

syracuse.com

Recession drives more graduating seniors to attend community colleges, state universities

Published: Friday, June 25, 2010, 6:00 AM Updated: Friday, June 25, 2010, 6:36 AM



Elizabeth Doran / The Post-Standard



Frank Ordoez / The Post-Standard

Cazenovia High School senior Hannah Polsin was accepted at private Elmira College, but she decided to go to the State University College at Buffalo. The reason? "I can't afford to pay \$200,000 in loans when I graduate."

When it came time for Cazenovia High School senior Hannah Polsin to decide between the state college she'd been accepted to and Elmira College, a private school, her choice became crystal clear. It came down to money. Elmira offered her \$10,000, but it still would have cost her \$40,000 to attend.

"It just wasn't enough," said Polsin, who picked the State University College at Buffalo. "I can't afford to pay \$200,000 in loans when I graduate."

The cost of college played a significant role in the decisions many high school seniors made about college this year, according to area high school guidance counselors and college admissions officials. This weekend, more than 10,000 students will receive diplomas at 49 high schools across Central New York.

For the Class of 2010, the recession continues to weigh heavily for many making choices about college:

- New York's state colleges and university will set a new record for applications for 2010-11, according to State University of New York officials.
- Onondaga Community College — like community colleges across the state — expects its enrollment to continue to rise, hitting about 12,575 this fall. That's about 2,000 more than just three years ago.
- Some private colleges, in an effort to compete with state schools, are offering more scholarships. In some cases, experts said, the grants and scholarships make the cost the same or lower than a state school.

At Fayetteville-Manlius High School, graduating seniors are much more aware of the cost of college, and more concerned about paying for it than in the past, said Heidi Green, director of guidance. "In the past, students were more naive about the cost," she said. "Now it's a factor in the equation, and kids don't want to graduate with a lot of debt."

Onondaga Community College is the No. 1 destination for F-M seniors, Green said. More kids are choosing to save money by attending a two-year college first, and then transferring to a four-year school, she said.

At Cicero-North Syracuse High School, about a third of the seniors go to OCC, and that number inches up every year, said Pat Zeleznock, the school's head counselor. "We still have a number of parents laid off, and that definitely impacts our students' choices," Zeleznock said.

C-NS senior Stephen Kliphon chose OCC over state colleges at Oswego and Oneonta because it makes more sense financially. With his mother's school district position and his dad's job at Magna both precarious, Kliphon said he needs to be economical.

"It's cheaper to go to OCC, but also I didn't want to pay for private school when I'm not sure what I want to do yet," Kliphon said. "This way I can get my general education and not go too much into debt until I know what direction I want to go in."



Stephen D. Cannerelli / The Post-Standard

The Class of 2010 graduation class at Nottingham High School starts their processional at the John H. Mulroy Civic Center on Wednesday. High school seniors graduating this month are more and more looking at community colleges and state schools for their college education to cut their costs.

Kliphon isn't alone. A survey conducted by The Chronicle of Higher Education and published this month showed revealed two-thirds of prospective college applicants say the economy had "greatly" or "somewhat" influenced their decision about where to apply to college.

In the Syracuse City school district, more students are taking advantage of the Say Yes program, which covers tuition for graduating seniors at certain colleges. At Fowler High School, for example, about 100 students will get their tuition paid by Say Yes, said school counselor Stacey Snyder.

Students' concerns about the cost of college have made SUNY schools even more attractive — and more selective. "We're getting more applications, so we can be pickier about who we take," said Mary Pitts, marketing director for undergraduate admissions at State University at Buffalo.

Many students applying to SUNY schools have to broaden their list of schools because it's harder to get into certain ones, F-M's Green said. The required SAT scores have gone up and colleges are looking for more academic rigor and increased leadership and extracurricular activities, she said.

The average student admitted to State University College at Geneseo, one of the state schools toughest to get into, has a 1348 SAT score, seven or eight AP courses and a 95 GPA, said Kristine Shay, director of admissions. This year, the school received 10,500 applications, admitted 3,400 and 938 students enrolled.

Today, Geneseo competes against elite schools like Cornell, Colgate and Vassar, Shay said. Private schools have endowments that can help reduce the cost of tuition, but Geneseo is often lower, she said.

"Seniors are still nervous about the economy," she said. "The competition is so expensive that it puts us in a very good position. Kids don't want all that debt when they graduate, especially since a lot of our students are going onto graduate school."

That's true for Emily Wanamaker of Camillus, who just graduated as salutatorian at Christian Brothers Academy. Accepted at Cornell, Colgate, University of Rochester, Villanova, Penn State and several others, Wanamaker chose Geneseo.

While not the deciding factor, the cost certainly played a role in her final choice, Wanamaker said. "I want to go to medical school, which will probably cost about \$200,000, so I don't want all that debt now," she said. "Most of the schools I got into didn't give me much, if any merit aid, although I did get a merit scholarship at Geneseo."

Elizabeth Doran can be reached at edoran@syracuse.com or 470-3012.

© 2010 syracuse.com. All rights reserved.