

## Choosing community college means some homework

By Kathy Kristof  
Tribune Media Services

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At a time when parental pocketbooks are strained, does it make sense to point high-schoolers toward community colleges instead of four-year schools?

President Barack Obama's plan to invigorate community colleges with a fresh dose of federal spending is winning accolades from pundits who have long maintained that the institutions are the unsung heroes of an affordable education.

Tuition at community colleges is about a tenth of the \$25,000 charged by the average private university, according to a survey by CollegeBoard.

And kids who do a so-called two-plus-two — two years at a community college and two years at a four-year university — can often transfer into prestigious institutions they might not have gotten into when they were high school seniors.

But there are downsides to community college education as well.

Community college students are less likely to complete their degrees than those who attend four-year institutions. And navigating the system of credits needed to transfer — and graduate — can be difficult.

Education Sector, a Washington, D.C., think tank, estimated that only about 14 percent of students

who start in Northern Virginia community colleges transfer to another university.

"You can go two years to a community college for the cost of one course at a four-year university," said Don Silver, author of the "Community College Transfer Guide." "What is overlooked is how complex it can be."

Too often, students who go to community college take the wrong courses and find out later that these class credits aren't transferable, he said. That can cause them to get discouraged and never graduate.

Those who do graduate often take a year or two more than those who went directly to a four-year university, Silver said.

If you figure that those extra two years in school cost the student two years of working, the touted savings of going the community college route can quickly evaporate.

That said, if you're organized, you can navigate the system to graduate on time and for a fraction of the cost of going to a four-year school directly, Silver said. Here's what you need to do.

First, consider your goal. There are two reasons you'd want to attend a community college, said Terry Hartle, senior vice president of the American Council on Education in Washington. One is because you aim to learn a trade. The other is to use the community college as a launching point for a four-year degree.

Pick your college based on what you most want to do.

Investigate by talking to your target. If you want to get a nursing degree, for example, and hope to work at a children's hospital someday, ask the hospital's

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human resources department whether it is more likely to hire from particular schools. If you aim to go to a four-year university — and know which one — talk to its admissions office staff members about which community colleges most impress them.

Many community colleges have formal written agreements that give their students admission preferences — sometimes even admission guarantees — at a set group of four-year universities. See whether the community college you're planning to attend has an agreement with your target school or with others that you like. (Community colleges typically post these agreements on their Web sites.)

Be sure to read the agreements. They'll say what sort of grade-point average is required and what classes can be transferred for four-year credit. Also realize that your academic major may affect what classes will fulfill graduation requirements, Silver said. If you know what you want to study, seek detailed information from your community college counselor and, ideally, from counselors at the college you hope to attend.

Contact Kathy M. Kristof at [kathykristof24@gmail.com](mailto:kathykristof24@gmail.com).

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