



COMMUNITY COLLEGES

All information is excerpted from the book "If You Want to Study in the United States: Undergraduate Study." To read the entire book, please visit www.EducationUSA.state.gov.

Increasingly, international students are looking at community colleges as their gateway to academic advancement. Like their American classmates, they are discovering that many of these unique schools have outstanding programs, transferable credits, reasonable fees, and supportive environments. These factors are so attractive that over 40 percent of the U.S. undergraduate population can be found in the classrooms of America's two-year colleges.

The number of international students at community colleges has been rising rapidly in recent years. With high-quality courses, simplified application procedures, low costs, extensive student support systems, committed teachers, and smaller classes, community colleges offer a unique way to access many aspects of U.S. higher education — from technical and vocational education to continuing education to full degree programs. For many international students, the quest for a U.S. bachelor's degree will begin at a community college.

Community colleges are sometimes called junior or two-year colleges, and there are more than 1,200 such colleges in the United States. Most community colleges are public or state-supported. A few are independent or under private control.

Like other post-secondary institutions in the United States, two-year colleges are varied. There are large multi-campus suburban systems with over 50,000 students and hundreds of programs and facilities. There are also small, rural schools with fewer than 1,000 students and a limited number of majors. Even the students are diverse, coming from all age groups, cultures, and economic backgrounds.

Programs of Study

In addition to academic programs leading to college degrees, community colleges offer vocational education and technical training. Community colleges usually have strong ties with their state's universities and their region's business sector, and so are sometimes referred to as the community's college. These relationships mean that the college curricula are designed to prepare students for either future academic success or immediate employment.

Programs of study at community colleges usually include:

Two-Year Associate Degree Programs

These may be:

- designed to fulfill the requirements for the first two years of a four-year bachelor's degree. They may be called transfer degree programs because students who complete them later transfer to four-year universities for the final two years of study. Examples of such programs include pre-business administration, pre-engineering, fine arts, liberal arts, and computer science.
- designed to prepare students for immediate employment in fields such as automotive engineering, interior design, aviation flight technology, child development, criminal justice, health care services and sciences, business, fire science technology, paralegal studies, food management, and photography. These are sometimes called terminal degree programs.

Certificate Programs

Certificate programs train individuals for positions in areas like social work and human services, health care, building trades, and technologies. Certificate programs may be short- or long-term depending on the type of course that is offered. Long-term programs include nursing, while short-term certificate programs include such specialty areas as office technology, real estate, and computer-assisted design.

Continuing Education

Continuing education programs are for students who wish to enhance their professional or personal skills, rather than to study for credit toward a degree or certificate.

There is an endless variety of courses offered for students in this area. The certificate programs at two-year colleges are very similar to those found at vocational and technical institutions.

Additional information about vocational and technical training, as well as continuing education courses, may be found in the third booklet of this series, which focuses on short-term study opportunities in the United States.

Accreditation

Institutional accreditation of a community college is very important, especially if you hope to transfer from a two-year college to a four-year institution, in which case you will want to ensure recognition of your first two years of study. Nearly all the community colleges and private two-year institutions in the United States are accredited by the same agencies that assess the four-year colleges and universities in their geographical area. However, prospective students should always verify the accreditation of any two-year college in which they are interested.

Transfer and Articulation Agreements

In addition to accreditation, the smooth transition from a community college to a four-year institution depends on the strength of the articulation agreement between the two schools. These contracts specify which courses transfer automatically from one institution to the other and, therefore, can be counted toward the four-year degree.

Public community colleges work closely with the public universities in their state to develop transfer guidelines. The transfer of credits involving a private or an out-of-state institution may not be as well-defined. If your ultimate goal is to earn a bachelor's degree, then as early as possible you should:

- ⇒ declare your intent to pursue a transfer associate degree;
- ⇒ confer with the academic/transfer counselor at the community college to identify a major;
- ⇒ select a four-year institution and seek out the latest information on its transfer policy and its programs of study.

