

Benefits of Community College

THE HIGH SCHOOL-TO-COLLEGE TRANSITION is fraught with stress over grades, admissions tests, career choices, parental aspirations, financial concerns, and the ultimate pressure to “get into a good school.” Students and parents may relieve themselves of much of this stress, and achieve better outcomes in the long run, by considering what they may be overlooking – their local community colleges. For many students, community college offers a number of benefits.

Cost Effective

The cost savings of community college may be the most significant factor to consider. In its Annual Survey of Colleges, the College Board compares the average annual tuition and fees in two-year and four-year undergraduate schools. Here’s what the data show for 2016-17:¹

Public 2-yr (community college)	Public 4-yr (in-state)	Public 4-yr (out-of-state)	Private 4-yr (non-profit)
\$3,250	\$9,650	\$24,930	\$33,480

Add the cost of room and board for non-local institutions and the price differential is even more substantial. Financial aid is available for community colleges just as it is for four-year schools.

While for-profit technical or trade schools have long offered occupational training, their costs vary widely by location and field of study, and tuition may be considerably higher than that of a community college. A sampling of figures cited by the websites [Colleges and Degrees](#), [American School Search](#), and [Real Work Matters](#) (which evaluated the latest data from the National Center for Education Statistics) showed average annual tuition costs at vocational schools ranging from around \$3,000 to \$25,000 and upwards.

Starting Point for College Experience

Students can use community college as a jumping off point, moving on to a bachelor’s degree – the “2 + 2 plan,” as it is known on many campuses. This has advantages, not the least of which is shaving \$60,000 or more off the higher education price tag.

Particularly for young adults who need some time to find a direction, community college can be a formative – and economical – transition, one that allows them to:

- **Enjoy a Gradual Adjustment** – Students can adapt to the college experience at their own pace, usually on a smaller, more manageable campus, and often while still living at home where they can maintain their family and social support system.

- **Take Time to Explore** – While declaring a major early saves time, credits and tuition, the lower cost of community college may give students some financial wiggle room should they need time to zero in on their field of interest.
- **Fulfill Core Requirements** – Meanwhile they can concentrate on general education credits, which can be applied to a variety of majors at a four-year college or university. Students should discuss potential transfer options with admissions counselors when considering community colleges.

Certified college admissions counselor Breda McCabe Malfesi points out that “most community colleges have articulation [transfer] agreements with the senior schools in the state university systems, as well as a large number of private institutions,” making the move into a baccalaureate program easier. Students can also use CollegeTransfer.net to find transfer-friendly colleges and universities.

Career and Technical Training Opportunities

In addition, young adults who are intent on a technical or trade-oriented profession may find everything they need at a community college with the benefit of connecting vocational training with an associate degree program or occupational certificate program. “Community colleges confer substantially more certificates than any other sector of higher education. They have become a stepping stone for many students to earn occupationally focused credentials, prepare for further education or to retrain workers who already have postsecondary credentials.”² In addition, numerous partnerships between businesses and local two-year colleges link students to apprenticeships and potential employer contacts while giving them career-specific courses, career coaching, and job placement assistance. Furthermore, “you do not have the same flexibility at a trade school as you do at a community college. At a community college, you may get professionally certified and receive a degree as well at a much lower cost.”³ The humanities, sciences and other academics offered by community colleges also provide a more well-rounded educational approach, which may benefit students in the long run.

Greater Flexibility

Students starting college a year or two later, working students, and students raising families may find community colleges to be more responsive to people who are incorporating postsecondary education into already busy lives. “Community colleges offer ... students the opportunity to work toward their educational goals without the lifestyle changes that come with a traditional four-year college experience,” explains the Community College Review website blog “[Why Community College.](#)” Accommodations include:

- **The option to attend part-time.** “More than 60 percent of the 7.4 million community college students who took credit courses in fall 2013 attended college part time.”⁴
- **Flexible scheduling.** Classes may be offered on weekends, evenings and early mornings, and may run once or twice a week instead of three times to allow some full free days.

- **A variety of course configurations.** Full online courses, as well as “blended” or “hybrid” classes that trade some class time for independent study, group learning activities or online work allow students greater independence in completing course work.⁵
- **Close-to-home convenience.** Some two-year colleges have satellite locations and may even run classes in local high schools, making attendance more convenient for students who lack transportation or simply desire less travel time.

This greater flexibility may make a cost-effective, local option for a higher education even more attractive.

Easy Enrollment

With no college entrances exams, the requirement is usually just a high school diploma or GED. “Although community colleges may ask for SAT or ACT scores as a part of the admission process, these tests do not typically keep students out of the school like they might with many four-year institutions.” So, “for high school graduates with less-than-stellar GPAs, community colleges offer a chance to start on a postsecondary education. Students that are able to pull up the grades during the community college years may have a better chance of moving to a four-year school to finish out a degree program.”⁶

Growing Reputation

The general notion that a four-year institution automatically provides a superior education in comparison to a community college has been changing. A 2015 Gallup poll showed a gap of only 4% between the number of Americans who rated community colleges as “excellent or good” (66%) and those who rated four-year colleges that highly (70%).

