

Opinion: Community college made all the difference

By Tom Hanks, New York Times

In 1974, I graduated from Skyline High School in Oakland, an underachieving student with lousy SAT scores. Allowed to send my results to three colleges, I chose M.I.T. and Villanova, knowing such fine schools would never accept a student like me but hoping they'd toss some car stickers my way for taking a shot. I couldn't afford tuition for college anyway. I sent my final set of stats to Chabot, a community college in nearby Hayward, which, because it accepted everyone and was free, would be my alma mater.

For thousands of commuting students, Chabot was our Columbia, Annapolis, even our Sorbonne, offering courses in physics, stenography, auto mechanics, certified public accounting, foreign languages, journalism – name the art or science, the subject or trade, and it was probably in the catalog. The college had a nursing program that churned out graduates, sports teams that funneled athletes to big-time programs, and parking for a few thousand cars – all free but for the effort and the cost of used textbooks.

Classmates included veterans back from Vietnam, women of every marital and maternal status returning to school, middle-aged men wanting to improve their employment prospects and paychecks. We could get our general education requirements out of the way at Chabot – credits we could transfer to a university – which made those two years an invaluable head start. I was able to go on to the State University in Sacramento (at \$95 a semester, just barely affordable) and study no other subject but my major, theater arts. (After a year there I moved on, enrolling in a little thing called the School of Hard Knocks, a.k.a. Life.)

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