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EXCLUSIVE RANKINGS



# SOLVING THE COLLEGE CRISIS



**DIPLOMAS MEAN MORE THAN EVER, BUT COSTS AND DROPOUT RATES KEEP RISING**

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**DOES THE SAT STILL MATTER?**

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# Different Paths to a College Degree

Online programs, three-year bachelor's degrees, and community colleges offer options and innovation in higher education

By Carol Frey

Unemployment has changed many a kitchen-table conversation about college. One of the best ways to ensure a job is to have a bachelor's degree. But a college education is now more difficult for many families to afford.

That means many students are on the prowl for bargain bachelor's degrees—and some are finding them in non-traditional programs such as three-year bachelor's degree programs, online education, and work colleges.

**A degree in three.** Over time, Americans have relaxed expectations that students will complete a bachelor's degree in four years. Because of the amount of remedial preparation many incoming college students need and the obstacles most families face in financing four consecutive years of college, many college students now take six years to graduate. "We in higher education have been so focused on that fraction of students not fully prepared to do college work that it seems natural for students to stay on longer than four years," says Molly Corbett Broad, president of the American Council on Education. Parents, too, have encouraged students to relish their college years and take maximum advantage of campus opportunities. But "the recession has brought us face to face with a new reality," Broad says.

Broad says she expects dozens of colleges to begin offering some bachelor's degrees in three years. She anticipates that trend to be strongest among private schools, where tuition is highest—more than \$25,000 a year, on average.

For three-year degrees to measure up, students must be willing to study year-round and faculties must be prepared to give fast-track students clear and regular counsel. The time is right to offer them this option, Broad says. "There are students who are ready now."

In a stroke of prescience, Ball State University in Muncie, Ind., identified in 2004 a list of 30 bachelor's degrees that

could be finished on an accelerated schedule. The university began offering three-year programs in 2005. The list of majors, described as requiring no field experience, includes business, humanities, premed, and pre dental. Two schools jumping on the bandwagon this fall—the University of Houston-Victoria and Hartwick College in New York—are adding to the three-year buzz.

While others are talking about three-year degrees, Purdue University will be trying out a two-year bachelor's degree program in Kokomo, Ind., this year. The first 25 applicants come from the ranks of jobless autoworkers who are eligible for two years of financial help under the federal Trade Adjustment Act, says Christy Bozic, director of Purdue's College of Technology in Kokomo. The city has been hit hard by layoffs at its four Chrysler factories. In response, the college de-



The government plans to invest \$12 billion in schools such as Northern Virginia Community College.

signed a two-year bachelor's degree in organizational leadership and supervision by cutting the length of courses from 16 weeks to eight. "These students will have the same amount of face time as other undergraduates, the same number of classes, and the same learning outcomes, based on standards set by curriculum committees," Bozic said. "It's going to be a tough program, the same as a full-time job."

**Work colleges.** An old idea is attracting new interest on seven campuses across the country where students work in return for waivers of tuition, room, board, and fees. That can mean zero debt at a time when the average student leaves campus owing \$22,000.

At College of the Ozarks, founded in 1906, students work



15 hours a week during semesters, and many earn their room and board working 40-hour weeks during summers. Their efforts are responsible for police and fire service, house-keeping, a dairy, and other functions on the campus near Branson, Mo. Students also contend with required attendance at chapel services, convocations, and spartan living conditions. Still, applications were up 10 percent this year, says President Jerry C. Davis. That translates to 4,118 applicants for 350 seats in the freshman class. Under college rules, 90 percent of them have to demonstrate financial need.

Berry College in Rome, Ga., operated similarly from its founding in 1902 until the 1960s, when the work requirement was dropped. But three years ago, college leaders decided to rebuild the work program and strengthen its role as a learning tool. Berry has added nine new businesses over the past couple of years, including a consulting group that provides accounting and human resources services. Work college alumni say they appreciate their freedom from debt as much as the job experiences they have received. "I have two siblings who have well over \$30,000 in student loans, and they're under a lot of stress in this recession," says Janelle Stolz, a College of the Ozarks grad who teaches fourth grade at Branson Elementary School. Since "I got hired as a teacher, every dollar has gone into my pocket."

**College, minus the frills.** Even in the private-school universe, Southern New Hampshire University's \$37,000 price tag is a bit past midding. That makes its offer of two years of study—minus a campus address and other niceties—attractive to students looking for a deal on college. Billy Flynn was one of those. Coming out of high school in 2008, he was drawn to the criminal justice field and foreign languages. SNHU had it all, but he and his family couldn't raise enough money. "I called my counselor. I flat-out didn't know what to do," he says. Not long after that call, the pilot of SNHU's no-frills Advantage Program was announced. A total of 40 students would attend classes at the university's Nashua and Salem, N.H., continuing education centers at a cost of \$10,000. With financial aid, Flynn jumped at the chance. Flynn's schedule allowed him to attend classes in the morning and work in the afternoon. At the end of two years, he will have the choice of an associate's degree or transfer to another college.

Flynn said he was content with access to the main campus library and had little time for the gym and other extras, anyway. Kaileen Crane, who attended the Advantage Program in Salem, hasn't missed SNHU's frills, either. "The classes are small. The teaching is personal, more one-on-one than most students will ever get sitting in lecture halls," she said. "That's the only frill I would really want."

