ACCESSIBILITY, OPPORTUNITY AND AFFORDABILITY

Arlene M. Spencer examines the Community College experience in The Empire State

Community Colleges are a uniquely American educational offering which started simply as a way for students in rural areas to gain access to a college education without moving to large university centers. Today community colleges are two-year state, or public colleges who are still serving their local community, usually a city or a county. Many of the students are commuters who live at home, or evening students who work during the day.

In New York State alone, there are 44 public community colleges. Thirty of them are spread throughout the State as part of the SUNY- State University of New York system. CUNY, or the City University of New York has 14 community colleges within the New York metropolitan area. New York leads the country and the world in their public education college offerings.

Colleges are found in small rural communities, medium-size cities and large metropolitan areas. New York State, for example, is a big state serving many types of communities. It is a five hour drive by car to travel from the capitol city of Albany, NY westward to Buffalo NY near Niagara Falls and it is also another five hour trip to travel from the northern part of the state which borders Canada down to the southern tip of the state near New York City. This large service area requires that New York offer community colleges throughout the state so that people can truly access a local college education.
Small class size, affordability and a variety of transfer and career educational paths are what make community colleges distinct. Excellent education on an affordable budget! Community Colleges, known as lower-division colleges, typically have tuition and educational expense costs that are significantly less expensive than the freshman and sophomore year at an upper-division college. The savings made from attending a community college often allows the student to continue further with his or her educational career.

Community Colleges in New York State lead the country in serving a large majority of its state population through this educational avenue. Despite the differences in size and location, all community colleges share common characteristics and purposes. Since the community college’s historical development emphasizes the need to provide access to all students seeking higher education, community colleges have become experts in a multitude of services to students in remedial, academic and vocational studies.

The scope of this expertise can be overwhelming to freshman students seeking to decide their college major. Luckily, community colleges also offer a strong array of liberal arts and science courses for the student needing a more “general study” path at the moment. But the vast technological and career specialty paths are certainly available as well to the student who knows exactly what he or she wants to study. Truly, the community college offers something for everyone.

At community colleges, the focus is on teaching. So unlike a research university where the professor may be busy conducting research and writing textbooks while the graduate teaching assistant took over the course instruction, the community college professor has teaching students as the number one priority. This gives the freshman and sophomore student much more direct contact with his or her college professor—resulting in a much more personalized approach to learning.

Students at community colleges can specialize in specific career or technical areas for employment after graduation, or they can enroll in programs that are designed for the transfer student. These allow transfer students the first two years of the associate degree at a reasonable cost before they transfer on to complete another two years at the college or university that will eventually grant the student the bachelor degree. In New York State, all SUNY and CUNY community colleges follow similar articulation agreements with each other, so that transfer students who graduate with the two-year Associate degree from a community college can easily transfer their work to a four year college or university center.

Of course, strict academic standards for admission still apply for each SUNY or CUNY upper-division campus, but the opportunities for students who are successful at the community college can open doors for students at institutions that they may not have been able to achieve directly out of high school.
Community College graduates are successful in all walks of life. Notable alumni of two-year colleges are in every career track including countless business men and women who have been presidents, CEOs and owners of prestigious corporations, law firms and technological companies. Prominent alumni from New York’s SUNY community colleges include Eileen Collins, the first woman to command a space shuttle as well as designer Calvin Klein.

Finally, community colleges are friendly places for students! Often, community colleges welcome international students. Many of these schools offer special services to international students such as free tutoring. Many community colleges also offer ESL or intensive English programs. Some community colleges have dormitories or other housing services available and extra-curricular activities and collegiate athletic programs are often available at most community colleges, allowing the student to get a maximum “college experience”.

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A note from the author
I, myself, am an alumna of my community college; ironically the very same college that I eventually became employed with. In fact, our college president is also alum of this same institution too. Certainly we know that we received the best education possible and we are proud to encourage other students to explore the wonderful advantages of the community college.

I hope you consider a community college as part of your educational journey!

READ MY PROFILE
Philip Neblett, Barbados, Studying at FMCC