

Keep Your Options Open: What Can a Community College Do for Me?

“Community colleges are in the business of changing lives. We are here to meet the broad-based needs of the community. Our doors are open to all members of the community. We base our reputation on these facts and on how we enrich people’s lives. It’s the best mission you can have in higher education.”

—Dr. Charlene Nunley, President, Montgomery College (Maryland)

Are you a high school student who isn’t sure if a four-year college or university is right for you? A working adult who dreams of completing a degree, but hasn’t had the time or opportunity? A student who wants to earn a bachelor’s degree, but is short on money? An international student seeking an economical way to start your education in the United States? Do you want to upgrade your job skills or start a new career? Do you already have a degree, but still have a thirst for knowledge?

Community college could be the right choice for you.

Because community colleges truly do serve the entire community, they offer a full range of learning opportunities to anyone who wants to pursue more education—whether it leads to a certificate,

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a degree, a job, or just to more knowledge and enjoyment of life. Community colleges are exciting places because they've got their hands on the pulse of the community and the world of work.

Understanding what community college is and what it can do for you is a smart first step in determining if community college is the right educational pathway for you.

Answer these few short questions to gauge your familiarity with some general features and facts about community colleges.

Test Your Community College Knowledge¹

1. The highest degree most community colleges offer is:
 - a. A bachelor's degree
 - b. An associate's degree
 - c. A doctoral degree
2. What percentage of community college students attend part-time?
 - a. 50 percent
 - b. 26 percent
 - c. 61 percent
3. The oldest continuously operating public community college was founded in:
 - a. 1901
 - b. 1854
 - c. 1967
4. According to a 2004 American Association of Community Colleges' survey, what is a hot program of study where community college graduates are in high demand?
 - a. Registered nurse
 - b. Computer technologies
 - c. Law enforcement
 - d. All of the above

5. What percentage of community college students are the first in their family to attend a postsecondary education institution?
- a. 30 percent
 - b. 25 percent
 - c. Over 50 percent

Answers: (1) b. associate's degree; (2) c. 61 percent; (3) a. 1901; (4) d. all of the above; (5) c. over 50 percent.

What Are Community Colleges? Open Doors and Opportunity

Community colleges are accredited two-year institutions of higher education dedicated to serving the educational and workforce needs of their local communities. They are often called “the people’s college” because of their philosophy that anyone can benefit from a college education. Community colleges welcome a diverse population of women and men of all ages, abilities, races and ethnicities, backgrounds, nationalities, and degrees of academic preparation. Open admission policies, low tuition rates, flexible schedules, and convenient locations make them easily accessible to the public.

“Community college is the American ideal of democracy in action in education.”

—Rob Jenkins, Associate Professor
of English and Director of
The Writers Institute,
Georgia Perimeter College
(Georgia)

Some community colleges are large, urban institutions with several campuses serving thousands of students; others are in rural

settings with small student populations; some serve suburban communities on the fringes of mid-sized or large cities or towns. Most community colleges are public; others are independent or private. They are all dedicated to teaching and learning, open access, and quality education for everyone.

At community college, you can train for some of the fastest growing jobs in the economy, or follow a course of study that will allow you to transfer into a bachelor's degree program at a four-year institution. You can also take courses just for pleasure or to improve your work skills.

AREAS OF EDUCATION

Most community colleges offer a comprehensive range of programs in the following general areas of education:

- ✓ **Basic skills education** (sometimes called developmental or remedial education) in reading, writing, mathematics, and English language skills to prepare you for college-level academics, if needed, before you start a particular course of study. Most of these courses do not carry any college credit; that is, they do not count toward a certificate or degree.
- ✓ **Academic preparation for transfer** (movement) to an upper division (junior/senior year) college or four-year institution to study for a bachelor's (baccalaureate) degree. Your first two years of general education courses at community college may count toward your four-year degree if you decide to transfer.
- ✓ **Vocational and technical education** (training in a skilled trade or technology) to prepare you for direct entry into the workplace with a certificate or degree. Transfer to a four-year institution is also a possibility in some programs; sometimes additional coursework is required.
- ✓ **Continuing education and workforce development**, ranging from a wide variety of courses designed for personal enrichment to programs that respond to the specific needs of business and industry for skilled workers. Many of these courses are non-credit and do not lead to a certificate or degree.

