

## LI'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES

# Big promise, big challenges

Schools face pressure to meet graduation, performance goals while serving a complex mix of students

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Too many students in remedial classes, chronically low graduation rates, stagnant enrollment, fewer public dollars, rising tuition.

All these issues face Long Island's community colleges, which together serve more than 40,000 students and are widely regarded as an essential gateway to higher education for nontraditional and first-generation college students.

Suffolk County Community College and Nassau Community College — like other such institutions across the state and the nation — are under increased pressure from local, state and national governments to monitor student achievement more closely to meet individual graduation and performance goals.

The schools are challenged by the complex economic and social needs of their changing population — whether that is a 20-year-old immigrant from Bangladesh who has been speaking English for a year, a single parent with a toddler and a part-time job, or a dedicated student who wants to stay home to help her parents.

"This is not the 13th grade — our students are transferring to colleges all over Long Island and the state. There is an expectation set forth by the institution that students leave here with the ability to think critically and are well-prepared for careers," said SCCC president

Shaun McKay, who has lobbied the state and county governments to increase financial support of the schools.

"The one thing we must do more of is talk about the strength of the community colleges and their importance to the region, the state and the transformation that occurs when students enroll here," he said.

Long Island's community colleges are among 30 in the State University of New York system, and they bear the distinction of volume: SCCC, with three campuses, is the state's largest by student population, and NCC is the largest single-campus community college. Both are major feeders to public and private colleges and universities, regionally and nationally.

Over the past decade, enrollment at both schools has stayed relatively flat other than the two years following the 2008 recession. In the 2015 fall semester, the most recent data available, SCCC had 15,558 full-time students and 6,435 part-time students, while NCC had 12,693 full-time and 8,763 part-time. For this academic year, college officials project a decline in enrollment of 5 percent at NCC and 1 percent at SCCC.

"I think the whole country now recognizes that the community colleges are more nimble than the rest of us," said SUNY Chancellor Nancy L. Zimpher, who plans to step down at the end of the 2016-17 academic year. "There are big pathways and huge industries



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— Ariful Arif, an immigrant from Sirajganj, Bangladesh

that set Long Island apart from the rest of the state. The community colleges have to play the labor market and be very agile — and move the way the market moves.”

At the same time, Zimpher said, New York has gone to extra lengths to pave the way for “seamless transfers” for these students — offering opportunities to move more easily from SCCC or NCC to four-year colleges or universities in the public system. New York is leading the nation in that effort, she said.

The colleges’ low graduation rates reflect the difficulty implicit in their broad mission, said officials and experts, who agree that more must be done to make sure students are on a path either to a four-year school or to an associate degree that provides a job tied to the current needs of the local economy.

### Graduation rates lag

Both of the Island’s community colleges have graduation rates below the national average of 25 percent, according to

U.S. Education Department data, which measures students that graduate or transfer out of a two-year school in three years.

Twenty-one percent of SCCC students graduated with an associate degree and 15 percent transferred out to continue their education after the three years that began in 2012. At NCC, for that same time period, the graduation rate was 22 percent and the transfer-out rate was 20 percent.

The rates, available through the National Center for Educa-



Nassau Community College student Hetali Shah, 21, right, gets help at the Student Service Center on the school campus.

## LI's community colleges, by the numbers

Graduation rates: full-time, first-time students who completed in three years

NCC:	SCCC:
22%	21%

Transfer-out rates: full-time, first-time students who transferred to another college within three years

NCC:	SCCC:
20%	15%

Retention rates: students who started in fall 2014 and returned in fall 2015

NCC:	SCCC:
72% for full-time students; 58% for part-time students	69% for full-time students; 46% for part-time students

Students taking at least one remedial/development course

NCC:	SCCC:
48%	58.5%

Transferring into a 4-year college

NCC:	SCCC:
23%	25%

Receiving financial aid

NCC:	SCCC:
48%	67%

Sources: Nassau Community College, Suffolk County Community College, U.S. Department of Education

tion Statistics, are based on tracking only full-time students enrolled in college for the first time. Not included in the count are part-time students or those who transfer in from other colleges, return to college after a hiatus or enter community colleges through noncredit courses such as language or remedial classes.

