

Exploring Admissions Part 5: Community Colleges

True Grit

BY TOM ROBINSON

Many among academia's refined aristocracy may view community colleges as the wild, wild West. Many of today's consumers of higher education truly view them as a land of personal opportunity with riches just ready for the mining. Which makes the territory just right for the grittier, more visionary John Waynes of higher education.

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Mention the words “community college” and you could get a disdainful look or a smart aleck comment that it’s not a real college or the students aren’t exactly top drawer. Based on our explorations of community college students in Dallas and northern Virginia, neither would be true.

In two urban encounters we saw community colleges providing a vital service in the classroom to large diverse student populations despite remarkable financial and bureaucratic constraints. The community college students we’ve interviewed demonstrate remarkable grit. Respect is in order.

Eastward Ho from Texas to Washington, D.C.

A *Greentree Gazette* scouting party began our community college explorations in Dallas last fall. In January we proceeded to another dynamic city with the assistance of a cooperative school of considerable size. The demographics of metropolitan Washington, D.C. were perfect for the task. And on the Virginia side of the Potomac River, there is a large community college that spans the entire bustle from Reagan airport to Dulles airport.

The school has a dedicated CEO, six campuses, an ultra-serious mission, and heavy baggage to match. It’s called Nova with considerable affection. That’s the community’s moniker for Northern Virginia Community College, one of the five largest in the U.S. by anyone’s measure.

For this installment we conducted eight focus groups in Dallas and in Fairfax, Virginia with community college students enrolled “for-credit.” Observers were in attendance from several U.S. community colleges and four-year colleges to help us distinguish between opinions and practices that are national and those that might well be Dallas- or Virginia-centric.

To follow up our student research, we convened working lunches with 20-plus invited higher education industry representatives each day. Participants enjoyed the good food and the lively conversation. Most participants came away with some new knowledge or a new viewpoint.

How community colleges meet the needs of consumers

Community college admissions are “open.” Very open. Entry is accessible with little pre-qualification, and there is no admissions gauntlet to speak of. We found no SAT or ACT exam requirements, nor even GPA requirements. Students appreciatively told us that if there’s a class open for you, and your check clears, you are pretty much in.

However, George Boggs, president and CEO of the American Association of Community Colleges, cautions,

“Don’t take ‘easy to get in’ too literally.” The limitation is capacity. Finite space in the classroom and shrinking funds to hire qualified faculty are forcing community colleges to turn students away—not from school, but from class.

Nevertheless, if the customer puts his or her value on cost per credit or cost per degree, community college provides extraordinary value. The financial advantage is accompanied by a predictable path to four-year colleges and even graduate schools, albeit through a convoluted set of inter-institutional agreements.

Undistracted by football games, Greek life and keg parties, there is a singular focus on education (or training or certification), and the students we interviewed are grateful for it. From those who previously attended a four-year resi-

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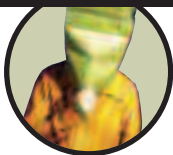
dential college or had friends who do, there were numerous complaints of loud music and boorish behavior in the dorms. “Campus people party seven days a week,” declared one student in her early twenties. A younger woman was so shaken by the nocturnal visits of her roommate’s 34-year-old boyfriend that she left the college.

Other young people said they prefer to avoid campus life for reasons of their own immaturity or lack of discipline. Satisfied with the community college atmosphere, one young man told us it’s a “good transition from high school.”

Convenience is key

Campuses are in locations convenient within the community they serve. In both Dallas and northern Virginia, the car and the parking lot rule. “At a community college, a car takes the place of the dormitory. It is an essential college expense,” explains John Dever, Nova’s executive vice president.

Flexible schedules accommodate family life and work. Some students, at their option, “spiral” in one semester and



Community college factors cited as desirable

It's nearby.

It's a bargain.

It's interruptible.

It's a great transition from high school.

It's a low-risk way back for adults to re-enter higher education

Transfer agreements that guarantee acceptance at four-year schools.

Few distractions from education.

Course loads can be tailored to schedule and budget.

Class sizes that are small to medium.

Instructors and key department heads rival those of four-year colleges.

Motivated adult students help set the bar for younger students.



Community college factors cited as annoying or stressful

Lack of respect for community colleges and their students

Academic counselors unavailable to guide course selection.