See Chapter 3 for more information about educational opportunities at community colleges.

SOME BACKGROUND ON COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Each year, community colleges help build an educated and skilled workforce in the communities they serve. They give millions of individuals like you a first or next step up their personal ladders of success. And, they've been doing this job in local communities, right where you live, for over a hundred years.

Here are some facts you may not know about community colleges.

- ✓ As of 2004, the American Association of Community Colleges says there are 1,158 community colleges in the United States, of which 979 are public, 148 are private, and 31 are tribal.²
- ✓ Community colleges will serve nearly 12 million students this year—a projected 6.67 million undergraduates³ plus another 5 million students in non-credit courses that are mainly short-term job training.⁴

FAST FACT: In 2005, 45 percent of all undergraduates in the United States were enrolled in two-year degree-granting post-secondary institutions.⁵

Because community colleges play such an important role in higher education and one might soon play an important role in your life, you should know a little about how they began and about their contributions.

Community colleges are one of America's most successful education stories. Junior colleges, as community colleges were first known, initially emphasized general liberal arts studies and prepared students to transfer to four-year (senior) colleges and universities. And, they did this in the neighborhoods and communities where the students lived and at an affordable cost, features that were innovative for the time. Founded in 1901, Joliet Junior College in Illinois is the oldest public community college in the country.

Another hallmark of community colleges is their ability to respond rapidly to the changing demands and conditions of the times. They added job training programs during the Depression, educated returning soldiers from World War II for re-entry into the workforce, and significantly expanded facilities and programs in the 1960s as the economy and population grew. More recently, community colleges have answered the needs of students for flexible schedules, basic skills (developmental) education, new life-long learning opportunities, English as a second language, distance learning, and more. As new technologies emerge, business and industry turn first to community colleges to train the workforce.

Community colleges serve their communities in many other ways. They generate millions of dollars in revenue, help train new leadership, work with community partners to remedy social and economic problems, and are often the vibrant core of athletic, cultural, and artistic life for the community. Most important, they open the door to new opportunities, choices, and futures for people like you each year.⁶

FAST FACT: Other countries worldwide have adapted the American community college model to make education more accessible to their own citizens and to strengthen their workforces.⁷

Community Colleges and Four-Year Institutions

Community colleges and four-year colleges and universities are institutions of higher education. Although they all play important roles in educating students and helping people get their start in life, it helps to keep their basic differences in mind as you think about which may be better for you.

The table below sets out major aspects of each type of institution. You'll find more detailed information about community college programs, how to select a community college, and details about admissions in subsequent chapters.

Comparing Types of Colleges

Community College

Many community colleges have open admissions policies, meaning that anyone who can benefit is welcome to attend. There are usually minimal qualifications for admission to degree and certificate programs; however, some programs—especially in the allied health sciences—are highly selective, have rigorous admissions criteria, and accept only a small number of students each year.

You will need a high school diploma or a high school equivalency certificate based on the General Educational Development (GED) test to take courses for credit. Many non-credit courses are generally open to anyone who wants to enroll.

Students take assessment and placement tests to determine their appropriate class level. Basic skills or developmental courses, plus English language classes, may be required prior to enrollment in college-level courses for credit.

Four-Year Private or Public Institution

Four-year colleges and universities vary in their degrees of selectivity and some do have open admissions policies. Selection is most often based on competitive factors including standardized test scores, such as the SAT and ACT, high school grade point average and coursework, letters of recommendation, and admissions essays. A high school diploma or high school equivalency certificate (GED) is generally required in order for an applicant to be admitted.

continued

Comparing Types of Colleges (continued)

Community College

Four-Year Private or Public Institution

The community college student body is often described as “non-traditional,” referring to independent, older adults who are entering college for the first time or returning after some time. “Traditional” college-age students (18–22 years old) entering directly from high school are increasing in numbers, especially as full-time students in day programs.

