

Community College

Is It Right For You?

by Tawnya Beerman

Those in search of the right college often find themselves wondering if a community college can offer a quality education and experience that measures up to that offered by a four-year college or university. Take a close look, and you may be pleasantly surprised by what you discover! Unfortunately, community colleges are often seen as the backup option for those who couldn't get accepted at a "real" school. People mistakenly think that an affordable price tag means a lower quality education. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, in recent years community colleges have undergone a major transformation. Community colleges now feature high-tech modern facilities and a full array of social networking opportunities and activities, along with learning opportunities tailored specifically to the needs of a diverse set of learners. A few even offer comfortable on-campus living. Community colleges offer a wide



range of programs and are partnering with local, regional, and national employers and transfer institutions to seamlessly connect graduates to employment or continuing education opportunities. No wonder community college enrollment has been on an upward trend overall, with a projected 14.4% increase from 2012 to 2022, as mentioned in "Projections of Education Statistics to 2022" a report released by the National Center for Educational Statistics. Community college offers the quality and feel of a traditional college experience—at an affordable price. If you haven't considered attending a community college – you should!



As you consider your options for post-secondary education, it's important to assess your resources, priorities, preferences, and overall needs. Review the table below to determine if community college is the right fit for you.

Mark all the items that would strongly impact your college choice:

ACCESS	I prefer a simple application process with few barriers to getting started toward my goal.
AFFORDABILITY	Earning a credential or degree at an affordable price is important to me.
STAYING LOCAL	I would prefer to stay close to home while attending college.
FLEXIBLE SCHEDULES	I want to attend college, but have additional responsibilities such as family, employment, and other commitments.
LEARNING MODES	I like a variety of options (on-line, hybrid, project based).
CREDENTIAL OPTIONS	My career field requires a specific training credential. I'm not sure yet if I would like to earn a Bachelor's degree.
CLASS SIZE	Large class size is overwhelming to me; I prefer working in smaller groups and having easy access to my professors.
SUPPORT SYSTEMS	I would benefit from individualized academic and social support systems to help ensure that I complete my goals.
ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY	I enjoy working with the latest technology and want to be trained on equipment that meets current industry standards.
CREDIT FOR PRIOR LEARNING	I have extensive work experience or have earned work-related credentials and certifications that I would like to apply toward a credential or degree.
CAREER CONNECTIONS	I hope to be employed in my community after graduation, and would benefit from internships and connections with local employers.
EMPLOYABILITY	I want to earn a credential that leads to employment in a high demand career field.
CAREER & TECHNICAL FIELDS	My occupational choice requires specialized technical training.
DIVERSITY	I value opportunities to meet a variety of people who have varied life experience. I value interactions with instructors who have real-world experience in my career field.
CONTINUING EDUCATION	My career field requires continuing education.

If you checked 8 or more items in the list, community college can offer exactly what you are looking for.

Access

Few four-year colleges can compete with community colleges when it comes to providing access to a quality college education with few barriers to entry. Many community colleges offer open enrollment, automatically accepting all applicants. Most community college applications for admission involve filling out a simple online form, and admission fees are minimal, or sometimes waived all together. Community colleges serve as a natural gateway for students hoping to transfer to a four-year college to earn a bachelor's degree, and students who choose this path tend to be the most successful: "Over 60% of students transferring from a two-year college go on to complete a four-year degree" (National Student Clearinghouse). This same report also showed that students who transferred from community colleges had higher graduation rates (73.5%) than students who started out at the four-year colleges (63.2%).

Affordability

Cost savings is one of the primary factors attracting students to community colleges. Community college students can complete their first two years toward a bachelor's degree at a fraction of the cost charged by traditional four-year colleges.

Students eligible for federal financial aid typically find that their aid package will completely cover their tuition, fees, and housing costs. Scholarships and grants are typically available for bridging any additional financial gaps. Free tutoring and other student support resources also help keep student costs down.

Staying Local

Learners don't have to go far to enjoy the benefits of a community college. Many select community college because it is close to their hometown or near their place of employment. Some also choose community college for distance learning opportunities offered through online learning. Staying close to home can help students save money on living expenses and also allow them to stay close to support systems such as family and friends.

Flexible Schedules

Community college students can often build a schedule that is workable for their individual needs as they work toward a credential. Many students are juggling work, family, and other responsibilities. Having the option to choose from full-time, part-time, evening, weekend, and online options to meet their needs is a real plus.



Learning Modes

Community colleges offer courses in a variety of learning modes to meet the needs of a diverse set of learners. Face-to-face courses, hybrid courses (combination of online and face-to-face learning), hands-on project-based learning, and apprenticeships are just a few examples of the various learning options available to students.

Credential Options

Community colleges respond to learner and employer needs by providing a variety of credential options such as skill-specific career-related credentials, credit certificates, credit diplomas, and credit degrees.

Class Size

Students who enjoy a more intimate learning experience that allows them to get to know their faculty and classmates will feel right at home at the community college. Class sizes are small, typically 10-40 students in a class. Small class sizes allow for more individualized assistance from instructors and more meaningful group learning experiences.

Support Systems

Community colleges are known for providing student support services that are designed to help students build their academic skills, develop soft skills, overcome barriers, and succeed. On-campus

services—such as advising, counseling, disability services, financial aid, tutoring, mentoring, career services, and student activities and clubs—are readily available to students. Having open access to these services helps to increase students' chances of success and degree completion..

