

# 2-Year Colleges Versus 4-Year Colleges: Which is Best?

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), there are 1,051 active community colleges in the United States. The vast majority of these are public institutions of education offering associate degrees and professional certificates to undergraduate students. Increasingly, community colleges are also adding bachelor's degrees to their list of offerings..

## **The Rise of Community Colleges**

Historically, community colleges have been looked as an easier alternative to four-year universities. With lower admissions requirements and questionable academics, these two-year junior colleges were considered last resorts for high school graduates who couldn't get into a "real" college. Times have changed, though. Community colleges have raised the bar in terms of academics and are a great alternative for students who choose a two-year credential as a substitute or stepping stone to a university degree.

## **Why Go to Community College?**

### **Affordable (or Even Free) Tuition**

Student debt is a major concern among university graduates, and many would-be university students are opting for community college instead of a four-year university as a way of saving money or avoiding having to take out hefty loans to pay for their education.

It's true that community college is far less expensive on average than a four-year university. According to U.S. News & World Report, the average tuition for in-state community college students is only \$3,660 compared to the \$9,716 in-state public college tuition and \$35,676 private college tuition.

### **Flexible Scheduling Options for Community College Students**

Community colleges are more likely to offer flexible scheduling options than four-year universities. Designed with working students in mind, two-year schools are known for their convenient part-time and evening classes. In fact, the AACC reports that most community college students (i.e. 63%) attend school on a part-time basis.

### **Smaller Class Sizes in Community College**

When you think of four-year universities, visions of huge, overpopulated lecture halls may come to mind. While this may be a stereotype, it is also the reality for millions of students who attend large universities. While the quality of the curriculum at these schools may be second-to-none, for many students, the instruction itself leaves something to be desired. Students who learn

best from one-on-one instruction may perform better academically at a smaller, two-year college. These institutions typically feature much smaller class sizes that allow professors to lend more of their attention to individual students.

### **More Academic Support from Community Colleges**

In addition to smaller class sizes, community colleges also tend to offer more student support services, especially when it comes to academics. While larger universities generally expect students to enroll with the study skills and preparation necessary to succeed in their classes independently, community colleges realize that their incoming students may need a little more assistance. Many of these students are the ones who struggled in their high school courses and aren't sure whether college is for them. At a two-year school, students of less-than-stellar academic caliber will find tutoring services, remedial courses, and mentoring programs, for instance.

### **Opportunities to Improve GPA through Community College Classes**

Many high school students don't realize the importance of earning good grades until it's too late (or so they think). Under-achieving students with aspirations of college degrees can save themselves, so to speak, by attending community college for their general education classes. If they resolve themselves to working hard, these students may be able to develop an academic transcript that will entice universities to admit them as transfer students down the line.

### **High-Paying Jobs With An Associate Degree**

In some cases, students choose to attend community college because a four-year university simply isn't necessary for their chosen career paths. The recent boom in the health care industry has produced many lucrative jobs that don't require a bachelor's degree. Other occupations in STEM fields require only associate degrees and are associated with salaries over \$50,000 per year. For your reference, we've listed some of these jobs below along with their mean annual wages, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

- Dental Hygienists: \$74,820
- Electrical and Electronics Engineering Technicians: \$64,330
- Mechanical Engineering Technicians: \$56,250
- Nuclear Medicine Technologists: \$76,820
- Radiation Therapists: \$82,330
- Respiratory Therapists: \$60,280
- Paralegals and Legal Assistants: \$50,940
- Occupational Therapy Assistants and Aides: \$57,620

## **Frequently-Asked Questions About Community Colleges**

If you're considering attending community college, you likely have some questions. In this section, we'll address some of the inquiries we commonly receive about two-year schools and

their academic offerings. Keep in mind, though that the answers provided here are general. For specific information about a particular school or degree/certificate program, it's best to speak to an admissions counselor at the community college you're considering attending.

**Q: Are community college credits transferable?**

A: In most cases, yes. Still, it's advisable to speak to your community college advisor and be clear about any intentions to transfer to a four-year university. He or she can counsel you on which classes to take and any articulation agreements that exist between the school and any larger universities.

**Q: Are community college courses easier?**

A: Not in the general sense. Community college courses can be just as rigorous as some university classes. However, it is possible that you'll receive more individualized instruction and academic support than you would at a four-year university.

**Q: Can community college students get scholarships and other financial aid?**

A: Yes. Students planning on attending community college should apply for the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Half-time enrollment qualifies students for grants, loans, and scholarships from the federal government. The community colleges themselves will sometimes offer scholarships to prospective students as well.

**Q: What community college classes should I take?**

A: It depends on what the end goal is. If you intend to transfer to a four-year university, then it's recommended that you take only general education classes that will count as credit toward your university degree. On the other hand, if you plan to earn a technical or vocational degree from your community college, you should follow this degree plan.

**Q: Is community college free?**

A: In some states, yes! Places like Rhode Island and Tennessee, for example, offer free tuition for community college students.

**Q: How much does community college cost?**

A: The cost of community college will vary based on the school you attend and how many credit hours you take per semester. Still, you can expect to pay significantly less than you would for a four-year university. On average, community college students pay less than \$4,000 per year.