Many students in baccalaureate programs start right out of high school and fall into the traditional college-age range of 18–22 years.

Most students are in-state residents from the local area; some foreign-born students also attend.

Students come from across the country and around the world.

The majority of students attend part time (less than 12 credit hours per semester).

Most students attend on a full-time basis.

Most community colleges offer a comprehensive curriculum (course of study) that focuses mainly on liberal arts and sciences, *plus* vocational and technical training for direct entry into the workforce, an option that most four-year institutions do not offer. Continuing education and workforce development programs are integral to community colleges’ mission to meet local needs.

The undergraduate curriculum (course of study) focuses mainly on liberal arts and sciences, preparation for professional degrees such as law or medicine, and preparation for other graduate level education. Many four-year institutions also offer continuing education and workforce training programs.

Community College

An associate's degree is usually the highest degree awarded; however, a few states—Florida, Arkansas, Utah—have begun to allow community colleges to offer a bachelor's (baccalaureate) degree. Most degree programs can be completed in 2 years of full-time attendance. Certificate programs typically take a year or less to complete if you go full time.

Community colleges are mainly geared to commuters; however, about 20 percent of community colleges do offer a more traditional college experience with on-campus housing available to students.⁸

Faculty members are mainly focused on teaching as their primary responsibility; many colleges require faculty to have master's degrees and there are a growing number who also hold doctorates.

Four-Year Private or Public Institution

All four-year colleges and universities offer a bachelor's (baccalaureate) degree as the highest undergraduate degree. Some also offer an associate's degree. The bachelor's degree typically takes 4 to 6 years to complete.

Most four-year institutions are geared to full-time, residential students with on-campus housing in dormitories widely available (although they may also have a commuter population).

Faculty members' focus is divided among teaching, research, and publication; there is a higher percentage of faculty with doctorates than in community colleges.

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Comparing Types of Colleges (continued)

| <i>Community College</i> | <i>Four-Year Private or Public Institution</i> |
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| Class size averages between 25 and 40 students. Classes are taught by full-time or part-time (adjunct) faculty. | Although average class size varies, many lower-division (freshman and sophomore) classes, especially lecture classes, can be very large and are often taught by graduate teaching assistants. |
| Tuition for community colleges is affordable. | Tuition costs at public institutions are usually at least twice that of community colleges and often more at a private institution. |

Some Reasons to Consider Community College

Community colleges are rapidly becoming the “college of choice” for many recent high school graduates, as well as older students. Why? Because today’s students want and need an accessible and flexible high-quality education at an affordable price. Community colleges offer just that.

Community college isn’t the right choice for everyone, but there may be one or more good reasons why community college might be the right place for you. Consider the following benefits:

- ✓ **It’s a great bargain.** You can’t beat the low cost of community college. A public community college’s annual tuition and fees are about half those of public four-year colleges and less than 10–15 percent of those of private four-year institutions.

SNAPSHOT: Igor Levine, a 2005 graduate of Montgomery College (Maryland) who is now studying economics and political science at Columbia University, says, “Going to community college made economic sense to me. I came here when I was 14 from Moscow to play the professional tennis circuit. I had what is the equivalent of a high school diploma. As I grew older, however, I realized I needed more education to succeed, but four-year college here is expensive. I knew I could save a lot of money by going to community college so I enrolled. I’ve been fortunate because I got into the the College’s Macklin Business Institute honors program with a scholarship. My grades and extracurricular activities got me into Columbia.”

If you live at home, you can also save money on room and board. Financial aid can help you graduate with no or low debt. If you want to go on to four-year college, but don’t have the money yet, attending a community college can help you cut back on expenses and earn transferable college credits until you have the funds to make the switch.

FAST FACT: The College Board reports that the average published tuition and fees for 2005–2006 is \$2,191 for public two-year colleges, \$5,491 for public four-year colleges and universities, and \$21,235 for private nonprofit four-year colleges.⁹

✓ **You can get in and get started.** So your grades aren’t or weren’t so great, or your SAT or ACT scores weren’t stellar. The door to college hasn’t been slammed in your face. Community college gives you a chance at a college education.