For instance, Ariful Arif and others like him are among the 18 percent of SCCC's matriculated population who entered the college through noncredit language classes and who do not factor into the graduation numbers.

Arif, 20, an immigrant from Sirajganj, Bangladesh, had never spoken English before coming to the school in January 2014. After one semester, he scored high enough on the language proficiency exam to start taking credit-bearing courses.

Arif, of Ronkonkoma, has worked 60 to 80 hours each week at a Hauppauge pharmaceutical manufacturer while taking a full course load. He studies from the books in the library because he doesn't have the money to buy them.

He has a 4.0 grade-point average and is on track to get an associate degree in December. He plans to go on for a bachelor's

degree in accounting at one of Long Island's private colleges.

"To be honest, I had never seen anything like a college campus before," Arif said. "For me, it's not just about getting a degree or teaching me out of a book. I relied on college for everything. Now I know who I am and what I want to be. My purpose is to just do really, really well."

Community college administrators and professors said that while improvement in the graduation rate is needed, the measurement is an unfair illustration of achievement at their schools. There are all kinds of reasons students start and stop, they said.

"These students don't fit the mold of the average, middle-class student," said Evelyn Deluty, a philosophy professor at NCC and chairwoman of the Academic Senate, an influential decision-making group at the school that is largely composed of faculty. "First of all, their parents are not giving them a single cent. These students are not falling asleep in class because they were out partying — it's because they were up working the graveyard shift. We need to readjust the paradigm, because you can't use the typical benchmarks to judge these

students."

### Focus on jobs criticized

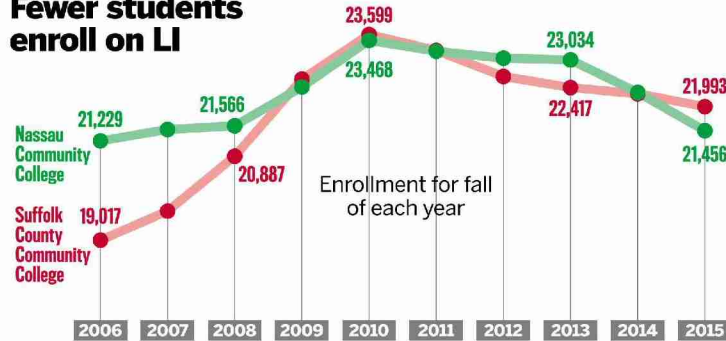
Deluty, who assigns readings from Aristotle, Plato and Kant, said she fears the national debate on the future of community colleges and funding them focuses too much on workforce development. Students aren't given enough time and financial aid to take core liberal arts courses that will benefit them in life and in their careers, she said.

"I'm not minimizing economic necessity for our stu-

dents, but are we the ones to decide which students should be channeled into workforce education and which students will be inspired to go on for more education? No one has the right to make that decision for anyone else," she said. "To assume that because of students' economic level or challenges in life that they should not be allowed to engage in these texts to inform their own opinions — to skip that goes against everything democracy is about."

See COLLEGE on A8

## Fewer students enroll on LI





## COURSES

Nationally, 45 percent of all undergraduates attend community colleges, according to fall 2014 statistics. Thirty-six percent are the first in their families to attend college; 17 percent are single parents; 12 percent are students with disabilities; 7 percent are non-U.S. citizens; and 4 percent are military veterans.

About two-thirds of the 7.3 million community college students in the country attend part time, according to the American Association of Community Colleges.

Jessica Abrams is among the many students who do not have a linear academic trajectory.

The 27-year-old student started NCC after graduating from Massapequa High School in 2007, but was struggling with a substance abuse problem and dropped out the following year.

Eight years later, she is sober and a single mother to Max, 4, who attends the campus child-care center. In her first semester back last year, she started with one class and gradually increased her course load.

"I was scared to go back to school, because every attempt I had made was unsuccessful," said Abrams, who works part time at a dermatologist's office. "But I know now it was just because I wasn't emotionally there yet. Once I had proven to myself that I can do it, I added two more classes and it turned out to be the best semester ever."

