

THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE CHOICE

The story of two brothers:

Some years ago, two brothers earned bachelor's degrees at the University of California. Their degrees were identical, except for the first names on the documents. One brother attended the university all four years. The other brother attended a community college for two years, transferred to the university, and finished his degree in two more years. The second brother's degree made no mention of the fact that half of his coursework was done at a community college. Their degrees were exactly the same.

One brother wanted the experience of living away from home and four years of university life. The other didn't qualify for Berkeley out of high school, and didn't want to attend a "lesser" university. He did well at the community college and earned admission to Cal as a third-year junior transfer. They both earned the same degree in the same number of years, but one did it all at the university, and the other in a "2+2" community college/university plan. The brothers in question, by the way, were the author of this article and his sibling.

How do community colleges work?

In most parts of the world, high school students take standardized university entrance exams. If students do well, they are admitted to highly competitive places in national universities. If they fare poorly, they go to work or attend trade schools. There is usually no chance for them to ever attend a university. In the US, it is different. Education is seen as the great equalizer of opportunity. University admission has two doors, not one. Students can enter as first-year freshmen, or transfer from a community college as third-year juniors. They all earn the same university bachelor's degree, regardless of which door they use to get in.

Who goes to community colleges?

Almost half of American bachelor's degree holders start their higher education at a community college. Many excellent students prefer to live at home and save money by taking the first two years of their university degrees at a nearby community college. They then transfer to a university and complete their bachelor's degrees in an additional two years. Attending a community college and transferring to a university is a very common and well-respected educational choice in the United States.

How does university admission work in the United States?

Admission to good universities as a freshman requires good high school grades, a good SAT or ACT score, and for international students, a good TOEFL score. Extracurricular activities and admissions essays usually also play a role. Students who wish to save money, or do not qualify for their first choice of university as freshmen, can take their first two years at a community college, and transfer to the university as third-year juniors.

Universities admit transfer students mainly on the basis of community college grades, although extracurricular activities, admissions essays, and for international students, TOEFL scores can also be important. SAT or ACT scores are rarely required for university transfer.

Is it easier to enter a university as a junior transfer?

Usually, yes. University admission standards are generally lower for transfer students than first year freshmen. This is because universities believe that if students do well at a community college, they have proven they can do good university-level work. In addition, all public universities have transfer agreements with community colleges, by which state residents who earn associate degrees are granted admission if they meet certain standards. Although this guarantee rarely applies to non-residents, including international students, the principle of lower admission standards for transfers tends to carry over and apply to them as well. Private universities, not being supported by state tax revenues, generally apply the same admission standards to all students, resident and non-residents.

What are the admissions requirements for community colleges?

Community colleges exist to give all Americans a chance to further their education, either in university studies or in a job skill. Accordingly, they are open admission for state residents. Community colleges are generally open admission to non-residents as well, although international students lacking the required TOEFL score (typically 133-173/450-500) must take ESL first. It should be noted that some programs, such as nursing and allied health, have special admission requirements and are not open admission.

Will I lose credits when I transfer?

Students earning associate degrees usually lose few or no credits when they transfer to a university in the same state. Transfer to universities in other states is not difficult, but loss of credits is more likely, because each state has its own university system. Careful planning and class selection will reduce lost credits. As a rule of thumb, students who do not plan carefully may lose up to one term when transferring out of state. For students changing their majors, the loss of credits is usually greater.

Can I really earn a bachelor's degree in four years if I attend a community college?

Good students who meet college-level English and mathematics standards and plan their transfer carefully should be able to graduate in four years. A summer term may be necessary. Additional time will be needed for students who do need pre-college level mathematics or English (including ESL), fail to plan their transfer well, fail classes, change their major, or pursue majors which are themselves longer than four years.

Are community colleges well respected in the US?

Almost all US public universities and most private universities gladly admit community college transfers, including Harvard, Stanford, UC Berkeley and Michigan. Top universities in the United States respect community colleges and accept their graduates. As stated before, almost half of all US university bachelor's degree holders transfer from community colleges.

Which is better, starting at a community college or a university?

Remember the brothers in the first story? For one, direct admission to a university was the best choice, and for the other, community college transfer was the way to go. They chose two different roads to the same goal. Here are situations which would tilt the decision in one direction or the other:

First-year admission to a university

- Excellent high school grades, good SAT or ACT score, and high TOEFL score
- Sufficient funds to afford four years of university tuition and living expenses
- Wish to experience 'college life' at a resident institution
- Wide range of classes
- 'University' sounds cooler than 'community college'

First two years at a community college and junior transfer to university

- Ability to transfer to a top university
- Less cost for the same bachelor's degree
- No need for TOEFL
- Smaller classes and a more personal experience
- Faster admission
- Special programs to improve job prospects

In sum, there are many excellent reasons to attend a community college first, just as there are in attending a university first. In general, if a student can get into the university of his or her dreams directly from high school, s/he should go there. If s/he can't get in, s/he should attend a community college first and earn a second, better chance to get into his or her dream university as a transfer student.

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