

Community colleges were developed, and still exist, for two major purposes. The first is to serve as a bridge from high school to college by providing courses for transfer toward a bachelor's degree (B.A. or B.S.). Four out of 10 college-bound high school graduates start their college education this way.

The second function of community colleges is to prepare students for the job market by offering entry-level career training as well as courses for adult students who want to upgrade their skills for workforce reentry or advancement. Here, then, are some reasons why you might attend a community college:

You're tight on funds.

Community colleges cost significantly less (particularly for state residents) than state or private colleges and universities. This means that they can be a cost-effective way to complete the first two years of college. The money you save by living at home and going to your local community college can help pay for your last two years at a four-year college or university.

You aren't sure if you want to go to a four-year college.

Maybe you'd like to begin by aiming for a two-year associate degree and assess as you go whether you want to pursue a bachelor's degree. Taking classes toward an Associate of Arts (A.A.) degree, for example, would give you a feel for the type of education you'd get at a four-year college.

You aren't sure what kind of program you want to pursue.

Many people enter college without a clear idea of what they want to focus on. At a community college, you can explore different subject areas before committing to a program, without having to be so concerned about finances. Keep in mind, however, that you will have to declare a major in order to receive federal Title IV financial aid.

To assist with the career decision-making process, many community colleges offer intensive guidance counseling that can help you assess your abilities, interests, and educational options. Plus, you may actually be able to take a wider array of courses (including both liberal arts and career-oriented) than at a four-year institution, making it easier to check out many different options in one place.

You've been out of school for a while or your GPA isn't so great, and you want to build your skills before transferring to a four-year college or university.

Whereas many four-year colleges and universities have selection criteria for attendance, such as a minimum required GPA, community colleges are open to everyone. If you want to pursue college-level course work but aren't academically ready, community colleges offer classes and one-on-one tutoring to help you strengthen your basic skills. Keep in mind that the average class size at most community colleges is significantly smaller than at public four-year universities.

You'd like to undertake a career-oriented degree, such as a fashion-design or computer-certification program.

Programs like these are often not available at four-year institutions. If you're thinking of seeking employment after finishing up at community college, there are several routes you can take.

You can earn an associate degree—an Associate in Arts or Science (A.A. or A.S.) or an Associate in Applied Science (A.A.S.). An A.A.S. usually requires specialized courses in fields such as construction technology, computer repair, or electronics as well as several general education courses in subjects like English and math. These degrees take about two years to complete.

However, if you want to take courses in a specialized area of study but don't want to spend the time necessary to earn an associate degree, many community colleges have certificate options that provide intensive training in a specialized field like computer-assisted drafting, food-service technology, or paralegal studies. These certificates usually take six months to a year to complete.

You need to be able to work, perhaps to help support your family, and are seeking a flexible schedule so that you can work around a job or other commitments.

At four-year colleges, course schedules are geared primarily toward full-time, traditional students who take classes during the day. At community colleges, the student population tends to be highly diverse with regard to age, experience, family background, socioeconomic level, and employment status. Course schedules are developed with attention to the variable needs of both part-time and full-time students, so classes are usually offered throughout the day and evening, and sometimes on weekends. Many of these colleges offer online courses.

Thinking Through Your Decision

You'll have a more satisfying experience at a community college if you research the program in advance. Find out which programs are strongest, what the student transfer rates are, and what student support services are available. There are many ways you can pursue your education, but the programs vary among colleges, and it's up to you to find the right match.

Use the College Search at www.collegeboard.com to research two-year and four-year schools and find the programs that meet your needs.