

Learning

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DISTRACTED LEARNER: Mike Loughran juggles work, fatherhood, and school at Massasoit Community College. Mr. Loughran often studies at the dining-room table – this time with 'help' from daughters Molly, 7 (left) and Emily, 5.

MELANIE STETSON
FREEMAN – STAFF

Community colleges aim for more respect

The institutions, which serve more than half of US undergrads, are working to improve access and uphold academic standards.

By **Stacy A. Teicher** | Staff writer of *The Christian Science Monitor*

Mike Loughran doesn't want to meander through his education. The 35-year-old says he's gone back to school "hard core," taking night and weekend classes at Massasoit Community College in southeastern Massachusetts, the very place he dropped out of after high school to join the Marines.

With their low tuitions and convenient locations, community colleges like Massasoit serve nearly half the country's undergraduates – everyone from second-career starters like Mr. Loughran to new immigrants to fast-track high-schoolers. But by some counts, fewer than half of community college students meet their educational goals, and that has a ripple effect in efforts to educate local workforces and make the United States more competitive.

Community colleges are becoming more aware of their shortcomings, experts say, in areas such as student advising, teaching methods, and the process of transferring academic credits. To address the latter, two-year and four-year institutions are collaborating on academic standards to ensure that key courses are transferable and are graded in a similar way.

Loughran wants to transfer from Massasoit and earn a master's degree within five years, but he wasn't thrilled with what his adviser told him when he first asked about four-year schools with business programs. One counselor recommended a public university 90 minutes away. As a husband and father of three, Loughran balked at the commute. The counselor still didn't get it, telling Loughran that room and board were very reasonable.

One trend in community colleges today "is to have a much more precise understanding of where their problems are," says Thomas Bailey, director of the Community College Research Center at Columbia University in New York. "They have always been very proud of their role of providing access, of opening doors to college for a broad range of students," but until recently, he adds, "there's been, frankly, less attention paid to what happens to those students once they get into college."

In southeastern Massachusetts, the CONNECT partnership brings together leaders and faculty from three community colleges, a state college, and a state university to better serve the students they often share.

The "transfer group," for instance, decided there should be full-time transfer coordinators at the four-year schools – the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth and Bridgewater State.

Just when Loughran was getting frustrated, he found out about Sandy Christoun, the transfer coordinator at Bridgewater, where he plans to enroll this summer. "She's by far been the most helpful up to this point," he says. She gave him up-to-date guidelines and directed him to the counselor at Massasoit who was most familiar with Bridgewater's requirements. Loughran, who works at a software company, says he's gaining credentials in management in order to "not allow opportunities to pass me by."

A first-of-its-kind consortium

"CONNECT is the very first consortium in the state that represents [all three levels] of public higher education," says executive director Jane Souza. Because faculty meet to decide on common expectations and grading systems for subjects such as writing and math, "An A at Bristol Community College is going to be an A at Bridgewater," she says.

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For professors, the added benefit is improved respect. "There's a lot of myth-busting," says Thomas Grady, an English professor at Bristol Community College (BCC) in Fall River, Mass. He is part of CONNECT's writing project, in which faculty share ideas to align and improve first-year writing courses. He and other community college professors have been reassured that they are indeed preparing students well for continuing at a four-year school.

And that, in turn, boosts the confidence of students, who sometimes arrive with the attitude that BCC stands for "Beer Can College." "I can tell my students that this course not only indeed transfers, but we're using the same language [on the syllabus]," Professor Grady says.

CONNECT has been presented at recent national conferences and has attracted a grant from the Calderwood Writing Initiative in Boston, which sees a replicable model in its work with professors who teach writing.

The next step is to reach out to area high schools. Teachers can prepare and advise students better if they're in close contact with college professors, Ms. Souza says. Nationally, there's a move toward improving high school curriculums and teaching, partly to cut down on the degree to which colleges have to provide developmental education (the new term for "remedial"). About 4 in 10 students at community colleges need to take at least one developmental course.

Gauging engagement levels

The Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas, Austin, has conducted an annual national survey of student engagement (called CCSSE) for the past four years. It measures everything from the amount of time students discuss ideas outside of class to the degree to which they can apply what they're learning to solve problems.

"Student engagement is very important to success," says CCSSE director Kay McClenney. "With students who have to work and have family obligations ... engagement doesn't happen by accident.... So the colleges have to make it inescapable that students interact with faculty [and experience] collaborative learning."

The 2006 survey found that 38 percent of full-time students spent less than five hours a week preparing for class (it included 250,000 students from 447 community colleges). It also found that 91 percent of faculty spend less than 20 percent of class time on student writing.

Colleges can view their own data – and compare it with publicly available national averages – to target improvements. "We're getting many, many stories back," says Ms. McClenney. Some schools are integrating study strategies into first-year classes. Others are training teachers to use methods that are more effective than lecturing.

Many community colleges are also "revamping their approach to academic advising and planning," McClenney says. For first-generation students and others from underserved populations, "the advising function is critically important," she adds. The survey found that nearly 30 percent of part-time students say they don't use the advising services at their school.

At Miami Dade College in Florida, each campus now hosts transfer workshops, some geared specifically toward certain majors.

The need for scrutiny doesn't take away from the important role these schools fulfill with modest resources. Compared with public and private four-year colleges, community colleges are the launching pad for more low-income students, first-generation college students, adults who have children, and people who start with low academic skills.

These colleges are more dependent on state funding, but "the long-term trend is that the share of state budgets going to higher education – and particularly community colleges – has been going down for the last 20 years," says Mr. Bailey of the Community College Research Center.

National database vs. privacy concerns

To better track the progress of college students as they move around the country, the Spellings Commission on the Future of Higher Education recently recommended creating a national database of student records, an idea that has stirred controversy because of privacy concerns.

In the meantime, tracking is left up to states or schools that have joined efforts like the Achieving the Dream network, supported by 14 organizations such as the Community College Leadership Program at the University of Texas. Currently it includes 58 community colleges that are committed to tracking students and taking certain steps to improve achievement.

As part of CONNECT, Eileen Shea, director of transfer affairs at Bristol Community College, is on a half-time sabbatical to develop a way to track more than 600 students a year who transfer within the partnership. She'll look at the students' achievement over five years.

So if Loughran reaches his goal, CONNECT administrators, in theory, will be able to send him a big card combining best wishes for his 40th birthday with congratulations for earning his master's degree.