

Column: Considering Your College Options

By John O'Brien - Guest Columnist

Published: Friday, August 13, 2010 2:22 PM CDT

<http://www.mnsun.com/articles/2010/08/14/opinion/fw/fw12college.txt>

I was scared. It was a number of years ago and I was sitting in my son's high school auditorium with a bunch of other parents learning about how we might pay for a college education.

There was a little sense of doom in the air and as the evening wore on I got more and more concerned - not only with the grim realities of paying for college, but with the incomplete picture that was presented. In a presentation that lasted more than an hour, parents learned about investment plans to save for college, opportunities for scholarships and the advantages of advanced placement courses.

But not once did any of the presenters mention the best chance for being able to afford a college education: the community college, which was literally blocks away.

Two-year community and technical colleges are clearly the most affordable option in higher education and what they lack in glamour they make up for in financial and educational sense. Now, when we are all staring down the worst financial crisis ever, it is time for recent graduates, older students, dislocated workers and paying parents alike to reconsider the value of community colleges.

First of all, affordability is no longer just one of many factors in choosing a college. More and more, it is the factor that makes the difference between going to college and not going. While this persistent recession has eroded our savings, college students nationally are taking on more student debt than ever before. According to the U.S. Education Department, borrowing was up 25 percent in the 2008-2009 school year alone.

In Minnesota, average two-year college tuition and fees for the upcoming academic year are about \$4,900 per year, compared to \$6,600 at state universities, \$11,500 at the University of Minnesota, \$16,200 at trade schools and \$30,800 at private colleges.

Moreover, the quality of education at community colleges is indisputably high. In fact, our data shows that North Hennepin students who transfer to Minnesota universities perform consistently as well as or better than non-transfer students. Many of these successful transfer students came to a community college for the convenience or the cost, but they stayed because of the quality - and the community.

As a community college we are proud of the fact that we are not selective in our admission. We take honors students and under prepared students alike. We invest in offering both groups the academic challenge they deserve and the support some need to be successful.

If you give your local community college a second look you won't be alone. Philanthropic organizations like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation are making significant investments in two-year colleges and President Obama has prioritized increased funding of community colleges because we are seen as the key to the country's long-term, economic competitiveness.

On a local level, college students are voting with their feet. Two-year college enrollments are expected to continue to increase this year, rounding out a decade of growth in which many colleges have seen a doubling of enrollments since 2000. At North Hennepin Community College, for example, 9,943 students took credit classes last year, and enrollment is up 7 percent for fall semester 2010. Thousands more took non-credit classes.

Affording college is more challenging than it has ever been, but as one student put it, "I don't know how I'm going to afford to go to college. I just know I can't afford not to."

O'Brien is the President of North Hennepin Community College.