find a job, and now they have to feed themselves," he says.

Younger students aren't the only former graduates assessing their careers and going back for associate degrees. College graduates over 50 are returning to community college in record numbers; 388,000 were enrolled nationwide in fall 2009, according to the AACC, a 12 percent increase from 2005.

Cathy Webb, 61, of Roanoke, Va., a nursing student at NOVA, returned to school in 2010 and is six months away from graduation day. Webb received her BA in 1973 from Longwood University in Farmville, Va. She started her career as a music teacher. By the 1980s, she had moved into medical sales. She ultimately became a mortgage broker. When the mortgage crisis hit in 2008, she lost her job and her career "came to a screeching halt," she says. Soon after, Webb contracted meningitis.

As she recovered from her illness, Webb says she began to consider returning to school to become a nurse. When she was younger, Webb had wanted to go to medical school and now she saw an opportunity to at least fulfill part of that dream by pursuing a health care career. She plans to begin working as a nurse when she graduates and then continue her studies to become a nurse paramedic.

Matos Rodriguez of Hostos says there's not enough data yet to know how well these graduates will do with their hybrid bachelor's and associate's degree. He says he worries that those who make the decision to return strictly based on the job market could find that their emotional skills may not match jobs like nursing. "I'll be happy if these students finish on time, don't take on too much debt, and go into the labor market earning between \$50,000 and 70,000."