Advanced Technology, Equipment, and Facilities

Community colleges have a reputation for providing students with access to the latest technology and equipment for their training experience. Community colleges partner with business and industry to provide cutting edge training on state-of-the-art equipment.

Credit for Prior Learning

Community colleges are uniquely positioned to offer credit toward credential requirements for many non-traditional students with prior work experience or previous training. It is important to keep accurate records of trainings, certifications, and previous coursework. You may be able to use some of that training and experience to satisfy some requirements of the credential you are working toward. Inquire with your advisor or request a review of your training and work experience to determine if you may qualify.



Career Connections & Employability

Community colleges were initially established to provide workers for regional business and industry. They have a longstanding relationship with regional sector boards, advisory boards, and employers for the career fields related to the credentials they award. As a result, you'll find that your faculty have connections to numerous employers who will be seeking to hire the most qualified graduates. As a result of these partnerships, community colleges students have access to tours, job-shadowing opportunities, internships, apprenticeships and more. So, many students are connected with potential employers long before they graduate.

Career & Technical Fields

If you're in the market to earn a credential that will allow you to enter a high-demand industry-specific career field, you're in luck. Community colleges have the ability to tailor training and credential offerings to meet the unique needs of industry. You'll be able to enter a high-demand career field with a sizable salary after only one or two years of specialized training, at a reasonable cost.

Diversity

Community colleges are known for their diverse student body and faculty. You'll share the class-

high school, along with students who have extensive and varied work experience, and students balancing work, family, and other responsibilities in addition to their classes. Community college faculty bring unique experience and expertise to the classroom as well. Some faculty focus solely on teaching, while others are currently employed in their area of expertise, and teach on the side. All of these connections enrich the community college learning experience.

Continuing Education

Graduates of community college can typically count on their alma mater to offer continuing education opportunities after graduation. Many of today's employers require their employees to be "life-long-learners," continually participating in industry-related training and certification in order to remain current in their field. It's great to know that you are starting a life-long partnership with your community college that will allow you to stay on the cutting edge in your selected industry.

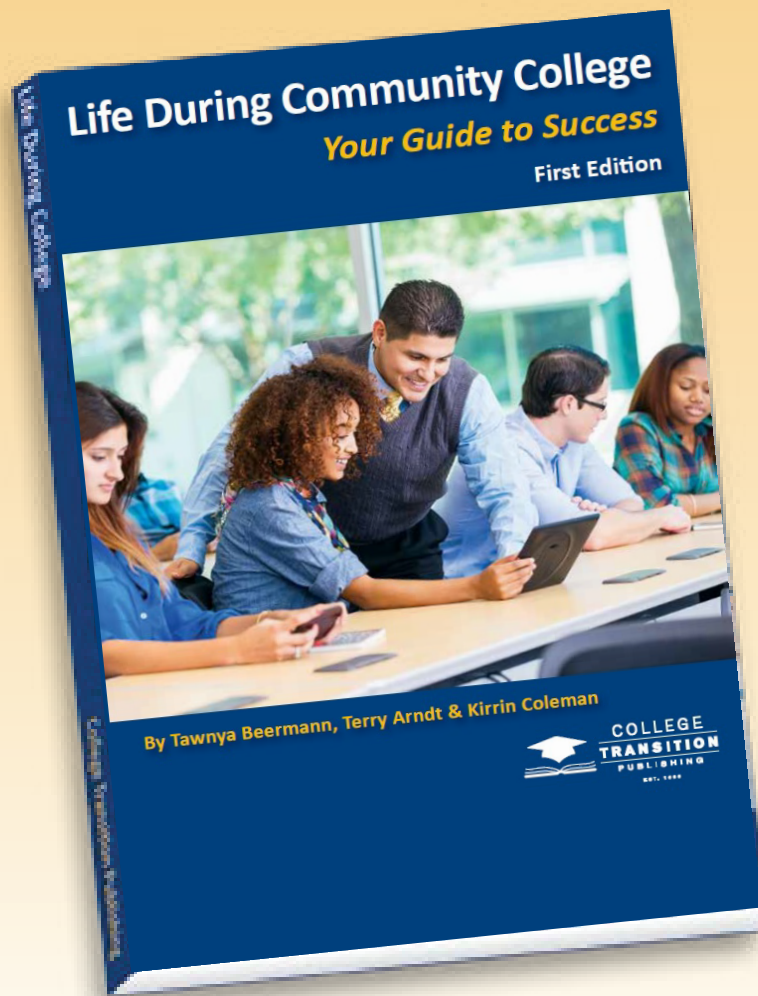
Carefully considering all of these factors along with your individual needs will help guide you toward the right college for you.

Resources:

Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Ziskin, M., Chiang, Y. Chen, J., Torres, V., & Harrell, A. (2013, August). Baccalaureate Attainment: A National View of the Postsecondary Outcomes of Students Who Transfer from Two-Year to Four-Year Institutions (Signature Report No. 5). Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.



Want to Help Students Transition Into Community College?
Consider using:



For more information, resources and tools on assisting students with the transition into college, read *Life During Community College, Your guide to Success* and also find additional resources at:
www.CollegeTransitionPublishing.com

