

Community College or Four-Year College: What's Right For You?

A traditional four-year college certainly isn't for everyone. In fact, plenty of students four out of every 10 first-time freshmen, according to the American Association of Community Colleges instead attend a two-year community college. Think a community college might be a good choice for you? Here's some information to help you decide.

What Is a Community College?

Community colleges are typically two-year institutions that offer the benefits of low tuition and convenient locations. Students usually choose a community college with one of the following goals in mind:

- To begin earning basic credits that they will later transfer to a four-year college.
- To pursue a two-year associate's degree or certificate program to prepare for a specific career.
- To take continuing education classes in order to build new job skills, explore a new career or pursue a personal interest.

When Should You Consider A Community College?

A community college offers plenty of benefits, but it might be a particularly good option for you if one of the following is true:

- **Cost is an issue.** Tuition at most community colleges is quite a bit cheaper than at their four-year counterparts. Even if you plan to eventually attend a four-year school, you can save big bucks by taking a couple of semesters of general prerequisites at a community college.
- **Your grades don't make the grade.** Unlike competitive four-year colleges, community colleges typically have open admissions policies which only require a high school diploma. Plus, attending a community college is a great way to improve your academic track record in order to get accepted at a four-year college.
- **You want job-specific training.** At a community college, you can usually dive right into a two-year program that will give you specific training for a specialized field or a technical or vocational career.
- **You're not quite ready to leave the nest.** Plenty of high school grads just aren't ready for the responsibility of living on their own. Community colleges are a good stepping stone, since you can ease into college courses while still living at home.
- **You need a flexible schedule.** If you need to balance a work schedule or family obligations with school, community colleges offer a lot of flexibility with day, evening or weekend classes, part-time schedules and online courses.

Drawbacks of Community College

Of course, there are tradeoffs to attending a community college. Here are some key differences between community colleges and four-year schools.

- **Choice of Majors and Classes.** While course catalogs at community colleges can be extensive, they can't compare to the number of majors and classes you'll have to choose from at a four-year college.
- **Academic Regimen.** Community colleges, by design, serve a broad-based student body. In order to accommodate the varied backgrounds and abilities of students, classes might move at a slower pace than at a four-year school.
- **Collegiate Experience.** From dorm-living and hanging out on the quad, to school spirit and homecoming celebrations, four-year colleges give you the camaraderie of being in a university setting and a traditional collegiate experience that you just won't find at a community college.

The bottom line is that community colleges and traditional, four-year colleges both offer great educational opportunities. And like every other choice you'll make in your college search, deciding what's best for you boils down to weighing your educational goals, your personal circumstances and what you want most from your college experience.