

COMMUNITY COLLEGES VS UNIVERSITIES

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Community college used to have a reputation of being less academically serious than traditional four-year universities. But a lot has changed in the world of community college. Most importantly, academic standards have risen, as have the qualifications of the teachers.

The choice of community college vs. university really depends on your overall plan for higher education. There are many benefits to beginning your college career at a community college. The quality of education can be comparable to traditional institutions of higher education, tuition is more affordable and the schedule is more flexible.

TRANSFERRING CREDITS

Most people attend a two-year community college to fulfill their general education requirements and earn an Associate's degree. This includes classes that focus on college-level reading and writing, mathematics, science and social science. These general credits can then be transferred to a four-year college to earn a Bachelor's degree.

Across the country, community colleges have worked to ensure that their Associate's degrees match the general education requirements of most universities, especially local ones. For this reason, it has never been easier for students to transfer credits between the two.

ACADEMIC QUALITY

The primary reason that community colleges have grown so much in popularity is because, by and large, they have significantly improved academic standards over the last 15 to 20 years. An associate's degree from a junior college, as they were more commonly called, used to be looked down upon. It was generally assumed—and usually true—that academic standards were lower and the classes not as rigorous.

But these days, it is widely accepted that students learn just as much, sometimes more, attending community college. The curriculum is on par with universities and the classes can be just as challenging. There is still plenty of variety in the industry, but dozens of studies have shown that students transferring from a community college outperform their university counterparts.

One of the main reasons for this level of quality is the faculty. Community colleges now require most professors to have a Master's or Doctoral degree in their discipline. You may get some younger, less experienced teachers here and there, but there are plenty of seasoned veterans teaching at community colleges.

Many community colleges have reached out to professional industries such as business and science, recruiting career professionals who are actively engaged in their fields and offer unparalleled real-world perspective. Traditional four-year universities typically do not have as much flexibility to do this.

Another significant difference is research. If you take your general requirements at a major research university, you may be attending lots of crowded classes being taught by graduate students. University professors can often be more focused on research than teaching.

But community colleges don't have research grants. The professors are hired to teach, and that is where their focus lies. They can give students more attention and often utilize more effective teaching methods. Because of this, many community college students find that the quality of instruction is better, even if the professor hasn't written esteemed books.

CLASS SIZE

Another crucial component to the community college experience is small class size. You won't see many huge, crowded lectures, if any. Most community college classes have twenty students or fewer. This allows for much more interaction and constructive discussion, rather than a one-sided monologue that is common in lower-level university classes.

The small class sizes also contribute to the quality of the teaching, as described above. Professors in small classes are naturally compelled to make the learning process more engaging and interactive. Classroom discussions are more common and professors are generally more accessible to students. And with fewer papers and exams to grade, professors can give more feedback and develop personal relationships with students.

Compare this with big public research universities. Many of the general education classes have similar curriculum to community colleges. But you will be attending plenty of crowded lectures—some containing more than 150 students—that are often taught by graduate students. Of course, there are exceptions to this, but it is a definite trend in universities. Things get better when you enter your major, but general classes tend to be less intimate and engaging.

COST OF TUITION

Public and private universities are much more expensive, lately the rise in tuition has outpaced average inflation by a wide margin. At a public university, tuition can be upwards of \$8,000. It's even higher at private universities. Add on other living expenses and the overall cost, also known as the "sticker price", averages over \$20,000.

Across the board, community college is much more affordable. The average tuition is half that of a public university. Part of this is because community colleges are stripped down, avoiding things like big campus infrastructure and extracurricular programs that increase the overhead at large universities.

Books and food still cost as much, but many community college students save money by living at home. Other than this, there won't be a dramatic difference in your living expenses. But as the cost of tuition keeps rising around the country, more and more people are turning to community college to save money on their first two years of college.

FLEXIBILITY

Flexibility is another huge advantage of community colleges, which are typically designed to cater to students who have jobs or families of their own. The fact that students commute to class, rather than live on campus, also makes it necessary to have built-in flexibility.

STUDENT CULTURE AND CAMPUS LIFE

This is one area where large universities will always have community colleges beat. Most community colleges don't invest as much in campus facilities, athletic programs, and student clubs/organizations. That makes it more affordable, but many students feel the need to have "the college experience", which includes living in student dorms and participating in campus life.

You won't find nearly as much of this culture at community colleges, and certainly no fraternities or sororities. But you may be surprised by some of the campuses in the nation's larger community colleges. Many have invested substantially in campus facilities like student centers, campus dining, computer labs and state-of-the-art classrooms.

If you'd like to play sports but don't feel that you're ready for NCAA Division I competition, you may be able get more playing time and better enjoy the sport at a community college. Many of the larger schools have active and diverse athletics programs, including competitive football, basketball, track and field, baseball, volleyball and more.