**Q: Will community college accept anyone?**

A: Not exactly. Generally speaking, community colleges do have lower admissions standards than many four-year universities. Still, you will need a minimum of a high school diploma or equivalent in order to be eligible.

**Q: What is community college like socially?**

A: Campus life at a community college is a unique experience that depends on which specific school you decide to attend. Generally speaking, though, you won't have as many opportunities to get involved as you would on the campus of a four-year university where fraternities, sororities, and other student organizations abound.

## Why Attend A Four-Year University?

It's clear that community colleges have made impressive strides in recent years. There are still some advantages of attending a four-year university, though, that shouldn't be ignored.

### Broader Course Selection from 4-Year Schools

Community colleges are aware that many students use their academic offerings as stepping stones toward a university education. Therefore, many have limited their course selections to the most basic general education classes. If you're searching for unique intellectual experiences, you may need to look elsewhere.

### More Degree Options for University Students

Community colleges offer numerous professional certificates and a range of associate degrees. Some of them even offer a few bachelor's degree options. Still, four-year universities typically offer a much wider selection of subject areas and degree levels. While they may not provide an associate level education, they do offer bachelor's credentials in a variety of subject areas, including the humanities, social and behavioral sciences, life sciences, education, and more. Many of these schools also offer options beyond the four-year degree such as master's and doctoral programs.

### Better Professor Credentials

No matter what school they attend, students depend on their professors to teach them the skills they need to succeed. When you attend a community college, however, you may be taking a chance on the caliber of the professor who teaches your class. Professors at four-year universities are often required to hold terminal degrees in their field (usually a doctoral degree) while community college instructors can be hired with only a master's-level education. Of

course, that doesn't mean that there aren't many excellent faculty members to be found at two-year colleges. It just means they may be less qualified, at least on paper.

### **Vibrant Student Life on University Campuses**

Many students attend college for an experience, not just an education. If this describes you, then a four-year university may be the better choice for you over a two-year community college. While some two-year schools offer some student clubs and organizations, most pale in comparison to what an active university can offer in terms of campus life. Students enrolled in four-year colleges and universities can take advantage of fraternities and sororities, campus sports, service learning organizations, study abroad opportunities, and much more.

### **Networking Opportunities**

Faculty members at large universities often have friends in high places, especially within the industry that they teach. For their students, this means almost guaranteed job placement after graduation via a professional recommendation. Community college instructors may have less pull.

Furthermore, four-year universities are known for forming partnerships with many of the businesses in the community that they serve. For students, this often translates into practicum and internship opportunities that have the potential to turn into employment arrangements upon graduation from their degree program.

## **Frequently-Asked Questions About Four-Year Universities**

Enrolling in a four-year university is a huge commitment, both academically and financially. You're bound to have questions. In this section, we'll field some of the most common inquiries we receive about universities and their degree programs. Please note that we cannot comment on specific details about a particular school, though. For this type of information, you'll need to speak to a university admissions counselor or other school representatives.

### **Q: Should I transfer to a four-year university to complete my degree?**

A: It depends on your career goals. For some occupations, it's sufficient to earn an associate degree from a community college. For others, you may need a more advanced degree offered by a university.

### **Q: How long does it take to complete a degree at a university?**

A: Despite being dubbed "four-year" universities, these schools typically offer scheduling options that allow students to extend their time in school if necessary or complete degree requirements in less time. For example, students can earn a bachelor's degree in as few as two years or as many as six.

**Q: How much does a university education cost?**

A: Tuition costs vary from school to school. Public college tuition tends to range from around \$25,000 to \$34,000 while private universities can cost \$60,000 and above.

**Q: Will my community college credits transfer to a four-year university?**

A: Your general education classes should transfer, but unless there is a clear articulation agreement between the community college and the university, there is no guarantee. The best course of action is to speak to your community college advisor about your transfer plans.

**Q: Can I live at home if I attend a four-year university?**

A: Not always. Some universities require that students live on campus. Check with the school you're planning to attend for housing requirements.

## **Transferring From a 2-Year College to a 4-Year University**

If you can't make the choice between a 2-year college and a 4-year university, then transferring from one to the other may be the solution. In some ways, this is like having the best of both worlds.

### **Benefits of Transferring to a 4-Year University**

If you've got your heart set on an occupation that demands a particular bachelor's degree or simply have a desire for a university experience but lack the grades or finances to make your college dreams come true right out of the gate, then a transfer plan may be the ideal solution.

When you enroll in a two-year community college with the intent to transfer to a four-year university, you're buying yourself some time to get things in order and put yourself in the position to be accepted into and/or afford university classes. In a two-year school, you'll enjoy affordable (or even free!) tuition and the academic support necessary to improve your GPA while preparing for the move to more expensive and challenging courses.

### **The Transfer Process**

An articulation agreement is a pact between the two institutions in which the university agrees to accept transfer credits from the community college. When you choose schools that have articulation agreements, you ensure a smooth transfer without the risk of losing hard-earned (and paid-for) credit hours.

Choosing schools with articulation agreements (most colleges in WA state) isn't always possible, especially if students change their minds about their career aspirations. However, most of the time it's still possible to find a university that will accept credits from the two-year school. It just may not be as seamless a transition, and there's a chance that not all credit hours will transfer.