

Opinion

Guest column: College degrees are convenient, needed today more than ever

By John O'Brien - Guest Columnist

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It's widely known that the 25 community and technical colleges in Minnesota are a smart place to start for many students. Classes are affordable and offered at convenient times and locations. Faculty and student services are exceptional. And two-year colleges are positioned well to meet the rapidly changing needs of the workforce.

Less known is the fact that students can earn their bachelor's degree at some two-year colleges. These 2+2 partnerships with 4-year universities allow students to continue their upper-division studies at a familiar community college. Students don't have to worry about whether or not their credits will transfer. They don't have to commute long distances, relocate their families or find their way around an unfamiliar campus.

At North Hennepin Community College for example, students can get their A.A. or A.S. degree - then choose from a number of 4-year degree options delivered on our Brooklyn Park campus.

NHCC offers bachelor's degrees in Business Administration, BioScience, Nursing, Operations Management, Construction Management and Medical Lab Science through Minnesota State University Moorhead, St. Cloud State University and Metropolitan State University. The four-year institutions confer the degrees and transcripts and academic records look the same for graduates of the 2+2 programs as they do for students who took the classes on the university's campus.

These partnerships at NHCC were formed in response to research done a few years ago in the Twin Cities 13-county metro area that showed existing four-year colleges and universities were not keeping up with demand. Another report by the Gates Foundation indicates college students these days have more work and family responsibilities than ever before. Therefore, it makes sense for them to study near their homes, employers, and support and child care networks.

This is certainly the case for Phi Theta Kappa honor student, Tina Hoikka. Tina is a married mother of four young children and a full-time student. She is pursuing her Bachelor of Science in Biochemistry and Biotechnology from Minnesota State University Moorhead at NHCC's campus.

"I can't imagine going to college without being near my family," Hoikka said. "NHCC is close to home and my children's school. My husband and family members help out with the kids and the household chores, so I am able to balance my time between them and my studies."

Hoikka and other NHCC students also appreciate the small class sizes and individual attention provided in these programs.

"I have gotten to know many of my classmates and professors," she said. "You may get face time with a teacher's assistant at a university, but one-on-one with a professor is not as typical. I feel comfortable approaching my professors here. At NHCC it is part of the culture - providing a wonderful learning environment."

Not only is it smart to start at a two-year college, it is smart to finish there as well. According to the U.S. Census-Estimates of Work-Life Earnings, students who graduate with an associate's degree can expect to earn almost a half a million dollars more than a high school graduate. Students who choose to stay to earn a bachelor's degree can add another half a million dollars to their lifetime earnings. The cost savings make sense too. These 2+2 programs are almost half the cost of the University of Minnesota and five times less expensive than many private colleges.

Two-year colleges have responded to the need in our communities for high quality degrees that are both convenient and affordable. Putting a four-year degree within reach not only changes lives for the better, but also contributes to a more educated workforce and thriving Minnesota economy.

It just makes sense.

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