

Community Colleges

By Mindy Levine

Most people do not think of midnight as a time to be in class. They would rather be sleeping, partying, eating, or doing most anything else. But for a select group of students at Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC), class runs from 11:45 pm to 2:30 am. BHCC started their “Burning the Midnight Oil” program in the Fall of 2009 with two course offerings. They expanded the program during the current Fall 2010 semester, offering 5 courses in a variety of subjects. This popular program, which comes with complimentary coffee for students, is designed to fit the schedules of busy and overextended community college students.

Although BHCC does not offer a midnight chemistry course, they (as well as other local community colleges) offer a variety of chemistry courses at other times of day. Most of the colleges offer an introductory course for students with weak science backgrounds. For example, Professor Stacey Olson of Roxbury Community College (RCC) teaches “General Science,” which introduces key topics in biology, chemistry, and physics.

Middlesex Community College (Middlesex) offers three levels of chemistry: “Introduction to Chemistry,” for students with very weak science backgrounds; “College Chemistry,” for pre-health students (dental, nursing, etc); and “Chemistry for Engineering and Science Majors,” for students who are majoring in STEM disciplines (science, technology, engineering, and math).

Community college students also benefit from small class sizes and substantial interaction with their professors. For example, BHCC chemistry classes are capped at 18 students for those courses with corresponding laboratory sessions. Students also benefit by having the same instructor for both the lecture and the laboratory, so that there is “no gap between the two,” said Professor Karen Atkinson of BHCC.

Professor Olson added, “There are no teaching assistants. Professors do everything.”

Community college students tend to be remarkably self-motivated, explained Professor Bill Griffin of BHCC. “Friends of mine who are at four-year schools often complain about lazy and unmotivated students,” said Professor Griffin. “They talk about how sheltered and non-responsive the students are.” In contrast, “when I give them an assignment and ask them to jump, they ask ‘How high?’”

Community college students, according to Professor Atkinson are “time-starved.” They often work fulltime, have families, and are taking a full-time course load at the college. “They are almost trying to do too much,” she said.

There are many examples of exceptional students who attend community colleges. Dean Linda Young of Middlesex Community College recalled that a recent graduation speaker at Middlesex was a grown woman with three sons. After graduating with a degree in Life Sciences, this woman continued her studies with a full tuition scholarship to Wellesley College.

Another example of an outstanding student was last year’s Biotechnology Student of the Year awardee, who was a fast-food worker with a GED before he began his studies at

Middlesex. “There are tremendous success stories,” Dean Young said.

“I had a student last summer who told me that he was old enough to be my father,” said Professor Olson. “He had been working in the food preparation industry,” and decided to go back to school to pursue a career in nursing.

Much of the teaching at community colleges is performed by adjunct faculty members. Even though BHCC has 12 full-time faculty members in the STEM disciplines, the increasing enrollment at community colleges requires that the majority of the classes are taught by adjunct faculty members, explained Professor Atkinson.

These faculty members are hired by the dean of the college, with input from the department chair. Fortuitously, the current dean of BHCC has a background in science, which is “very comforting when he observes the lectures,” said Atkinson. “We’re very happy to have him.” Professor Griffin explained that most adjunct faculty are either people who have taught previously at the high school level or people with industrial careers who have a “second career” in community college teaching. There are also some post-doctoral fellows at Tufts University who teach courses at BHCC. “Teaching is a very rewarding career,” said Professor Olson. “A lot of the adjunct faculty are motivated by that fact.”

Several community colleges run other science-related activities outside of the formal classroom setting, although the scope of these activities tends to be limited by the students’ busy schedules. For example, Middlesex has a “STEM club” that facilitates study groups for students in science courses. The STEM club has a Facebook page where they advertise STEM related events and activities. “The goal is to get more students involved,” explained Dean Young, “by combining fun and educational aspects.”

RCC recently hosted a biotechnology workshop in collaboration with the University of Massachusetts. Students at the workshop spent two weeks learning crucial laboratory techniques, such as DNA isolation, PCR analysis, and protein purification assays. “I think it’s really important for community colleges to become embedded in this field [biotechnology workshops],” said Professor Olson. “My biotechnology students can get a leg up.”

Professor Griffin acknowledged that community colleges sometimes get a bad reputation, for example, for their low graduation rates. Such a reputation, however, fails to account for students who successfully transferred to Ivy League “bumper-sticker” schools without finishing their associate’s degree. “What really upsets me is our response to that [criticism],” Professor Griffin said. “We have an opportunity to challenge the notion that graduating with an associate’s degree is not a measure of success.” Instead, the administration may be more likely to focus on improving graduation rates, instead of trying to keep track of people who transfer to better schools.

“I think that, because of the economy, people are more understanding of the importance of community colleges,” said Professor Olson, adding that many people in the current economic climate decide to go back to school for retraining in order to improve their career prospects.

Dean Young, who prefers to characterize community colleges as “undiscovered or under-discovered, rather than unappreciated,” pointed out that the Obama administration has been particularly supportive of community colleges. In July of 2009, President Obama unveiled a 10-year, \$12 billion initiative called the “American Graduation Initiative,” which will invest heavily in community colleges. The president explained that

“jobs requiring at least an associate degree are projected to grow twice as fast as jobs requiring no college experience.”

Vice-President Joe Biden’s wife, Jill Biden, taught for several years at a community college. Mrs. Biden has said about teaching at a community college, “I feel like I can make a greater difference in their lives...I love the women who are coming back to school and getting their degrees, because they’re so focused.”

In conclusion, the faculty members continued to praise the high quality of their students. “If you have the opportunity to work with a student from here you see that they are obviously getting something worthwhile,” said Professor Atkinson. “They are fantastic and well-prepared.”

“I think the people who work in community colleges really believe in open access for all,” Dean Young said. “We should continue to highlight the things we are really good at,” like open access education and helping students recognize their potential. In conclusion, Dean Young added, “I think we have a lot to be proud of.”