



A Guide to California's Community Colleges

Who attends community college?

Community college is designed for students who are seeking a technical/career certificate, a two-year associate's degree, or credits to transfer to a four-year university to obtain a bachelor's degree. Students may also take courses to enhance their job skills, improve their knowledge of basic English or math, and for personal enrichment or enjoyment.

Community colleges attract students with a broad range of backgrounds, abilities, and interests. Most community college students in California work as well as go to school. Many are the first in their family to attend college or are raising a family while attending school. Only about a quarter of all students attend college full time. Community college students reflect a wide range of ages, with about a quarter 19 years old or younger and close to a quarter 40 years or older.

Are all community colleges the same?

Each of the 110 community colleges in California is distinct and reflects the area where it is located. All try to meet the needs of all students. However, some colleges—particularly those in regions with multiple colleges—specialize in specific areas.

If there are two or more colleges near your home, learn how they differ in terms of the career programs they offer and their transfer agreements with California State University (CSU) or University of California (UC) campuses. Often the college's course catalog can be downloaded from the Internet. In addition, you should make an appointment with your high school and/or community college counselor to find out what your local colleges offer. It's also a good idea to visit the campuses.

Can high school students take community college classes?

High school students may be able to enroll in courses not provided by their high school. And some school districts offer programs—often referred to as “middle college” or “early college high school”—in which students take high school–level courses from high school teachers and community college–level courses from college instructors. These programs sometimes take place on the college campus. Talk to your high school counselor or administrator for more information.

What if I am uncertain about what I want to do as a career?

Community colleges offer many opportunities to explore careers. If you are unsure whether you want to go to a four-year university, for example, you can keep your options open by carefully planning your schedule. Many courses that fulfill requirements for an associate's degree also meet the prerequisites if you want to transfer to UC or CSU campuses. Typically there are fewer community college courses accepted by UC than CSU, and fewer accepted by CSU than for an associate's degree. For example, if you need to take a math course, choose one that meets the criteria for all three: UC, CSU, and an associate's degree.

All students entering community college should meet with one of the college's counselors to plan their schedules. It is even more important to do so if you are not sure which university you want to attend and/or what major you want to pursue. Well-meaning advice from friends, teachers, or others could cost you time and money.

What do community colleges have to offer?

Community colleges provide career programs in hundreds of areas, such as technical and industrial trades, health occupations, business and finance, electronics and computer sciences, agriculture, police and fire, food science, and building and landscaping. Depending on the occupation, training may take from six months to two years. Associate degrees and certificate programs are available for many fields.

Students who want to earn a four-year degree may choose to first go to a community college for a number of reasons, such as:

- Closeness to home;
- Lower cost;
- More time to explore their options and interests;
- Smaller classes and more direct contact with faculty;
- Inability to qualify for a university because they don't meet all the admissions requirements.

Does it matter how well I do in high school?

If you didn't do well in high school, you can still attend community college as long as you are 18 or older. If you are younger than 18, you can attend if you have a high school diploma or have passed the California High School Proficiency Exam (CHSPE). (See www.chspe.net.)

How hard is community college?

Not working hard in high school will make college more difficult. If you are a junior or senior, taking your schoolwork seriously those last years in high school can make a difference in how well prepared you are for college.

Completing the general education requirements that many high schools require may not be enough to prepare you for community college. To pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE), you must meet only 10th-grade standards in English and 8th-grade standards in math.

Whether or not you have a high school diploma, you will likely be assessed through placement tests and other measures, such as your high school grades, to determine what level of English and math classes you are ready for. Some students end up taking “basic skills” classes in English and math, which do not count toward a degree. These classes can lengthen students’ stay at community college and thereby increase the cost of their education.

Thus, it is important to take the most challenging courses your high school has to offer and to do well in all your classes. Try to take English and math classes all four years so it will be easier for you to do well on college placement tests.

How do I apply?

Contact the admissions office of the college you would like to attend to get a copy of the application or visit www.cccapply.org where you can apply to many colleges through a common online application and link directly to college websites for those colleges that require their own application. Also make an appointment with the college’s counseling office. Many courses, particularly entry-level required classes, fill up quickly. To make sure you get the courses you want, ask your high school counselor or administrator about the best time to apply—typically spring or early summer—to your local college.

Some students begin college in the summer to get a head start. Some colleges offer a short orientation class that includes help in signing up for classes. If students take that class in the summer, they have an advantage over the freshmen who will enter college in the fall.

Some high schools work with their area community colleges to offer college tours and help seniors fill out their applications, take their placement exams, and sign up for courses. Check with your high school counselor or administrator to see if your school has such a program.

What does it cost?

In 2008–09, the fee was \$20 per semester unit or \$600 a year if you take a full load of 15 units each semester. Books and supplies typically cost more than \$1,200 a year. These costs are significantly lower than for UC or CSU.

Most community colleges do not provide dormitories for students. However, some colleges in rural areas offer access to limited dormitory or apartment housing with varying prices. For example, in 2008–09, students attending Columbia College could rent a double-occupancy room in a student apartment for \$1,850 per person per semester. (These apartments are owned and managed by a private organization.)

Is financial help available?

Some students can receive fee waivers and assistance with books and living costs, such as housing. Visit the financial aid office at your community college to get help applying for grants, low-interest loans, work-study (on- or off-campus), and scholarships. Also go to www.icanaffordcollege.com to apply for financial help or find out more.

In addition, reduced rates for public transportation are often available, and most campuses provide low-cost childcare.

Where can I find out more?

Talk to your high school and community college counselors. Look for notices of open houses or information meetings sponsored by the colleges in your area. Look up your local colleges on the Internet. For further information, see the following websites:

- California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office:
www.cccco.edu
- University of California Office of the President: www.ucop.edu
- California State University system: www.calstate.edu
- Community college financial aid: www.icanaffordcollege.com
- EdSource: www.edsource.org for a free student/parent guide—
Community College: A First Step to a Bachelor’s Degree

How to navigate community college

New students are not always aware of how community colleges work. Here are a few tips:

- Take advantage of orientation provided for new students to find out how to make the most of the services available.
- Sign up for classes early to ensure you get the courses you need.
- If a class you need is full, you can often sit in anyway. Typically some students drop the course, allowing you to add it. Always talk to the instructor for guidance about adding the class.
- Be sure to pay all your fees, even parking tickets, on time. If you haven’t paid your fees, you can’t register for classes. Slowing up your registration by even one day to clear fees can cost you a space in the most sought-after courses. ■■



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