

4-year college coming to your neighborhood

By Jim Nowlan

Until recently most of us went away to college; now four-year college is coming to us, largely through innovative collaborations being developed by Illinois's impressive system of community colleges.

The once humble "junior" college has become a powerful yet nimble hub around which creativity in higher education swirls, from the high schools that meld with community colleges to provide dual credit and dual enrollment programs, to the four-year colleges that now offer bachelor's degrees on or near the campuses of the community colleges.

The numbers are impressive. Almost 400,000 Illinois students enroll in degree and certificate programs at our 39 community colleges on about two to three times that many campuses and satellite centers. That is almost as many as enroll at our public universities and private colleges combined.

"Enrollments have shot through the roof in the past three years," says Mike Monaghan, executive director of the Illinois Community College Trustees Association.

Part of this is due to the weak economy, which drives people back to community colleges to retrain and retool. Cost is another major driver.

With our nearly bankrupt state retreating from its commitment to student financial aid and funding for public institutions, including community colleges, tuition charges at

all institutions have been going up rapidly. In relative terms, this makes the live-at-home community colleges a real bargain. Tuition and basic fees at a community college of about \$3,000 a year for a fulltime student are about one-tenth that for a private college and one-fourth of a public university's charges. To that add the savings from staying at home.

The Illinois Community College System is one of the few functions of government where Illinois has been a national leader. Maintaining that advantage is probably the single most important thing our state can do to compete globally in the years to come.

Years ago, I taught evening courses at the Black Hawk College campus near Kewanee. I was impressed by the mix of young and older adult students in my classes, the older ones with worldly experience which they passed on to their younger classmates.

Created largely in the 1960s and 1970s, the state community college network is so pervasive that, according to Monaghan, most Illinois residents live within 10-15 minutes of a community college, and it is difficult to be more than a 25-minute drive away.

And the colleges are working feverishly to make it even easier to study at a community college. Illinois Valley Community College in Oglesby has, for example, just opened a satellite center in Ottawa, which serves the eastern part of that district. IVCC president Jerry Corcoran estimates many students will save as much as \$2,000 a year in transportation costs by going to the convenient new center. Lincolnland College in Springfield has 14 satellite centers across its sprawling territory.

Responsive to demand, the colleges will even take courses onto a manufacturer's shop floor for the 2 a.m. shift, if that is what it takes to reach the students.

The colleges have also been reaching directly into high schools, offering a wide array of dual credit courses, where the student earns both high school and college credit simultaneously. Dual credit enrollment has doubled in just the past five years.

This fall IVCC will begin a “running start” program at Marquette Academy in Ottawa. Gifted high school students will be able to earn their community college associate’s degrees at the same time they stride across the gymnasium stage to pick up their high school diplomas!

Corcoran estimates that a successful running start student will be able to save \$38,000 in college costs—and have a terrific head start in life as well.

In addition to the high cost of education, many students also find it hard to travel long distances to complete their bachelor’s degrees. They may be place bound by jobs and young families, for example. Not to worry, four year colleges are beginning to come to the students.

Western Illinois University is establishing a full campus in the Quad-Cities, where Black Hawk College students will find a nearly seamless transfer. In addition, Black Hawk has strong “articulation and transfer” (course acceptance) relationships with Augustana and St. Ambrose universities in the Quad Cities.

Where no four-year colleges exist, they are coming onto the community college campuses. This fall, Northern Illinois University will offer a Bachelor of Science Degree in Nursing at IVCC. Attracted by the student bases at the community colleges, many other four-year colleges and universities are coming to a community college near you.

Several two-year community colleges would love to morph into four-year institutions, but the legislature has thus far resisted the idea, fortunately. The more likely

model will be a collaborative one, in which the community college and an on-campus four-year institution will offer joint degrees.

The future of higher education is changing almost as rapidly as the hand-held communications devices that baffle me. Community colleges have stepped up to meet these changing times. Our state stands at its own peril if it fails to support these innovative colleges.

Photo of Michael S. Monaghan, executive director, Illinois Community College Trustees Association, in his Springfield office on a casual weekend afternoon.