Rather than delay your education, take advantage of community college’s open admissions policy and get started. Build a stronger academic record that can help you transfer to a four-year college, or choose a more direct route to a career. The longer you wait, the longer before you achieve your goals.

- ✓ **You can stay close to home.** Community colleges are usually located where you live or are usually within easy reach. Many of them have a main campus and branch campuses so that you have easy and convenient access to their services without living on campus.

“I could have attended a four-year institution first, but I chose Montgomery College because of its excellent reputation, affordable cost, and closeness to home. I saved enough money in two years to ensure that my last two years at Rutgers University wouldn’t be a financial burden. I got an excellent education and had opportunities I might not have had as a freshman or sophomore at a four-year school, including a two-week study-abroad program at Cambridge University.”

—Judith Martinez, Montgomery College
(Maryland), Class of 2004

- ✓ **You can get a flexible schedule.** You can find a schedule of courses that fits into your personal schedule. Community colleges are geared to students who work full time or part time and who have families and other commitments. They are open days, evenings, and weekends, and you can study part time or full time. In addition, distance learning courses—online, video, television—offer students an alternative means of taking coursework that is often adjustable to any schedule.
- ✓ **You can get help with the basics.** Community colleges are focused on your success. If you need additional help with the

basics—writing, reading, mathematics, science, study skills—they will help you gain or strengthen these skills through basic developmental skills classes. So if you missed out on the basics in high school or have forgotten some of them because you've been out of school for a while, you'll have an opportunity to catch up before you plunge into college-level classes. The aim is to help you be successful in your coursework.

Most community colleges also have special programs and services for students who are at risk academically. If English is not your first language, you'll also be in the right place, as there are special programs to help you.

- ✓ **You can be the center of attention.** Community colleges generally offer smaller classes and more individual student attention than many four-year colleges. Although faculty members do conduct research and publish, their main focus is on teaching you.

Small class size and more personal attention help many students gain confidence and thrive academically. Tutoring, learning resource centers, and many forms of assistance are also available to help you succeed.

- ✓ **You can test-drive the college experience.** You may be undecided about whether or not you are ready for college, or if you even want to go to college. A two-year experience can help you gain the skills and confidence to go on to four-year schools. Or, it can help you decide you'd rather learn a technical skill and start your career. Either way, you always have the option to continue your education in the future.
- ✓ **You can take time to adjust.** Making the change from high school to college is a big adjustment. Sometimes, it's just too much to handle all at once. High school students who enroll in four-year institutions often find that they get sidetracked by campus social life, are homesick, or simply don't do well in their studies. Sometimes, life at the college or university that you chose just isn't what you expected.

If you're not ready to be on your own, community college is a great option. You can continue to live at home, get your

feet wet at college, and focus on your studies. Community college can be an excellent bridge between high school and a four-year institution.

SNAPSHOT: Whitney Gentile enrolled in a state university in Texas, but found that the experience of a large campus wasn't what she anticipated. "I discovered that I couldn't just major in theater arts, which was what I wanted to do. Instead, I had to take a major in each of four different areas: dance, music, theater, art. I was exhausted trying to meet all the requirements. It was also hard being 18 and moving away from everything I knew even though I had some friends from home on campus. I've been working for a while and deciding what to do. I'm going to enroll in my local community college—Montgomery Community College (Texas). I plan to take some of my core courses before enrolling in another four-year school, probably to major in French. Going to community college will help me get refocused and not lose too much time."

- ✓ **You can explore your options.** Community colleges offer a broad range of vocational and technical studies, as well as liberal arts and science coursework.

Through the college's career center, academic counseling, and other support services, you can explore what it takes to jump-start a career in fields as varied as accounting, culinary arts, criminal justice, nursing, or computer technology. You can also take courses without credit to see if a certain field is right for you, or to improve your readiness to enter the world of work. You can even enroll in a vocational or technical course such as automotive technology at the same time you're studying art, history, or another subject in a general studies or liberal arts and science track.