One reason for planning carefully is that schools do not have the same course requirements for identical degrees. By targeting the four-year institution early and determining what is needed to transfer, then following a carefully designed program, you can avoid unnecessary work and expense.

Also, because of accreditation or university requirements, some four-year institutions cannot accept certain courses from other schools. Before taking a lot of courses in one field of study, especially business or engineering, students should talk to their academic/transfer counselor, who will be familiar with any restrictions. Recent innovative arrangements have made transferring easier. Some institutions have worked together to establish "dual admissions" policies whereby students are admitted to both the two-year and the four-year schools at the same time. Immediately after completing an associate degree, the student may transfer directly into the bachelor's program at the cooperating university.

Admission

Community colleges operate an "open-door" admissions policy. This means anyone who wishes to enroll and meets the minimum entry requirements can do so. Each institution will have its own set of admission requirements, but the minimum usually includes the following:

- ⇒ completed application form;
- ⇒ proof of secondary school completion (usually 12 years of schooling);
- ⇒ certification of English language proficiency (usually a score from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL));
- ⇒ evidence of financial support (required for the I-20 form — see chapter 11, "Applying for a Student Visa").

The TOEFL requirement is often lower for a community college than it is for a four-year institution. In addition, if your TOEFL score is a little below the entry requirement, the community college may still admit you into the English as a Second Language (ESL) program. Successful completion of all the prescribed ESL courses will open the door to the wider academic world of the community college.

As with four-year colleges, students should contact the admissions office of the two-year college to request international admissions information. Many community colleges now have Web sites with downloadable or on-line applications.

Costs

For many international students, a major attraction of community colleges is their low cost. Tuition and fees at colleges do vary based on the program of study and whether the college is public or private. Nevertheless, the cost of attending a two-year institution is usually lower than that of a four-year college in the same geographic area. This is the case even for international students attending public community colleges where all out-of-state students must pay a higher rate than state residents. The economic advantage of two-year colleges is difficult to ignore.

Financial Aid

In general, it will be a challenge for international students to secure financial aid at state-supported community colleges. Though you should check with the colleges about any scholarships they offer that are open to international students, almost all of the funds available to students will come from the federal government or local government, and are set aside specifically for U.S. citizens and permanent residents. There is a slightly better chance of acquiring financial assistance at private colleges. Other private institutions such as foundations, corporations, or associations may also have funds for grants and scholarships.

Student Life

The services and personnel at a community college play important roles in creating a supportive learning environment. Academic assistance comes in the form of ESL programs; developmental courses in mathematics, reading, and writing; tutorial services; and academic advising. Student services include personal and career counselors, facilities for students with disabilities, and extracurricular activities. Cooperative education offices reach out to businesses in the community to locate training opportunities or internships for their students.

Importantly, institutions that have a history of educating international students will have special foreign student advisers. This may make a considerable difference to your experience at the college as such staff will have more experience dealing with the unique visa, academic, cultural, and personal issues faced by international students studying in the United States. Most two-year colleges do not offer student housing but often provide assistance through local housing groups. Students usually commute to campus and live in local communities. This experience is very different from living in student dormitories on a four-year college campus, and it gives international students a wonderful opportunity to develop independence and observe American life.

The Classroom Experience

Above all else, the success of community colleges rests in their classrooms. Their faculty members are renowned for being expert teachers who prefer interacting with students to conducting research or publishing articles. Also, the class sizes are often smaller, which means instructors can give each student personal attention.

Time for a Recap

Community colleges:

- ☞ are an important part of the U.S. higher education system.
- ☞ offer high quality programs that prepare students for immediate employment.
- ☞ offer transfer associate degree programs that can lead to a bachelor's degree.
- ☞ are highly cost effective.
- ☞ provide a nurturing learning environment with committed instructors, smaller classes, and extensive support systems.

USEFUL WEB SITES

Community College Information and Links — Listed by State

<http://www.aacc.nche.edu>

Links to Community Colleges — Listed by Name

<http://www.mcli.dist.maricopa.edu/cc/>

U.S. News & World Report — Community College Search Site

<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/communit/commsrch.htm>