

To counter comedian Jay Leno's cracks on community colleges as being not "real colleges," Dr. Betty Young, then-president of Northwest State Community College in Archbold, Ohio, embarked on a cross-country road trip that highlighted the numerous opportunities community colleges provide.

## COMMUNITY COLLEGE BY CHOICE

Two-year colleges are increasingly serving high-achieving students, while at the same time, trying to avoid mission creep.

**By David Pluviose**

Certainly, "Tonight Show" host Jay Leno has nurtured the perception that community colleges are a punishment for underperforming high school students by joking that community colleges aren't "real colleges." However, this perception belies the reality that contemporary community colleges serve students seeking trade skills, but they also serve a growing population of "students with choice": high school graduates possessing grade point averages high enough to go to reputable four-year universities. Many in this latter group choose to start their collegiate careers at two-year institutions.

In 2005, after being fed up with the latest Leno crack against community colleges, Dr. Betty Young, then-president of Northwest State Community College in Archbold, Ohio, embarked on a "Lessons for Leno Tour" — a cross-country road trip that highlighted the numerous opportunities community colleges provide. The tour made pit stops at 10 community colleges between Ohio and California and culminated with a visit with Leno on his "Tonight Show" set in Burbank. Knowing Leno is an avid collector of classic cars and motorcycles, Young rode her Harley-Davidson Heritage on the tour — the same type of motorcycle Leno rides.

Though the perceived lack of academic rigor at community colleges had become the butt of many Leno jokes, Young says most two-year colleges are "highly respected" within their local communities for providing transfer credits that are recognized by brand name universities as equal to their own. Young says the perception of what community colleges have to offer has lagged considerably behind the reality of their rapid evolution.

Young says she outlined for Leno the many programs and benefits community colleges offer, and Leno hasn't joked about community colleges on-air since meeting with her in 2005.

"Part of our challenge in community college leadership is to be sure that we tell our story. Sometimes we're so busy doing the good work that we do that we don't take enough time to tell our story. ... I really believe and I know since that time that Jay Leno has great respect for community colleges and really gets us. He even funds a scholarship for folks attending community colleges," Young says.

"I wanted Leno to be aware he could really

make a positive impact if he would lay off of us. And he has been a good sport about that, and I think he has done that," she adds.

### Savvy Consumers of Education

Anthony J. Felicetti, associate vice president for academic services and enrollment management at Monroe Community College, says his college has seen a boom in the number of "students with choice" who may not get into Harvard, Yale and Princeton, but could gain admission to most four-year colleges.

"The big shift we've seen here in Rochester, N.Y., is large numbers of students who are very well prepared academically and who look at us as the first two years of their baccalaureate training. We go after those students; we think we're a good option for them, and so we try to position the college in a way that they will look at us a little more seriously than they might have in the past," Felicetti says.

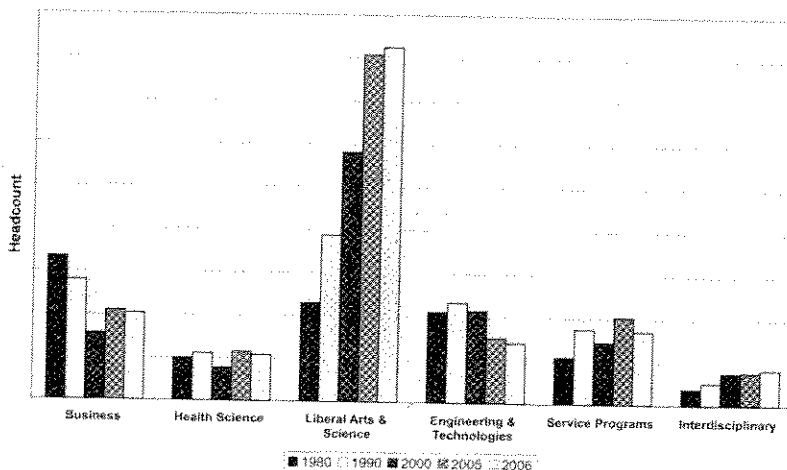
He adds that one of the programs that has fueled the surging enrollment of top-performing high school

students is a seminar hosted by MCC titled, "College 101 for Parents: An Overview of the College Planning Process." During the seminar, Felicetti says MCC officials and officials from area four-year colleges answer questions from high school students and their parents about the college enrollment process for two- and four-year institutions.

Having four-year college representatives tell parents and students that credits taken at MCC are fully transferable and are the equivalent of similar classes offered at their schools helps dispel any misconceptions about the quality of MCC classes, Felicetti says. Once presented with that reality, many students opt to start out at Monroe for the cost savings among other reasons, he adds.

"If we have a representative from the University of Rochester or from SUNY Geneseo say — 'You can come here; the credit is fully transferable; we have an articulation agreement' — it helps get that message through to parents as well as to students, that if you are a student with choice, you can opt to stay locally, come to the com-

## Monroe Community College: Fall Headcount Enrollment By Academic Program Area



SOURCE: MONROE COMMUNITY COLLEGE



Anthony J. Felicetti of Monroe Community College says that it is important to inform students on articulation agreements with four-year schools.

munity college at far less cost, and then make your decision as to where you'd like to go when you complete your associate degree," Felicetti says.

