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Recession sending more students from richer towns to County College of Morris

BY LAURA BRUNO • STAFF WRITER • December 13, 2010

RANDOLPH — When Veronica Costa attended a college night at Randolph High School last year she noticed one major difference from a similar presentation the year before.

The County College of Morris made the cut, with guidance counselors reminding parents that the two year community college was located in their hometown. The year before last, CCM never got a mention.

Costa's oldest daughter, Courtney, who had a 3.7 grade point average upon graduating Randolph High School, enrolled at CCM this fall with plans to major in nursing.

"It does become a status thing in towns like this," Costa said of where students attend college. "It's sad because that's not what college should be about."

In some elite Morris County public high schools, more students and parents are choosing CCM than they did five years ago, according to statistics provided by CCM. The community college has seen a 30 percent rise in enrollment from students graduating from Madison, Montville, Randolph and West Morris Mendham high schools. Parents, students and school officials said the economy is prompting a change in how the cost of college is viewed.

"The economic situation has opened up conversations and made people more receptive to CCM," said Jessica Chambers, CCM's admissions director.

CCM data showed that in the fall of 2010, 322 Randolph High grads enrolled in CCM, in comparison with 249 Randolph grads in the fall of 2005, a 29 percent increase. And 108 West Morris Mendham graduates chose CCM this fall, in comparison with 80 from the Class of 2005.

Overall, 700 students from those four high schools enrolled this fall, up from 538 in 2005, a 30 percent increase.

Parents and students from those towns said that in these uncertain times, saving money on the first two years of college at CCM made the most sense. The majority are middle or upper middle class families who don't qualify for financial aid and had concerns about spending at least \$20,000 a year or taking on significant debt without guarantees of a job after graduation.

"I've heard so many stories of children going to college and not doing well — that can be a very costly mistake," said Costa, who noted that she and her husband work for AT&T where there have been numerous layoffs in recent years.

"This isn't going to break anyone's bank book for Courtney to figure out if nursing is really right for her ... it makes more sense than finding out \$60,000 later that it's not what she really wants," she added.

CCM charges \$3,795 a year in tuition and fees for a full-time student taking 30 credits.

This year, tuition and fees cost \$27,293 on average at a four-year private nonprofit college, according to the College Board. For the 2005-06 school year, the average cost was \$23,408. And college seniors who graduated in 2009 carried an average of \$24,000 in student loan debt, according to the Project on Student Debt.

Randolph Superintendent Owen Snyder said that while many Randolph families can still afford four-year private and public colleges, the economy is driving more to CCM.

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"Certainly, a lot of folks here were affected by the recession and our guidance office is aware of that," Snyder said. "The guidance office is trying to provide as many options as possible."

Catherine Mauch, 20, of Chester Township, said it was hard to see her friends all leave for college. She and her twin brother both graduated West Morris Mendham in 2008 and expect to graduate from CCM this spring. Mauch has pursued an environmental science major.

"CCM really surprised me, I expected it to be easy, but the classes are challenging," said Mauch, who is attending CCM for free as a NJ Stars scholarship recipient because her high school grades ranked her in the top 15 percentile of her graduating class.

The Mauch family became familiar with CCM when their oldest son transferred there after a dissatisfying semester at a four-year college several years earlier, said her father, Jim Mauch.

"Where we live it is a non-traditional view, but it's becoming more acceptable," Mauch said. "We take education very seriously and we felt very good about the education they are getting."

Mauch said they made a deal with their children. If they attended CCM first, they would pay for them to transfer to whatever four-year accepted them upon receiving their associate's degree.

"Did they miss out on some partying, yeah, absolutely, but I can't say I'm upset about that," Mauch said.

Nicole Sperone took classes at CCM during senior year at Randolph High and decided to stay for her musical theater major, passing on the opportunity to attend the University of Hartford in Connecticut. She said it was the right choice after meeting the professors, who offered her more personal attention than she could have gotten at Hartford. She's now applying to New York University as a transfer student.

Chambers said CCM students find they can transfer to a better four-year after attending CCM because they've proven themselves as college students.

That's what Anthony Scandariato, also a Randolph High graduate, heard from his friends attending CCM. He initially planned to attend Ramapo until his father lost his job in June of his senior year. His

father has since gotten a new job, but Scandariato said he stuck with his decision to attend CCM to save his family money.

After one semester at CCM, Scandariato said he had a 4.0 GPA, where at Randolph he graduated with a 3.3 GPA. He's also involved in three on-campus clubs and hoping to start an entrepreneur's club. His goal post-graduation is to open a nightclub.

Scandariato said he wants to speak to students at area high schools to talk about CCM as an option. At least two of his friends are returning home from a four-year school to attend CCM after their first semester.

"A lot of my friends who went to four-year schools are feeling overwhelmed," Scandariato said. "I felt I was ready for a four-year, but I realized after I took summer courses at CCM that I would not do well right away at a four-year."

Every January, CCM has hundreds of transfer student returning to Morris County after a semester at a four-year school, Chambers said.

"Our kids will be laughing their way to the bank, Chambers said. "They're getting a great education, having fun and saving a lot of money. And they still have mom and dad to help do the laundry."

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