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Macomb Community College grows up

Charles E. Ramirez / The Detroit News

CLINTON TOWNSHIP -- Matt Bella remembers his friends in high school making jokes about community colleges, considered the landing place of last resort for kids not smart or fortunate enough to make it to a four-year university.

But after getting a bitter taste of life at the University of Northwestern Ohio three years ago, Bella found himself back in his hometown, pursuing a cheaper -- and, to him, more practical -- education at Macomb Community College.

"I didn't like (the school) and it was costing me a lot of money to be there, so I came back home and enrolled at Macomb," said the 22-year-old from Rochester Hills, who also works in his father's machine shop. "I've been impressed by the school and its instructors."

Bella isn't alone. As it welcomes its first new president in nearly 30 years this spring, the college once known derisively in Macomb as "12 Mile High" is expanding its campus and its course offerings to appeal to students of all ages who are grappling with Michigan's stagnant economy and need affordable, close-to-home postsecondary education and job training.

More than 59,000 students currently attend classes at MCC every year, from degree-seeking 20-somethings to retirees taking personal enrichment classes in gardening. That's more than its counterparts in Oakland and Wayne counties.

Among the new programs at MCC are a medical school partnership with Michigan State University, two new health services programs on its Clinton Township campus and a proposed \$14.5 million state grant for a new science and technology building.

The school's image got another boost earlier this week when U.S. presidential hopeful Barack Obama used the college's South Campus in Warren as the backdrop for a campaign rally. About 200 invited guests joined the U.S. senator at the college for the rally, one of a few stops during his first visit to Michigan in 10 months.

"We're the gatekeepers of opportunity for people," said MCC's incoming president, James Jacobs, director of the college's Center for Workforce Development and Policy. "We're the place where somebody who has never gone to college can get a start, where somebody who needs to upgrade their skills can get a start."

One of the moves designed to raise the college's profile was selecting Jacobs to serve as its fifth president, effective July 1. Jacobs -- who has been with the school nearly 40 years -- succeeds

Albert Lorenzo, who announced in the fall his plans to retire at the end of his contract in September.

"Through Lorenzo's leadership and vision, this college has become known for setting trends and is in very good shape," said Nancy Falcone Sullivan, chairwoman of the college's seven-member board of trustees. "The board's members and I think Dr. Jacobs will take the college to the next level."

'They're cheaper to go to'

The college, which has three campuses in Warren and Clinton Township, has more than 1,800 employees and an operating budget of more than \$120 million. It offers nearly 200 degree and certificate programs, ranging from accounting to veterinary technician. Some of MCC's most sought-after programs are courses in culinary arts, nursing and law enforcement.

Tuition for a full-time student, carrying 12 credit hours a semester, will cost \$864 for county residents for the upcoming fall term. That compares with the more than \$5,000 the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor charges for full-time undergraduate students per semester.

"That's why community colleges don't compete for students in a tight economy," said Clifford Adelman, senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy in Washington, D.C. "They're cheaper to go to than a four-year school. I don't fear for their student enrollment."

Granted, Macomb's tuition has also risen over the years along with the school's enrollment, but it still remains thousands of dollars cheaper than four-year post-secondary schools. The most recent tuition hike at the college was announced in March. Students who live in the county will see their tuition for the fall go up \$2 a credit hour, from \$70 to \$72 due to increasing operational costs and decreasing property tax values.

Despite the increase, attending Macomb is still a little cheaper than some of Metro Detroit's other community colleges, including Oakland Community College.

George Cartsonis, director of college communications for OCC, said the two schools are more friendly rivals than competitors.

"We both serve a particular population and are supported by taxpayers," he said. "We also primarily serve residents in our counties, so we're really not in competition with each other."

MSU teams up in osteopathic

Meanwhile, MCC continues efforts to broaden its offerings with the help of some high-profile partnerships.

Among the most high-profile is an agreement with Michigan State University that will allow MCC to offer courses in osteopathic medicine. Last year, MSU announced it will use Macomb Community College's University Center -- and Detroit Medical Center's former Hutzel Hospital -- as a school for first- and second-year MSU osteopathic students.

The program will enable Macomb residents to earn a four-year degree from a university without having to leave Metro Detroit. It also adds to MCC's prestige because it shows MSU recognizes the community college as a vital postsecondary institution in Metro Detroit, Jacobs said.

"It also shows (MCC) recognizes how important the health care industry is becoming to the

economic vitality of the county," he said.

Macomb already has similar partnerships with eight universities, including Ferris State University, Oakland University, Lawrence Technological University, Walsh College and Wayne State University.

In the fall, Macomb also will offer two new health services programs at its new Health Science and Technology Building on its Center Campus in Clinton Township. Under the program, students will be able to earn associate of applied science degrees in nuclear medical technology and medical laboratory technician courses.

And just last month, a group of state legislators proposed a plan to speed up construction projects and create jobs for Michigan workers by giving the college \$14.5 million toward constructing a 30,000-square-foot facility to support science and emerging technology programs -- a second phase of the Health Science and Technology Building. The state House approved the plan and sent it to the Senate.

University plans on hold

The developments at MCC come at a time when much-touted plans last year for a four-year university in Macomb have fallen as flat as the economy.

In July 2006, Gov. Jennifer Granholm created a 15-member commission to study ways to increase opportunities for post-secondary education in Macomb County. After a 10-month investigation, the commission recommended the county should begin laying the groundwork for a four-year university to help boost the county's economy in the future.

"We still need a four-year university in Macomb County," said Macomb County Commissioner Paul Gielegem, D-Clinton Township. "The county has the highest percentage of the existing work force that has some college but no degree. We have to really focus on getting those folks a four-year degree because that's what companies look at when they're figuring out where they're going to locate."

Matt Bella sought an associate's degree in automotive technology from Macomb. Bella wrapped up work on the degree just last week. But he isn't saying goodbye to the school just yet.

"I'm continuing at Macomb in a program with Ferris State University to get a bachelor's degree in automotive and heavy equipment management," he said. He said he is mulling over the idea of either running a shop or going into teaching.

"I think Macomb is a great school, especially because it's in the area and for the price."

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