**Community colleges.** Even before President Barack Obama this summer announced a federal initiative to invest \$12 bil-

lion to produce 5 million more community college graduates by 2020, two-year colleges were on the rise. For many students, community colleges are the most practical path to a diploma. Hundreds of community colleges have added campus housing to their attractions as well (article, Page 68). And many of these schools have been improving their partnerships with four-year universities to ease transfers for students. Itasca Community College in Grand Rapids, Minn., revamped its engineering program in 2005, adding dorms to create a learning community that gave students 24-hour access to computer labs and other engineering classrooms, says Ron Ulseth, one of the program's founders. The program (which costs students \$13,000 a year for tuition, fees, room, and board) already is so well regarded that it has drawn interest from one of the state's four-year colleges.

"The feedback we were getting from practicing engineers was: Why can't engineering be [taught] in the last two years like Itasca has done it in the first two years?" Ulseth says. Starting this year, in partnership with Minnesota State Uni-

versity-Mankato, Itasca will offer the four-year Iron Range engineering program. As in Itasca's associate degree program, students will live in the same dorm. But they will be working toward bachelor's degrees in engineering from MSU-Mankato. "It's an experiment, but there's lots of evidence to show that it works," Ulseth says. "Once we prove it, there will be followers. People will be watching around the country."

When the transfers to four-year universities for upper-division classes work seamlessly, community colleges make bachelor's degrees affordable for millions of families. Since 2000, their enrollments have risen 30 percent. "All the evidence is that these students do just as well," says Broad, the American Council on Education president. "I think this is a great way to complete a first-rate baccalaureate degree."

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**Online colleges.** The Web has become a national shopping mall for higher education, or so says Vicky Phillips, for 20 years the leading consumer advocate for online college students. "The pro side is that if you go online, you have more choices," she says. "The biggest con is that there tends to be a much higher dropout rate than a residential college. . . . Some [online programs] can have dropout rates of 70 percent, where 30 percent would be a high rate for a traditional campus." But when a program suits the student, online education can be a worthy alternative: A Department of Education study this year found online teaching just as effective as face-to-face instruction. The student's abilities to learn without the structure imposed by class attendance and to overcome the tendency to procrastinate are the crucial factors, Phillips says.

Capt. Ashley O'Neill says her job with the Army's 45th Sustainment Brigade in Iraq provided the structure she needed to study technical writing online through East Carolina



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University. "I'd go to work at 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning, and during off-hours, there was nothing much else to do," she says. "Most of the professors didn't know I was eight time zones away." O'Neill, holder of a bachelor's degree in English from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, says her online classes were plenty challenging. Most of her fellow students were working people in their 30s and serious about their education. "It felt strange getting to know these

people by E-mail, but by the time I graduated, I felt closer to people I had online classes with, much more so than undergrad," she says. O'Neill met her classmates in 2008 at graduation in Greenville, N.C., where she collected a master of arts in English. "Without a doubt, online was the more cost-effective way to do it," she says, explaining that ECU professors even helped students hold down textbook costs by E-mailing articles. "But it's not an easy out. It requires the same work, dedication, and time commitment as any other program."

Phillips says 95 percent of online degrees are offered by nonprofits, a fact often lost in the aggressive marketing of the University of Phoenix and other for-profit schools. "But the University of Wisconsin may be looking for 30 students in its undergraduate business program. The University of Phoenix is looking for 30,000," she says.

What today's undergrads need to be learning for tomorrow's work, Broad says, are skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, communicating, and working in teams. And expect that learning shouldn't end with a diploma. "No body of knowledge gained in four years will last a lifetime anymore," she says. ●

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## New College Scholarships for Laid-Off Workers

The unemployed can take classes free at a growing number of community colleges

**A** small but growing number of government agencies and colleges are rushing to help laid-off workers afford retraining and college courses by offering free or discounted tuition.

Most of the new scholarships for the jobless are being given by community colleges. Many cover only a few specific job-related programs. And, generally, the financial aid doesn't cover extra costs of college, including fees, textbooks, or transportation. What's more, many are being offered for a limited time, so interested students should call their community colleges as soon as possible.

The tuition grants are a godsend for people like Frank DeCristina, 52, of Bloomington, Minn., who lost a job supervising computer assembly recently. If it weren't for the two free business courses at a nearby community college, he would have been "pretty depressed. . . . The job market's pretty bleak." His management and salesmanship classes gave him new hope and inspired him to widen his choices by writing a business plan.

**Free tuition:** In Illinois, Oakton Community College will waive tuition for up to 12 credit hours of courses in five in-demand careers. The No

Worker Left Behind program in Michigan provides up to two years' worth of free tuition for unemployed and underemployed workers.

New Jersey community colleges will let unemployed workers enroll free in courses with empty seats. In Pennsylvania, Bucks County Community College is offering up to 30 free credits. The Community College of Allegheny County is offering free tuition for 10 career certification programs. The Northampton Community College is offering one semester's worth of free tuition.

**Partial scholarships and grants:** Anoka-Ramsey Community College in Minnesota will waive half its tuition for the recently unemployed.

Besides these new school-based scholarships, unemployed workers can apply for special governmental programs, such as those for workers laid off because of imports. They can also try for the standard grants, scholarships, and student loans by filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. More information is available at career or unemployment centers and college financial aid offices.

—Kim Clark