Abrams intends to get an associate degree in liberal arts in 2018, with plans to continue her education at a local university to become an occupational therapist.

## Full-timers tend to stay

Students who attend full time are more likely to return, federal data show. Seventy-two percent of full-timers who started in the fall 2014 semester returned for fall 2015, as opposed to part-

timers, who returned at a rate of 58 percent. That measurement, called the retention rate, was similar for full-timers at SCCC (69 percent) and part-timers (46 percent).

SCCC and NCC are supposed to be funded in thirds by their respective county governments, the state and student tuition.

Funding from state and county budgets has remained flat in recent years and students are picking up more of the costs. Tuition for the 2016-17 year was increased at both schools: Full-time tuition at NCC now is \$2,434 per semester, and at SCCC it is \$2,385 per semester.

By comparison, commuter student would pay up to \$2,000 more annually at the Island's four-year public colleges. The posted or "sticker" price of tuition at private four-year schools is about \$20,000 to \$30,000 more, although students can receive grants and scholarships to offset some of the cost.

Forty-eight percent of the students at each community college receive some form of federal financial aid. A majority receive the federal, income-based Pell Grant. The maximum federal Pell Grant for 2016-17 will be \$5,815.

NCC faces another challenge: It was placed on probation by its accreditor, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. The independent, nongovernmental agency, based in Philadelphia, found several deficiencies in planning, leadership, resources and integrity at the school. With a new president in place, the college must show improvement in those areas by Nov. 1. Losing accreditation would mean students would be ineligible for federal financial aid.

National experts said community colleges are ripe for reform and need to make sure students enter prepared, stay in school, and earn degrees leading to better-paying jobs.

Davis Jenkins, senior research associate at Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College, believes the schools must reform the broad-based "cafeteria-style" approach of course offerings in

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— Gladys Eze, 18, recent graduate of North Babylon High School

favor of one that provides students with more structure.

For students, that includes taking credit-bearing courses from the start; for the schools, it means reviewing every program to be sure there's a path to a specific degree. The model "guided pathways" is detailed in a 2015 book he co-authored called "Redesigning America's Community Colleges."

## Outreach, transfer pacts

Nearly 390 institutions nationally have signed on to implement some of the changes, including

those in the City University of New York system. Large systems, like those in Tennessee and Chicago, already have seen positive results, Jenkins said.

Community college students often are the ones most in need of structure and advising, he said, "because they are least likely to have gotten it before." Without that structure, the schools are "wasting human potential, letting them meander when they are most ready to go to college and when the financial aid is most available."

To keep the academic mo-

mentum, both SCCC and NCC officials are doing more outreach and assessments in local public high schools, as well as sealing transfer agreements with private universities including Adelphi University in Garden City, Hofstra University in Hempstead, LIU Post in Brookville, Molloy College in Rockville Centre and St. Joseph's College in Patchogue.

Connecting with students as early as 11th grade allows community college and high school educators to address their preparedness earlier.

It also gets the community colleges' admissions officials into schools to attract students like 18-year-old Gladys Eze.

If all goes as planned, the North Babylon High School graduate will have an advanced nursing degree and be ready for a well-paying career by the time she's 25, with relatively little debt.

She was accepted to several public and private four-year colleges but decided to enter SCCC's nursing program this month.

Among her top reasons: saving money by commuting from her parents' house and helping out with her siblings, a 5-year-old brother and 8-year-old sister, while her parents work.

"I plan to finish the two-year program and then go to Stony Brook's accelerated nursing degree," said Eze, who was granted a full academic scholarship to attend SCCC. "I want to attend a college that reflects the community we live in. It was my top choice and it's a dream come true."



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**I was scared to go back to school, because every attempt I had made was unsuccessful, but I know now it was just because I wasn't emotionally there yet."**

— Nassau Community College student Jessica Abrams, who works part time at a dermatologist's office, and her son Max

## INTERACTIVE

Search SCCC and NCC's 2015 payroll, by name or title.  
[newsday.com/data](http://newsday.com/data)