

# Community College vs. Four Year Universities

**There are thousands of community colleges and universities throughout the United States. While universities have long attracted international as well as domestic students, community colleges have historically attracted a largely local cohort. Today, however, many do now welcome international students too.**

The choice of community college vs. university really depends on your overall plan for higher education, and for US students in particular, aspects which community colleges have in their favor such as lower overall fees, low admissions requirements and local access to the classes can be the deciding factors. It is also a great opportunity for students who are unsure of what they want to major in, and allows them the time and low cost opportunity to explore different courses before committing to a major.

Lots of students are still drawn to traditional 4-year universities, however, which offer many things a community college does not, including extensive campus facilities, sports and a more rounded student life.

Community colleges primarily offer 2-year programs that provide an **"associate's" degree**, which students can then use to transfer to a full college or university and complete their undergraduate degree in another two years.

During a college student's first two years, their schedule will mostly consist of General Education classes, or what they like to refer to as GE's. GE's are going to be your basic core classes that every student is required to take in order to graduate college. This may include classes such as: english, math, science, history, etc. These classes will take up the majority of your first two years of college, regardless of what your major is. If you choose to go to community college or university, you will be taking the same (or similar) courses those first two years. Once you reach your third and fourth year of college, you will then move into your major specific classes, or what they like to refer to as your "upper division" courses. This is important to keep in mind, because it reminds us that community college is a viable option that will provide you with the same education as a student who is doing their first two years at a four year university.

Many community college students in California choose to participate in the [Transfer Admission Guarantee Program \(TAG\)](#) or the [Associates Degree for Transfer Program \(ADT\)](#) before transferring to complete their degree at a four year university. These programs allow students to have guaranteed admission to select UC, CSU, and other California universities, as long as they follow the specific requirements they need, which often include taking certain courses and passing them. If a student has a specific school they are interested in going to, and they are unable to attend or do not get in when they apply straight after high school, following one of these paths is a way they could have guaranteed admission into the school of their dreams.

If you did not get excellent grades in high school, community college could be a chance for a fresh start, and give you the opportunity to transfer to a great college. On average, universities accept more transfer students than incoming freshmen. Please feel free to Google the specific acceptance rates for the schools that you are interested in.

### **What is Community College?**

In the US, a community college is a higher education institution that primarily serves its surrounding community.

Community colleges offer traditional academic classes like math and history that will transfer to a four-year college or university but also offer more community-focused or vocational programs like resume writing, or junior swim classes. Historically, community colleges were known as junior colleges.

Most offer a variety of degrees or certificates that prepare both domestic and international students either for their first entry-level job, or for entry into a traditional, and often large, university to gain a full bachelor's degree.

### **Difference #1: Class Size**

Class sizes in community colleges are generally quite small. You are unlikely to attend big, crowded lectures, and most classes will have around 20 students. This allows for much more interaction in classrooms. However, many of the faculty members are lecturers who are employed part-time and students may find it difficult to have access to their professors.

Big, public research universities on the other hand can have lectures which are attended by **over 100 students** at any one time. Of course, there are exceptions to this, but it is a definite trend in universities of this type.

### **Difference #2: Degree Programs**

As already referenced, the main difference between a community college and a university is that most degrees at a community college only take two years to complete, while degrees at a traditional, four-year institutions span four years.

At four-year universities students spend their first two years taking general education requirements, also known as “**GE’s**,” such as math or history, regardless of what their area of focus will be.

Instead of doing the first two years at a traditional university, some students will choose to do those two years of general education requirements at a community college first and then move to a traditional university as a transfer student to complete the last two years of their degree.

Even though both programs offer “GE” courses, it can be common for students attending community colleges to have difficulty registering for these courses due to community colleges enrolling more students than they can handle.

### **Difference #3: Transferring Credits**

Those people who attend a two-year community college to fulfill their general education requirements and earn an Associate's degree gain general credits which can then be transferred to a 4-year university to earn a Bachelor's degree.

Across the country, community colleges have worked to ensure that their Associate's degrees match the general education requirements of most universities, especially local ones, but not **all** credits are transferable to a four-year Bachelor’s degree institution.

### **Difference #4: Cost of Tuition**

In general, community college education is deemed to be more affordable. The average tuition is half that of a public university — partly because community colleges avoid

costs like big campus infrastructure and extracurricular programs. Books and food still cost the same, but many US community college students save money by living at home.

### **Difference #5: Learning Styles & Academic Quality**

In the past, community college classes have often been viewed as less academically serious and rigorous than those at traditional four-year schools. But a lot has changed and academic standards have risen, as have the qualifications of the professors. Many community colleges now require most professors to have a master's or doctoral degree in their discipline. Professors at community colleges are more likely to have a background in industry (as opposed to academia) than university professors. However, most of the professors working at community colleges are part-time lecturers, often with another vocation or working at several institutions.

As already highlighted, the smaller classes at community colleges mean that there is **much more one-to-one interaction with teaching staff**, which can be very beneficial to overall learning and progress. Teachers and professors here are likely to spend most of their time teaching and working with students, whereas at large universities, professors may spend a good amount of time conducting original research and therefore less time teaching.

### **Difference #6: Extracurricular Activities & Student Life**

This is one area where universities will generally always have an advantage over community colleges. Most community colleges don't invest as much in campus facilities, athletics programs, and student clubs/organizations, although they do often still exist. That makes it more affordable, but it means that many students miss out on "the college experience", which includes living in student dorms and participating in campus life.

Those community college students who transfer to a traditional university after two years can sometimes struggle to adapt to this new type of environment.

However, most community colleges have small, safe and inclusive campus environments, which are ideal for new students adapting to college student life. Many community colleges allow students to have opportunities to join activities and

organizations that they are passionate about, which in turn will help them build their profile as a strong student.

### **Difference #7: Flexibility**

Within community colleges, the student body can often be much more varied in terms of age and background than traditional universities. Students' ages can range from 17-60 and sometimes above, although the average tends to be around 30 (28, according to the American Association of Community Colleges). For this reason, the flexibility that local community colleges offer can be of huge benefit in particular to students who are studying alongside work, or who have a family to take care of and therefore need to study part time.

The flexibility of the schedule can rarely be found in traditional schools. Community colleges offer many more night classes.

Your level of participation and what you get out of it are up to you — this can be hugely helpful to those with other commitments, but for **those students whose primary focus is study**, the more stringent and intensive study schedule of many universities can sometimes be preferable.

### **Difference #8: Financial Aid**

Financial aid isn't only for four-year college students — community college students are eligible as well. About 60% of US community college students who apply for financial aid receive some, according to the American Association of Community Colleges.

There are also forms that students can fill out at most community colleges which will allow them to attend classes at discounted rates or for free.

### **Difference #9: Online Classes**

As is the case with traditional universities, certain community colleges have expanded their online offerings to attract a wider range of students.

Online course offerings and components at both types of institutions will have of course increased exponentially over the past few years, given the global Covid pandemic.

## **Difference #10: Career Prospects**

Career prospects for those who attend community college after high school are likely to vary according to whether they finish their education with a two-year degree (Associate's degree), or transfer to a university to complete a Bachelor's degree.

There are plenty of jobs which can be accessed with an Associate's degree rather than a Bachelor's degree, including radiation therapist, engineering technician and registered nurse. Some of the fastest-growing careers for people with Associate's degrees include dental assistants, paralegals and legal assistants, and web developers, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projections for 2018 to 2028. While these career fields offer strong job prospects one thing to note is that there is generally a cap on their maximum salary and they may be limited when it comes to progressing to a management position.