Non-intuitive web pages

Scarce human contact at vital times

Unavailable courses

The web registration "shootout" from midnight to 5:00 am on day one of registration

Offices scattered, closed or staffed with ineffective people.

Transfer credit mistakes that waste time and money.

Dropping out means losing health insurance eligibility on a parent's policy.

Dropping out triggers repayment of student loans.



out again the next. They might take a semester off to earn the money to pay for next semester. For single moms or military personnel, the break could last a couple of years. One young Asian man will be returning to China for a year to learn to read and write his native language. Such interruptions occur with understanding and support that might not be forthcoming at four-year schools.

The students themselves are admirable

We found ourselves musing on whether "community" college might be a misnomer, because the student experience appears to be quite *individual*. Most for-credit students are passing through. Each is using the community college to amass courses and credits to transfer to another school that will award a bachelors degree. Many of them expect to proceed on to graduate or professional school thereafter. With very few exceptions, there was no desire to move through the community college experience as a member of a class of 2005 or as part of an otherwise identifiable cohort.

Meanwhile, the world appears to be "the community," especially so at Nova. Among the students we interviewed in both metro areas, we encountered move-ins from Cleveland and Sacramento. But just as often, students hailed from Cameroon, Lebanon, Brazil or Senegal.

Both cities provide a demographer's nirvana of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, life stage, lifestyle, psychography and socio-economic stratification. Educational attainment is quite high, and it has an especially strong effect on immigrants. The middle-Eastern waiter at our working lunch restaurant is pursuing a masters and trying to get into Johns Hopkins. My Moroccan-born cab driver told me on the way to the airport that he has a bachelors degree from American University and expectations for a career in foreign service after getting his doctorate.

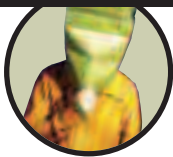
But it's the life circumstances of community college students that consistently captured our attention. At a community college, the "non-traditional student" is actually the norm. For many, their circumstances require sacrifices. Often they are financially strapped. Almost all are working part time or full time. While they're commuting and attending class, some have families fending at home for themselves. Others are constantly struggling to find and keep sitters.

There are also career-changers, who must go back—back to school literally and backwards financially—to go forward.

Credentials are somewhat murky

Though the community college offers a variety of them, most students view associates degrees as a somewhat confusing formality. They're seeking transcript credits here for admission elsewhere. The credential that matters is the bachelors or graduate degree. For a "transfer student" there's not much luster to an associates degree, which often is called a "transfer degree" by community college staff.

Even the Nova students whose academic records indicate they are pursuing a "terminal degree"—Associate of *Applied Arts* (AAA)



or Associate of *Applied Science* (AAS)—told us they expect to go on to a four-year program elsewhere.

As purchasers, community college students are value conscious

We asked focus group participants to compare the value of their community college education to an interesting array of life's wants and needs. Nova's students consistently value their Nova education over a vacation, a new car, their music collection, life insurance and a degree from nearby Strayer University.

Surprisingly, a majority of students placed health insurance above Nova, including some of the younger ones. Other younger students are willing to roll the insurance dice that nothing will go wrong. And they have to, since their part time jobs rarely come with benefits.

In an earlier *Exploring Admissions* article, I likened the financial naivete of freshman four-year applicants, and even some grad students, to playing with Monopoly money. Not so community college students. Most of their

ing a family. We spoke to several who have already sent their children to college or are attending college at the same time as their kids. Many younger students told us they or their family simply can't afford anything other than a community college. Several told us they are on the rebound from failed educational experiences at four-year schools, and lamented the wasted money.

And here the first generation college student is represented in abundance. In barely intelligible English, one thirty-ish Hispanic man, told us he gave up his job to provide the time to "make more of himself." He is amazed that he might actually graduate from a U.S. college.

Is community college a retail transaction?

Sort of. In most cases, there is no personal courtship by the seller. In many cases there isn't much choice, due to price, grades or test scores. And in many cases it's the obvious choice; because no other local institution can deliver the convenience, variety, and classroom experience of a community college.

Students of all ages said they "shopped." On average, young people reported giving three schools serious consideration, while for adults the number was two. Their shopping method was the web, which they used to examine degree programs, course offerings and schedules.


