

# **Community College: An Option Not to Be Ignored in College Planning**

By  
Dr. Ralph G. Perrino

George Lucas, Hollywood producer, Arthur Goldberg, U.S. Supreme Court Justice, Fred Haise, Apollo 13 astronaut, Tom Hanks, NASA Space Shuttle Commander Eileen Collins, Dustin Hoffman, Jim Lehrer, Nolan Ryan, Billy Crystal, Morgan Freeman, H. Ross Perot, and Calvin Klein. Each of these highly successful individuals attended community college. What did they know that many students and parents do not take into consideration when planning for college?

The community college of today offers opportunities not available to previous generations. As they opened the doors of opportunity, they also became a less expensive alternative that offered two-year terminal degrees where general education classes could be completed at less cost. Community colleges also offered specialty training or certification in careers that did not require a four-year degree. In addition, they became the stepping-stone to a four-year college or university, where the significance of a deficient high school grade point average or low entrance exam scores was minimized.

Data from the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) indicates that 44% of U.S. undergraduates are enrolled in the nation's 1,132 two-year colleges. These students are seeking degrees and certification in a wide range of fields including law enforcement, culinary arts, health-care, technology, business management, and technical trades such as automotive and other service industries. State and local governments are the primary source of funds for two-year colleges. Tuition covers a small portion of the overall cost. The average cost of a year at a community college is less than \$3,000.00, compared with tuition in excess of \$7,000.00 at most four-year public institutions. A student who attends a community college will also be able to save on room and board expenses. The net savings on an annual basis can be substantial.

Financial planners advise that a college degree at a cost of \$60,000 or more obtained with full or partial loans is not a very cost-effective planning strategy. This is particularly true in fields such as teaching, social work, health-care and other service occupations. Community college can be a very prudent way to avoid financial purgatory when one enters the work force. The median education loan debt is nearly \$20,000 for full-time students at four-year universities. That does not include the average credit card debt of \$5,000 - \$10,000.

Why do so many students who can and should attend community college choose to attend more expensive four-year universities? Much of this has to do with the cache associated with attendance at a prestigious college or university. Peer pressure and, let's be honest, parental ego also often drives the decision-making process. In a society where financial decisions are often made devoid of rational thinking, emotion frequently supplants sound financial decision-making.

To avoid this dilemma, parents and students should consider several misconceptions and myths associated with attendance at a community college.

**Misconception:** Community colleges are the refuge of students who cannot get into four-year colleges.

**Reality:** Although it is true that students who attend community colleges generally have lower ACT and SAT scores, many students attend community colleges for financial reasons, convenience, family concerns, and job considerations. Many community college students have the ability to attend a four-year college but choose to attend a community college for a myriad of reasons.

**Misconception:** A university degree is superior to a degree from a community college.

**Reality:** Community colleges are a major source of training for many professions, including health-care, law enforcement officers, and firefighters. In fact, recent statistics from AACCC indicates that community colleges train 62% of health care professionals as well as 80% of law enforcement officers and fire fighters. Depending on one's career plans, community colleges can be the best option for many students.

**Misconception:** There is a direct relationship between the inexpensive cost of community colleges and the quality of education they offer.

**Reality:** Class size at most community colleges is smaller than at large universities. This results in much more student-faculty interaction. The sole mission of the community college is to teach. The age-old dilemma of "publish or perish" inherent in large universities is non-existent in community colleges. Community colleges offer honors programs for students who want the challenge of increased academic rigor. The cost savings is hardly an indication of inferior education.

**Misconception:** Students at community colleges are unable to transfer credits upon completion of an associate's degree.

**Reality:** Recent policy changes at several Virginia state universities virtually guarantee transfer of credits and, in some cases, admission if a student's GPA is at a certain level. In fact, the University of Virginia recently announced that they will offer a Bachelors of Individualized Study on the campus of Northern Virginia Community College beginning the fall 2008 semester.

**Misconception:** A bachelor's degree is the only ticket to future employability.

**Reality:** According to Robert G. Templin, Jr., President of Northern Virginia Community College, in the northern Virginia region, "for every job requiring a bachelor's degree or advanced degree, twice as many require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree."

Community colleges have opened the door to millions who previously had little chance of furthering their education. It has also offered a range of professional options at minimal cost. The choice of a community college can be a cost-effective option that enables individuals to obtain two years of a college education while at the same time, staying debt-free, leaving assets for potential investment elsewhere. Students and parents

should ask themselves whether the cost associated with tuition at an expensive four-year institution is an effective long-term investment strategy. Attending a community college can be a first step toward answering that question.

McLean Highlights, McLean High School PTSA,  
Feb. 2007, Volume 34, Number 5.

Templin, Robert G. "New Reality, New Opportunity for Higher Ed." The Washington Post 23 Mar. 2008: B8.

---

Dr. Perrino is Owner and Director of Northern Virginia Tutoring Service, LLC and an Associate Professor of Sociology at Northern Virginia Community College. NVTS offers subject-specific tutoring and academic coaching/mentoring to students from elementary to adult levels. Dr. Perrino can be reached at 703-534-5779 or via email at DrPerrino@nvtutoring.com. The website for NVTS is [www.nvtutoring.com](http://www.nvtutoring.com).