Springboard to Oregon universities: community college

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Betsy Hammond, The Oregonian

Oregon's public universities have seen a sharp increase in in-state students arriving on campus not as wide-eyed freshmen straight from high school but as transfer students with college credits and experience from a community college.

The main reason is clear: Community colleges offer most of the same foundational courses as the universities -- but at half the cost. So a lot of students who want a four-year degree opt to start out at a lower-cost, closer-to-home two-year college.

In 2006-07, about one-third of Oregonians who were newly enrolled at the state's seven public universities started out in a community college. This fall, nearly half took that path.

Colin Fawcett is one of them. A 2000 graduate of Portland's Franklin High, he served in the Army in Iraq before deciding to earn a four-year degree to become a Portland police officer. His G.I. scholarship wouldn't cover the tuition at Portland State University, so he earned his associate's degree at Clackamas Community College before starting as a junior at PSU this week.

"I did it purely because of cost," he said. "But I was very satisfied with the instructors at CCC. The classes were small, and I had some excellent, excellent teachers."

If the trend continues, Oregon's four-year universities will soon issue more baccalaureate degrees to state residents who got part of their education at a community college than those who traveled the traditional university-only path.
That can be a good thing, for students and for universities, said Joan Jagodnik, assistant director of transfer and college relations at PSU.

Community colleges and universities are partners, not competitors, when it comes to getting Oregon students through college, agreed Melissa Trifiletti, PSU's director of new student programs.

Students pile up less debt if they choose the less-costly route, Jagodnik said. And students who arrive at PSU from community colleges are well-prepared, having already mastered college coping skills. They also have been well-taught in most cases, by community college instructors who are passionate about teaching and free of the demands to conduct and publish research that university faculty face.

Their success rates are documented by university system researchers. About one in three students transferring in from a community college has earned an associate's degree. Of those, 82 percent go on to earn a four-year degree.

In comparison, 60 percent of students who enter Oregon's public universities as freshmen earn degrees as do 81 percent of those who make it to junior year, said Bob Kieran, the university system's director of institutional research. (Most students who drop out do so during their first year, whether at community college or university.)

"We find that our transfer students know how to navigate college, and they want to get down to business and find the fastest path to their degree," Trifiletti said.

Rates vary tremendously by campus. At Portland State, 70 percent of new Oregon students enter from community college. But at the University of Oregon, more than 70 percent enter straight from high school. At Western Oregon University, one-third of students from Oregon transfer in from a community college.

Krystonia Katoa, a 2008 graduate of Portland's Wilson High, was surprised when she showed up for her junior year at Western with two years of credits from Portland Community College and Mt. Hood Community College -- and found she had plenty of company.

"It was kind of like a security blanket for me. 'Oh, there are lots of students who understand where I am coming from,'" she said.

Attending a university with lots of community college transfers enriches students' experience, Katoa said, because some transfer students are older, and many bring different perspectives and life experiences to class discussions.

"We're not all 18-year-olds. ... Diverse ideas and ages are normal here," she said.

Oregon university and community college officials say they have worked to strengthen the pipeline from
community colleges to the public four-year universities, to help students like Katoa and also to help the Oregon economy.

They want to help the state boost the share of Oregonians who earn college credentials -- industry certificates and two-year degrees issued by community colleges and four-year degrees from public and private universities.

Educators also are trying harder to help community college students who aspire to a four-year degree make smart choices about which courses they take.

**An online program makes it easy** for community college students to see how each course will be treated by a university, for instance that Writing 123 at PCC will count as Writing 222: Research Papers at Portland State. The public universities also send advisers to community colleges to help students eyeing particular majors know what to take.

The increase in students starting their path to a four-year degree at community colleges corresponds with a trio of economic factors:

- The economic recession and housing bust that left many parents without the high pay or home equity they counted on to finance college;

- Steep tuition increases at Oregon's public universities in the face of eroding taxpayer support;

- And **Oregon's decision to narrow and then eliminate larger Oregon Opportunity Scholarships for students who go to four-year schools rather than community colleges.**

For Juana Valadez, a 2003 graduate of **Forest Grove High** who aspires to become a middle school teacher, starting at community college made sense for logistical reasons, too.

The **Hillsboro** resident works part time as a chiropractic assistant and is mother to a 3-year-old son, demands that made **PCC's closer Rock Creek campus** and its flexible schedules a great way to get two years of college under her belt.

Valadez started at Portland State this week and is confident she can meet the stepped-up demands.

"It's a challenge, but yes, I can."

--- **Betsy Hammond**