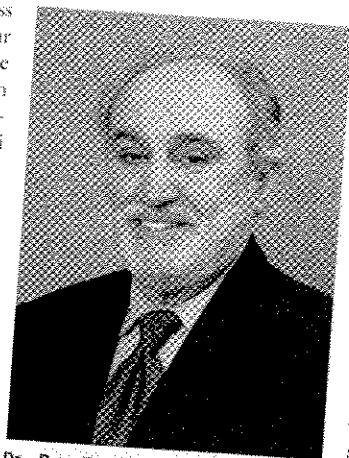
Dr. Roy Flores, chancellor of Pima Community College in Tucson, Ariz., says many high-achieving minorities have long favored community colleges as a more affordable option than four-year schools. However, "it's not just minorities; it's middle-class folks as tuition increases at state universities, in part because funding in many states has been flat or declining."

And Dr. Dan Otto, professor of economics at Iowa State University, says he too has seen a rise in the number of high-achieving students coming to Iowa State from community colleges. As part of a team of economic consultants at the Strategic Economics Group, he recently helped complete a project called the "Early College Opportunity Study," which concluded that the state of Iowa gets a five-fold return on the \$9.8 million it spends on dual enrollment programs.

According to the study, this investment, which allows high school students to enroll in college classes, pays off later when the state and students' families save the millions more it would cost to fund the same education at a four-year institution.

Otto says he sees the trend of more Iowa State students choosing to start at community colleges "increasing, as the cost of education has seen double-digit increases during the 2000s. And I also think community colleges and universities are working together to develop transfer plans in the interest of students not wasting their time and money and getting a system that works for them," Otto says. "There are a couple of forces at work; both finances and competition for fewer students in the state of Iowa," compared to other states experiencing a boom in college enrollment.

Flores says many states now, as a matter of deliberate policy, are encouraging students



**Dr. Roy Flores, chancellor of Pima Community College in Tucson, Ariz., says that many states are now encouraging students to earn community college credits while still in high school.**

to get community college credit while in high school. He notes these students oftentimes "make a connection with very bright students. Then, if they finish one semester or a year while still in high school, it's quite natural to finish that second year and then transfer."

Katrina Burch, a student at Clark College in Vancouver, Wash., who is also the president of the two-year college's Phi Theta Kappa honor society, says she indeed chose a community college over going directly to a four-year college.

"A lot of the students that I've seen here were in my honor society in high school, where they obviously had the grades to get into a four-year school but they went to a community college. I had the grades as well ... but I decided to come to a community college," Burch says.

"One of the driving factors is cost; it is a lot cheaper to go to a community college than to go to a four-year university. Also, it's a lot easier to get in. You don't have to do the essays; you don't have to wait to get your admission letter — the registration process is a lot easier," she adds.

### Sticking to The Mission

Amid all the hubbub over catering to well-prepared students, how will resource-constrained community colleges continue to dedicate funds towards helping underprepared students get college-ready? Felicetti says MCC is committed to continuing to serve remedial students.

"Under no circumstances will we ever allow our work with students with choice to result in a situation where we're not meeting our access mission. That access mission is key to who we are and what we do in this community," Felicetti says. "Community colleges are large, complex institutions, and we can serve multiple missions just as research universities across the nation serve multiple missions," he adds.

Young, now president of Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College in Asheville, N.C., says though community colleges do have multifaceted roles, other institutions are unlikely to assume responsibility for remedial instruction. "So I think each piece is significantly important and what we have done in community college is that we have organized ourselves in a way, internally, that will allow us to focus on students with basic skills" and move them into career and transfer programs, Young says.

Flores notes that the community college mission is evolving, and because of societal failures that allow some students to reach adulthood lacking basic skills, community colleges must meet these students' needs as well as the needs of high-achieving students who are seeking a very economical way to start earning their bachelor's.

"If we take the same students that come to us at a ninth-grade level to an associate level, in order for us to do that well, they have to have exposure to good students," Flores says. "We think that coming to a community college, getting well-grounded in learning fundamentals and giving students the opportunity to go as far as they possibly can is our mission. It's not just about remediation; it's not just about occupation or transfer. We're also supposed to provide opportunities for people in their sunset years."

Ultimately, Young says she sees a "tipping point" when it comes to shifting perceptions about the quality and comprehensiveness of community college programs.

"I think students are becoming savvy consumers of education, and they realize that at the community college, they're going to get the same kind of general education if they're doing a transfer curriculum that they would get in terms of course work at a four-year institution. They're going to get it oftentimes in much smaller classes and they're going to get it at a very different price point," Young says.

Young adds that as more high-achieving dual enrolled high school students "see for themselves what the community college really is and get that kind of personal private school attention at the community college because of the smaller classes ... that will do more than anything to change the perception of what a community colleges is."