

**Bloomberg Businessweek****Business Schools**

<http://www.businessweek.com/stories/2008-11-09/cost-wary-students-turn-to-community-collegesbusinessweek-business-news-stock-market-and-financial-advice>

# Cost-Wary Students Turn to Community Colleges

By [Jane Porter](#) November 09, 2008

---

More students are starting college at cheaper two-year schools, and more community colleges are making the transfer to university easier

When Amanda Balarezo graduated from MAST Academy in Miami last spring, she had a 4.0 high school GPA, acceptance letters to four top-choice colleges, and aspirations to one day go to medical school. The 18-year-old from a comfortable middle class family had already bought a new winter wardrobe in anticipation of the cold weather at her dream school, the University of Maryland, but at the last minute, Balarezo—not ready to leave home—changed her mind. Instead she took the route more and more high-achieving students are taking these days as the economy plunges: community college.

Now a freshman at Miami Dade College, the largest community college in the country, Balarezo is saving the more than \$36,000 a year it would have cost to go to Maryland. In fact, "I make money," says Balarezo, who pocketed \$5,000 in extra scholarship royalties this semester alone. It's money she plans to use when she transfers in two years, her eye set on University of Southern California, Johns Hopkins, Georgetown, or New York University.

At a time when parents and college students are saddled with soaring tuition bills (BusinessWeek.com, 10/29/08)>, a growing contingent are recognizing just how much they can save by substituting the first two years of school with community college. As a result, community colleges are seeing their number of traditional college-age students growing faster than any other demographic. "What has happened with this economic downturn is middle class families...see that one of their children can come here and get the same courses they can get at a university at a reasonable cost and transfer over," says James Ortiz, president of Southern Maine Community College, where enrollment is up 11% this year and a new honors program fast-tracks students to go on to get a four-year college degree.

## More Like University

While community colleges have long been a place for students to get vocational training and graduate into the workforce after two years, the demographic shift is leading these schools to operate more like traditional colleges: developing study abroad offerings, student organizations, honors programs, and

even building on-campus housing. This year, Onondaga Community College in New York and Hillsborough Community College in Florida are adding housing to their campuses to accommodate the growing number of students wanting to live on campus. Like Southern Maine Technical College, Des Moines Area Community College in Indiana recently added an honors program to the curriculum to appeal to higher-achieving students planning to transfer to four-year schools. "For many high school seniors...it is becoming a first-choice option," says Phil Day, president of the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators.

Today more than half of all community colleges have honors programs, which means students have access to classes often much smaller than those at large public four-year schools. At Kingsborough Community College in New York, an honors freshman biology class has a total of 17 students, while the same class at a more expensive four-year state university counterpart easily has 10 times the number of students. Kieshorne Dennie, an honors freshman at Kingsborough this fall had a hard time enrolling at any of the six four-year colleges where he was accepted. When his mother lost her job during his senior year of high school, Dennie scrapped plans to go to State University of New York at Plattsburgh, where annual tuition is \$4,350, and enrolled instead at Kingsborough at nearly a third of the cost. "It was astounding. I save about \$16,000 going to a community college my first two years [including living and other expenses]," says Dennie. "I jumped on that."

Already, community colleges across the country are making the transfer process easier for students like Dennie. At Florida community colleges, classes are given standard course codes so that students can easily transfer credits to four-year schools. At LaGuardia Community College in New York, where more than 60% of students transfer to four-year colleges, students are required to make an electronic portfolio that is used in application packets when transferring. The school also has virtual interest groups where students can chat about the transfer process with graduates who recently moved to four-year schools, a resource that has increased transfer rates by 14%, says President Gail Mellow. What's more, honors programs, like the one at Miami Dade, often devote an entire course in the second year to filling out college applications.

### Transfer-Friendly Schools

Education groups, too, are responding to the growing interest in community colleges. Phi Theta Kappa, the international community college honors society, is developing a Web site, CollegeFish.org, where community college students will complete a personal profile to identify their top five college matches. When the site is formally launched next fall, members will be given a list of scholarships and colleges that best fit their profile as well as alerts on approaching deadlines. The honors society is also putting out the first-ever list of "transfer friendly" four-year colleges to give students another resource in weighing transfer options. "That's going to put a lot of pressure on the senior institutions to change policies detrimental to transfer," says executive director, Rod Risley of the forthcoming list.

While most elite schools don't recruit actively at community colleges, a handful of private schools, including Smith College, Wellesley College, Mount Holyoke College, Bates College, and Vassar College, visit community college campuses to help make the transition process more accessible. State schools often have "two-plus-two" programs where students who are admitted to a two year school can automatically transfer for their remaining two years after fulfilling a certain amount of credits. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, for example, has partnerships with three local

community colleges and a quarter of the 800 transfer students admitted each year come from community colleges. "There are community college students around the state who are aspiring higher than they were 10 years ago," says Stephen Farmer, UNC's associate provost and director of undergraduate admissions. "It makes sense that a greater share of our population would come from there."

Even some high school students are taking advantage of UNC's transfer-friendly policy to save on tuition. Kaitlyn Elliott transferred to Middle College High School in Durham for her senior year this fall. Elliott, 17, is part of a growing number of teenagers taking community college classes for credit while still in high school. Elliott and the other seniors in her school take classes at Durham Technical Community College for free, graduating from high school this spring as college sophomores. The youngest of three children, with a single mom, Elliott gets the equivalent of her freshman year for free and will pay just under \$5,000 for her sophomore year at the community college—saving \$30,000 in tuition at UNC, where she plans to transfer to complete her degree.

"It's cheaper and it's got one of the better math programs in the area," says Elliott about the community college. "I was expecting that people who come to a community college don't take school seriously.... Being [here], you don't look at it the same." Especially when, in a down economy, the price is right.

---

©2013 Bloomberg L.P. All Rights Reserved. Made in NYC