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Community Colleges

EARNINGS OF 2-YEAR TRANSFERS BEAT TRADITIONAL COLLEGE GRADS

by Ryan Hess

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Alumni of Florida's public higher education system who spent the first half of their postsecondary careers in community colleges earned more with their bachelor's degrees than classmates who had solely attended four-year schools.

This finding was true of Class of 2001 graduates entering the workforce from 10 of the state university system's 14 most popular bachelor's degree programs. By the fall after receiving their four-year degrees, associate's degree holders' wages would net \$2,052 more in a year, on average, than those of students who had taken what has long been considered a traditional college track.

In an experiment requested by a community college advocate halfway across the nation, Sunshine State officials matched wage, public university and community college data for all students awarded bachelor's degrees by state institutions at the end of the 2000-2001 school year.

For some graduates, the fiscal advantage of having earned an associate's degree meant wages 30 percent higher than those of classmates on the traditional college track.

"One assumes, as an employer, you are paying for the bachelor's degree, not the path that was taken to earn that degree," said Patricia Windham, acting executive vice chancellor for Florida's community colleges.

Benefitting the most from having attended community colleges were graduates with political science and government degrees. They earned \$7,520 more on average than traditional students. Nursing graduates with associate's degrees earned \$6,452 more than their peers. For biology grads, the difference of earning a bachelor's atop a community college degree, as opposed to a straight bachelor's was \$5,700.

Other major programs from which associate's de-

gree-holding graduates earned at least \$2,500 more than their peers included business administration, English and criminal justice.

General finance, business data processing (MIS) and elementary education majors earned more if they spent their entire postsecondary careers at four-year institutions. The difference between their starting wages and those of community college transfer students ranged from \$884 to \$1,264. These differences were smaller than the leads community college transfer students had in most fields in which they led, save mass communication and marketing management.

Accountants earned only marginally more after the traditional track as opposed to matriculating through a community college.

Students that earned more having followed the traditional college track still did not earn enough of a differential compared to associate's degree holders in their initial year's wages, to make up for the difference that they paid in tuition, according to Windham.

Because the findings are based solely on a data match, they prove a correlation, not a direct relation, between associate's degrees and higher wages. Community college students may very well have logged more work experience for their résumés, leading to better wages.

Work During Study Helps

"Community college transfer students can earn more if they use their associate's degrees in jobs during their third and fourth years, instead of taking traditional college jobs like washing dishes," Nick Isenberg, spokesman for Colorado Mountain College, told MII.

The community college, located deep in the Rocky Mountains, requested the data from Florida because it was the only state that had the ability to match wages with educational records from the two types of institutions.

Aside from being a spokesman for the community college, Isenberg is also freelance journalist. He told MII he was inspired to seek out the data by a number of feature stories he has produced over the years about people who prepared for lucrative careers while living at their parents' homes and attending community colleges.

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“Many people, especially outside of the region served by CMC, think of community colleges as schools of last resort,” Isenberg said. “The research shows that for many people — especially those who go to college primarily to increase their income and opportunities — community colleges should be their first choice.”

The institution of higher education nearest to Colorado Mountain College is 90 miles away. The data from Florida offers an important insight for local students, according to Isenberg: they will realize savings in attending community college for their first two years and then moving to a state college, if their earnings wind up the same or better than if they leave home immediately for a four-year school.

“The results should be pretty similar for students anywhere,” Windham said. “I would assume the relationship would be very similar in Colorado and other states because baccalaureate degree recipients should have the same initial earning power no matter where they went to a community college.”

K-20 System

In recent years, Florida education administrators under Gov. Jeb Bush (R) have been promoting com-

munity colleges as a stepping stone to higher education, envisioning state schools as part of a K-20 system. Also, over the past three years, the number of bachelor's degrees offered at the Sunshine State's community colleges has more than tripled.

Florida's public colleges and universities granted 35,724 bachelor's degrees in the 2000-2001 school year. The sample size for the wage comparisons includes all students for whom a wage record could be found.

While changing demographics make community college students' life paths difficult to typify, fall 1999 would have been the university admissions session for students who finished a traditional 2 + 2 associate's-to-bachelor's degree pathway in 2001 and those numbers were included in the data set.

Florida's state college and university system enrolled 12,705 community college transfer students during this session, making up about a quarter of the system's total newly admitted enrollment, according to state records.

In recent years, Floridians transferring from community colleges to state colleges have won admittance and enrolled at higher rates than first-time college students and transferees from other baccalaureate institutions. ☆