Adults younger than 30 still need some convincing, however. This group tipped the scales in favor of four-year colleges by twelve percentage points.⁷ Yet, they might be wise to come around. Community College Review, an online resource that provides information about community colleges across the country, claims: “While every community college is different and the individual professors play a large role in determining the quality of education, there is no real difference between a degree earned at a community college and one earned at a state or private college.”⁸ In addition, the “2 + 2 path” may pave the way for a motivated student to move from a community college to a bachelor’s degree at a more prominent institution.

In terms of prestige, while a brand-name college or university may be impressive on a resume, its absence isn’t always a deal-breaker. Kristen Zierau, Director of Executive Recruiting at JMJ Phillip Executive Search, points out that “for many entry-level and mid-level corporate jobs, our clients often don’t have a preference over which college the candidate attended because to that company, experience usually trumps education.” Furthermore, once someone has entered the workforce, academic credentials begin to diminish in importance.⁹

Research, Then Decide

In all, community college is an alternative to the high student debt and other factors that make some students and parents hesitate when considering expensive four-year away schools. In view of the cost savings, the option to turn community college credits into a bachelor's degree, the availability of vocational training in an academic setting, the scheduling flexibility for working students, the convenience to home, and the open admissions policies, community college is, at the very least, worth looking into.

When advising students and parents who are ambivalent about community college, Ms. Malfesi offers the following recommendations:

- Take a closer look before you decide.
- Go to an open house.
- Talk to some professors and students.
- Take a walk on a community college campus.
- See for yourself.

Endnotes

- 1 "Trends in College Pricing. Average Published Undergraduate Charges by Sector, 2016-17." *College Board, Annual Survey of Colleges*.
<https://trends.collegeboard.org/college-pricing/figures-tables/average-published-undergraduate-charges-sector-2016-17#Key%20Points>
Data for 2016-17 are from an online questionnaire distributed to colleges and universities in October 2015, with data collected and reviewed through early September 2016. Tuition and fee figures based on charges to full-time first-year undergraduate students over the course of a nine-month academic year or 30 semester hours or 45 quarter hours.
- 2 "Boom in Certificates: Certificates Awarded at Community Colleges, 2014," *American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Data Points*, January 2016.
http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/datapoints/Documents/DP_Jan7.pdf
AACC analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) 2014 Completion data file, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Carnevale A.P., Rose, S.J. & Hanson, A.R. (2012), "Certificates: Gateway to Gainful Employment and College Degrees," Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce.
- 3 "University, Community College, or Trade School: Which Makes the Most Economic Sense?," *Value Colleges*. <http://www.valuecolleges.com/university-community-college-trade-school/>
- 4 "Attendance Trends: Attendance Patterns, 2011-2012," *American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Data Points*, February, 2015.
http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/datapoints/Documents/Attendance_final.pdf
AACC analysis of Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) fall 2013 enrollment data and 2007–08 and 2011–12 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS: 08 & NPSAS: 12) data, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.
- 5 Grace Chen. "Why Community College: Community Colleges Offer Online Options," *Community College Review*, updated June 19, 2015.
<https://www.communitycollegereview.com/blog/category/why-community-college>
- 6 Grace Chen. "8 Reasons Why Community College Might be the Best Choice After High School," *Community College Review*, updated June 19, 2015.
<https://www.communitycollegereview.com/blog/8-reasons-why-community-college-might-be-the-best-choice-after-high-school>
- 7 Justin McCarthy. "Americans View Quality of Two-Year, Four-Year Colleges Similarly," *Gallup*, June 23, 2015.
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/183779/americans-view-quality-two-year-four-year-colleges-similarly.aspx>
- 8 Kate Barrington. "Why Do Community Colleges Get a Bad Rap?," *Community College Review*, updated November 5, 2015.
<https://www.communitycollegereview.com/blog/why-do-community-colleges-get-a-bad-rap>
- 9 Terri Williams. "Employers Don't Prefer For-Profit Over Community College Graduates, Reveals New Study," *GoodCall*, March 2, 2016.
<https://www.goodcall.com/news/employers-dont-prefer-for-profit-over-community-college-graduates-reveals-new-study-04948>

Website Links

CollegeTransfer: <http://www.collegetransfer.net/Search/tabid/159/Default.aspx>

Colleges and Degrees: <http://www.collegesanddegrees.com/vocational-schools?lvl=32#B>

American School Search: <http://www.american-school-search.com/colleges>

Real Work Matters: <http://www.rwm.org/articles/how-much-does-trade-school-cost/>

Community College Review. “Why Community College”:
<https://www.communitycollegereview.com/blog/category/why-community-college>

Youth Connections, Postsecondary Preparation and Transition Activities:
<https://youth.workforcegps.org/resources/2017/03/14/14/25/Postsecondary-Preparation-and-Transition-Activities>

Youth Connections, Tutoring, Study Skills Training, Instruction, and Dropout Prevention:
<https://youth.workforcegps.org/resources/2017/03/14/11/17/Tutoring-Study-Skills-Training-Instruction-and-Dropout-Prevention>

Youth Connections, Alternative Secondary School and Dropout Recovery Services:
<https://youth.workforcegps.org/resources/2017/03/14/10/14/Alternative-Secondary-School-and-Dropout-Recovery-Services>