An Open-Access Opportunity

What does it mean to attend a community college? Answers to this question may include phrases such as technical training, associate's degrees, and high school completion. Or a longer answer: “Community college is a more affordable way to get basic college requirements out of the way prior to transferring to a four-year college or university.” Although all of those are still major components of the community college experience, we are increasingly offering more. Our institutions, which began as junior colleges, are just over a century old, with many celebrating 50- to 75-year anniversaries. Despite this relatively short tenure, we have been at the forefront of nearly every major development in higher education during that time.

When I am out in the community, people often ask why they’ve seen so many changes on our campus in Bellevue, Washington. Why are we changing? And how can we continue to serve our traditional populations? My answers lie in our mission: To advance the lifelong educational development of our students while strengthening the economic, social, and cultural life of our diverse community. In adjusting to these needs, we cannot help but mirror the changes that are influencing our student and business communities. At Bellevue College (BC), we have responded by (1) bringing in more research opportunities for our students, (2) increasing bachelor's degree offerings, (3) building on-campus housing, (4) offering competency-based education (CBE), and (5) considering a major partnership with our state’s land-grant institution. These are moves that other community colleges might want to consider, if they are not already.

Not long ago, it was rare for an undergraduate student to become involved in scientific research—something that was even rarer for a community college student. These days, however, most undergraduates bound for grad school or industry do laboratory or fieldwork beyond what's required. Undergraduate research, which can take many forms, gives students not only a taste of what a career in their field would be like but also an edge in applying for graduate schools and jobs. But that edge isn't what it used to be, because many graduate schools and employers have come to expect it. So at BC, to ensure that our students are school- and work-ready, we have developed the RISE (Research, Innovation, Service and Experiential Learning) Institute and have dedicated precious resources, including a Dean of Undergraduate Research and new classroom/laboratory space, to support student research efforts through grant-funded projects, curriculum development, faculty support, and partnerships with other research labs and industry/community organizations.

The modern workforce is changing. Education, government, and human resource department officials alike recognize that the major gaps between traditional programming, pedagogies, and graduation rates in the areas of health care, energy, and information technology demand increased training opportunities to meet workforce need. To address this need, BC recently received approval to offer two new bachelor of applied science degrees—one in Health Promotion Management and the other in Healthcare Management and Leadership. These degrees are specifically designed to provide residents with affordable paths to family-wage jobs in growing fields. The two programs will begin classes in the fall of 2016, raising the total number of four-year degrees offered at BC to 10, almost all of which are STEM related. All are filling crucial unmet workforce needs.

The affordability of community college bachelor's degree programs and the ease of access are particularly important in attracting students from first-generation and traditionally underrepresented groups. In addition, BC programs are tailored to the state's workforce needs, so our graduates are able to quickly find living-wage jobs. According to the State of Washington Education Research & Data Center, BC graduates who were awarded bachelor's degrees in 2011–12 earned a median salary of $48,200 in 2013. To take this approach a step further, in July 2015 the Washington State Legislature approved a budget proviso giving BC a state appropriation to develop a bachelor of science degree in computer science. This will establish BC as the first community college in the state to offer a four-year bachelor of science program open to freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. To date, community college bachelor's degree programs have all been two-year, applied baccalaureate degrees, designed for the professional/technical student with an AA degree.

As the local demographic has changed and grown, and as we at BC have expanded our offerings in line with community need, we are now finding ourselves in need of on-campus housing. For many community colleges, a combination of various factors—from an increasing number of international students to the influx of bachelor's degree students whose demand for housing is expected to grow—is prompting the building of student housing. Our new building at BC, scheduled to start construction in April 2017 and to be completed thirteen months later, is planned to be four stories tall with just over 350 units. This building will be the first of several housing units, of varying style and size, that the college will build over the next decade to meet this new challenge.
Like many other community colleges, BC is also exploring CBE degree offerings—a unique way of approaching education for students who come to us with an established understanding of a subject and who would like to progress quickly through their coursework. CBE courses measure students’ course completion by what they have learned, via successful demonstration of specified and agreed-upon learning outcomes, rather than by how much seat-time they have put into a course. CBE students participate in a self-paced, online course with the support of a student navigator and the course instructor, allowing them to quickly progress through topics they understand well. CBE is not suited to all students, but for a growing population, this style of learning is proving beneficial. In addition to offering the CBE certificate, BC is part of a consortium of community colleges that have come together to fund and build an entire associate’s degree in business (http://cbewa.org/).

Finally, one of the more attention-grabbing changes at BC is our potential partnership with Washington State University (WSU). The two institutions signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in 2015, allowing for further discussions. By signing the MOU, BC was able to begin investigating some of the details that a partnership might entail: benefits to students, accreditation and governance issues, financial implications, and requirements to move such a partnership through the state legislature. The discussions developed organically as our institutions sought to find solutions to address some of the state’s higher education shortfalls. House Bill 2626, passed by the Washington State Legislature in 2014, strengthens the state’s commitment to educational attainment, in part by setting two goals for the state: (1) that all adults ages 25–44 will have a high school diploma or equivalent by 2023, and (2) that 70 percent of those adults will have a postsecondary credential. These are excellent goals, but they will require some creative thinking. To meet them, the state of Washington will have to increase postsecondary graduation rates by roughly 56,000 students each year through 2023.

Partnerships like the one being explored between BC and WSU are one way to reach this goal. BC is located within the Puget Sound region of Washington State, an area that has both the major metropolitan city of Seattle and fast-growing satellite cities like Bellevue. These “east side” cities are home to growing corporations such as Microsoft and Boeing. Yet this metropolitan area has only one state-supported, bachelor’s-degree-granting college: the University of Washington, the state’s flagship research university, which is highly selective and limited in its enrollments. The region thus has a severe lack of access to affordable and local bachelor’s degrees for thousands of high school students annually. As outlined in the MOU, Bellevue College would become Washington State University-Bellevue College (WSU-Bellevue College) and would continue to offer an array of two-year degrees. But BC would also augment its four-year degree offerings over time. We are viewing this possible partnership through the lens of how to best serve our region and our students. Looking at both the land-grant and community college missions, one can easily envision the benefits of this partnership. The ideals of land-grant universities include making high-quality education accessible, developing research and technological innovations that address the public good, and infusing contributions to solving the world’s grand challenges into the undergraduate experience. Community colleges aim to provide a comprehensive educational program for individuals in their region through an open-access admissions policy and to serve as a community-based institution of higher education, teaching, and lifelong learning. A partnership between WSU and BC could significantly increase access to higher education, which we greatly need right now.²

This is an exciting time to be in higher education. Change is all around us. With community and workforce needs evolving at breakneck speed, community colleges can offer a nimble response. We should address these needs through creative and innovative models, while at the same time we must continue to offer an excellent and affordable education to anyone who is willing to put in the time and effort.

So, returning to the question that started this column: What does it mean to attend a community college? I believe it is an open-access opportunity to explore just about every aspect of the undergraduate experience.

Notes

David L. Rule david.rule@bellevuecollege.edu is President of Bellevue College.

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