- ✓ **You can chart a pathway to a four-year institution of your choice.** Preparing students to transfer to a four-year institution is one of the original purposes of community college. Many

four-year colleges and community colleges, especially those in the same state, have agreements to accept credits from community colleges toward the baccalaureate degree. Many state educational systems give first priority to transfer students from in-state community colleges to their four-year institutions. High-achieving students from community colleges are also accepted at prestigious four-year institutions such as Harvard University, Stanford University, and Smith College. See Chapter 10 for more information about the transfer process and requirements.

FAST FACT: A long-term study of students first enrolled in public two-year institutions in 1995–1996 showed that 9 out of 10 enrolled with the intention of obtaining a formal credential (such as a certificate or degree) or of transferring to a four-year institution.¹⁰

- ✓ **You can enter the workforce faster with a career-oriented degree.** Community colleges offer many programs leading directly to a career. You can earn a two-year associate's degree or enter a shorter-term certificate program (usually a year or less) that offers intensive training in a specialized field. These programs are often not available at four-year institutions.

Moreover, studies show repeatedly that education translates into greater earnings over your lifetime. Individuals with an associate's degree or technical and vocational certificates consistently earn more than those who have only a high school diploma. The more education you have, the greater your earning potential.

FAST FACT: Graduates with an associate's degree can expect to earn more than \$1.6 million in their lifetimes, about \$400,000 more than someone with only a high school diploma.¹¹

- ✓ **You can connect with employers.** Community colleges are networked with your potential employers. They know what fields are “hot” and what skills the market demands because they ask employers what they need. Community colleges often revise their coursework based on advice from employers.

Community colleges also offer internships, cooperative education opportunities, and community service learning programs that can give you a competitive edge in finding a job after you graduate or in getting accepted by a four-year college or university.

- ✓ **You can stay competitive in your field or start a new career.** Community colleges offer a great opportunity for you to upgrade skills to help you in your current job, or to learn new ones that will help you find a new position in the same or a different field. Many employers partner with community colleges to provide employees with specific training to keep them current with changes in their fields. Some employers will pay for job-related coursework.
- ✓ **You can expand your mind.** Community colleges are great places to explore a subject just for the fun of learning. Many adults enroll in continuing education courses to pursue a personal interest, such as learning a language or getting a grip on personal finances. Sometimes, this experience can motivate you to enroll in an academic or vocational program and earn a certificate or degree, or go on to a four-year school.

Reality Check: Is Community College Right for Me?

Here are some questions to ask yourself to help you determine if your next step should be community college. Your personal circumstances, grades, vocational and career interests, and finances are all factors that will enter into your decision.

If You're Just Graduating from High School

- Could I use some help and time to strengthen my basic skills—writing, reading, math, and science—and my academic record?
- Am I interested in starting a career in a short period of time? Do I want to explore vocational and technical career options?
- Am I ready to be on my own at college living away from my family and friends?
- Do I need some time to decide what I want to do before making a commitment to a four-year institution?
- Can I afford a four-year college at this time?

If You're an Adult Considering Community College

- Can I afford to put off my education any longer?
- Do I want to continue in the same career or job, or am I ready for something new?
- Could I improve my current or future job situation by updating my skills?
- Will a smaller, more intimate environment help me be successful in the classroom?
- Do I need a flexible schedule so that I can juggle the demands of work, family, and community while attending college?

Find Out More

- ◆ Check out the excellent Web site of the American Association of Community Colleges (www.aacc.nche.edu). You'll find a wealth of information about community colleges and their history, as well as a community college locator and advice for parents and students.
- ◆ The College Board Web site (www.collegeboard.com) is a comprehensive site for information about community colleges, as well as four-year institutions.

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- ◆ *Peterson's Two-Year Colleges* (Thomson's Peterson), an annual guide, plus their Web site (www.petersons.com), offer advice for high school adult students who want to go to community colleges, career colleges, and for-profit colleges, plus specific information about these colleges such as location, number of students, types of degrees and majors offered, and more.
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