In some instances students see themselves as "customers." Yes, they "have choices" and they do "pay for services." But young people seem to view any "customer relationship" through a negative lens. About this interesting psychology we have theories but no conclusions as yet.

Meanwhile, customer service complicates the relationship

Students of all ages in both cities declare themselves to be "very happy" or "happy" with their community college experience. They feel and express a sense of alliance, partnership and trust. This remained true despite other concerns or misgivings which were freely discussed.

In every case, and without exception the strength of this relationship is grounded in the classroom. The bond is between student and instructor(s). Although we heard reports of disinterested, even "deluded" instructors, they were rare exceptions willingly overlooked. Over and over in both cities, the faculty and department heads were judged to be excellent by students of all ages.

Very often the relationship between the student and professor extends beyond classroom material. "When I taught at Northern Virginia Community College, at least 30 percent of my time with students did not involve class materials. It was career advice and helping them negotiate the NVCC system," says Richard Jacik, now president of Information Methodologies Inc., a Virginia-based technology firm serving a number of higher education institutions.



Most of their tuition, books and fees (and every other expense) is paid for with real, hard-earned cash

tuition, books and fees (and every other expense) is paid for with real, hard-earned cash. They are respectful of their own money, or in the case of some younger students, their parents' money.

The majority told us that two years at Nova followed by two years at George Mason University represents a much better value than earning the same bachelors degree via a four-year stint at GMU. Only a few business students thought school brand plays an important role in hiring and might justify the additional cost of a four-year stay at George Mason University.

Why so?

Why are these students so attuned to finances? Look at their circumstances. Adult learners returning to college know well the realities of running a household and rais-

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EXPLORING ADMISSIONS PART 5: COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Nova's students remain happy despite the low marks they give the school for counseling and the failing grades for administrative services. What courses do I need to take? The answers to that question are difficult to find. The academic and career counseling desks are often understaffed or staffed by the uninformed, the misinformed or the loaded-with-forms (instead of answers). As a result, many students report they have taken courses that will not be transferable to the baccalaureate school of choice.

They flunk the school for administrative services like registrar, financial aid and parking. Administrative offices are often closed or scattered over the landscape. The same people who don't want to call themselves "customers" very much want streamlined, efficient administrative services and knowledgeable personnel to handle the routine, yet time-consuming administrative tasks like obtaining parking permits.

Nova executives and staffers felt their pain. The school is enrolling Virginians in numbers greater than Richmond subsidizes. Meanwhile, the academic/administrative resource allocation dilemma shows up in customer dissatisfaction. Dever thinks administrative staff training may improve the situation.

Yet whenever possible, these students want to look on a brighter side. One thoughtful young woman said, "Even if no one here knows about you as a person, they are familiar with your situation." To round out her thought, add these words of John Wayne from one of his movies, "Out here a man settles his own problems."

Payment is straightforward, understandable

The payment method is certainly reminiscent of retail. MasterCard, VISA, checks and cash are used by students in abundance. Financial aid is rare for three reasons we can identify. 1) Though tuition is low, community

college students are not necessarily poor. 2) Grant money is scarce in general, especially for working adults or military personnel. 3) A goodly number of busy community college students want to avoid the financial aid office and government forms that are seen to be its stock-in-trade.

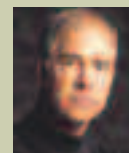
Without exception, student loans are viewed as inevitable by one hundred percent of the "transfer students." Yet they are easily ignored by busy people right now. We observed with interest, even surprise, students' responses to the question "Who would you prefer to deal with to get your student loan?" You'll find a summary of those responses in the *Student Loan Buying Guide* section of this issue of *The Greentree Gazette*.

Wrapping up this installment

So far, we've found that at a reasonable cost, community college students can get a good education, the credits they need to move on or the credentials they need for employment. It's accessible, convenient and flexible. The most important person in the relationship, the professor, knows his or her students pretty well and often spends the time and effort to provide more than the basic curriculum.

Many thanks to EduCap Inc. for generously co-sponsoring the research events in this installment. We hope you'll enjoy the accompanying articles in this issue and join us in May for installment number six. Our explorations continue in community college territory. ■

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