

College: What is it, actually?

Lewis Pulsipher

I have found that some things I take for granted about community colleges, universities, and their relationships are completely beyond the knowledge of many high school students. So here's the scoop, Lew's version.

I graduated from high school in 1969. At that antediluvian date (that means, "before the flood"!) conditions were somewhat different than now. Fewer people attended college, a high school diploma was **much** better education than it is now, and there were many more jobs suitable for someone with "just" a high school education.

I'm sure you've heard often that there are fewer and fewer jobs that do not require college education. While this is not necessarily sensible--one of the best computer experts I know has no degree beyond high school, though he's taken many college classes--the state of the legal system in this country is making a piece of paper (a degree) necessary in many, many instances. So you're stuck. I've had students who were already experts, but who needed a degree to "prove" that they are.

Moreover, many jobs that don't require a lot of thinking, such as factory jobs, have gone overseas or south of the border, where people are willing to accept much, much lower wages than here (and where the cost of living is much lower).

Some people join the military right out of high school. That is praiseworthy, though I have to say that a 27-year-old of my acquaintance who joined the Army and saw the world (Iraq) recommends you join the Air Force or Navy, not the Army. He joined partly for the educational benefits, but because he was in combat arms, he was able to take only two classes while in the Army. The military **does** have entrance requirements, mostly based on testing, I believe. Unfortunately, unless you get a degree while in the service, your military service won't help you get jobs that require a degree. So many veterans end up in college, as with our 27-year-old.

A community college degree is an "associates degree", otherwise known as a two-year college degree. A full college or university offers a "bachelors degree", a.k.a. four-year degree. In general, two-year colleges deal more with the concrete and the real world, while four-year schools tend to be more theoretical. It's been said, in some esaggeration, that community college students "do" and university students "ponder". Some jobs require as a condition of hiring more than a high school diploma but less than a bachelors degree, that is, an associates. Some jobs require a bachelors degree. And some require even

more, a "graduate degree", that is, a masters or doctorate.

Many people take five or six years to get a four-year degree; many take three years to get a two-year degree. This is a result of having to work a paying job, having a family, lack of focus, lack of funds, too much partying, or other reasons.

Community colleges, formerly known as technical schools (some still have "technical" in their name, most have abandoned it), have three separate purposes:

- adult basic education (GED high school diploma equivalent)
- technical training for jobs such as computer technician, Webmaster, game creator, laser technician, dental hygienist, nurse, cosmetologist, and so on.
- college transfer (take your first two years of college, then transfer to four year school)

Virtually all of the 58 community colleges (CC) in this state do all three of these. Some of these CC are in just one county, some in several (there are 100 counties in the state). E.g. Central Carolina CC is in Lee, Harnett, and Chatham counties.

When choosing where to attend college, there are several points to consider

- What is required to attend
- How much will it cost?
- Is it accredited?
- How will I be treated?
- What will my options be when I graduate?

(Before we go through this, what's the difference between a college and a university? Universities run many graduate programs offering masters degrees and (sometimes) doctorates (Ph.D.s). Colleges do not.)

Requirements

CC:

- High school diploma or equivalent
- Test to determine English and math competency
- An application

Four year school:

- High school diploma or equivalent
- Good grades in high school
- SAT or other standardized test (ACT)
- An application

- You may not be "accepted"

CC generally require a high school diploma or equivalent of beginning students. Your grades in high school are not relevant. Four year schools normally have waiting lists and take some rather than all applicants. Hence they have more stringent requirements, such as a particular grade point or a particular score on a standardized test such as the SAT. Some schools, such as Duke or UNC Chapel Hill, are much harder to be accepted to than other schools, a matter of supply (openings for students) and demand (students who want to go there).

Any school will test you in some way to be sure your reading and math skills are sufficient to cope with required English and math classes—yes, even CC require at least two English and one math class, whether you're in a technical field or college/university transfer. The English classes in CC are geared toward reading and writing and research, not toward literature.

CC often have their own test for these; four year schools often depend on the SAT test. If you don't meet the math or English requirements you'll have to take "developmental" or "remedial" or "pre-curriculum" classes (with course numbers less than 100) that will not, usually, count towards your graduation or your grade point.

You may not know it, but you have already applied to and been accepted to FTCC, otherwise you couldn't be taking a college course. You are taking a college class, and if you choose to attend FTCC after you graduate from high school, your Huskins/College Connections classes and grades will count toward graduation (and toward academic probation, if you do poorly in these classes).

High school dropouts have earned associates degrees at CC (I've had several such students): they were not stupid, they were just unwise when they were young.

Cost

CC are relatively inexpensive (say \$600 per semester tuition, then a couple hundred more for books each term). Four-year state supported schools are much more expensive (several thousand per semester tuition), and private schools can be astronomically expensive (five figures tuition). CC are rarely residential, that is, you don't live at the school. Four-year schools are usually residential, though if you happen to live near enough to one you would likely live at home. The "residential" part is an additional expense, of course.

Financial aid of various sorts is available at all schools. Someone with really good grades and SAT scores may have most or all of his tuition paid by scholarships. Someone from a

financially poor background may also have most or all of his tuition and books paid by grants such as the "Pell Grant" at FTCC.

In any case, the tuition is not sufficient to pay for the expenses of the school. CC are supported by both the local countie(s) and by the state. Even private four-year schools get some state and federal assistance, but most state college money goes to the state system of 16 universities (UNC system-UNC Chapel Hill, UNC Pembroke, UNC Wilmington, etc.).

There are some private schools that are for-profit operations, such as DeVry University, Strayer University, and Phillips Junior College (now defunct, I believe). While these are usually accredited, they are **very** expensive and sometimes have poor reputations as "degree mills" (DeVry, Phoenix).

Accreditation

There are several independent college and high school accreditation groups in the US that are regarded as "the standard" for accreditation. In our area it's SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools). There are other "accreditation" agencies, but they have little or no credibility.

If you attend an unaccredited school, some employers will regard your degree as worthless. Your education might be just as good as someone else's, but the employers rely on the accreditation rather than try to evaluate each school individually themselves.

Many "game schools", e.g. DigiPen and Full Sail, are accredited as trade schools, not as colleges. If you want to get an accredited masters degree, that trade school bachelors will not count, you'll have to get a "real" bachelor's degree.

How will I be treated?

- Large schools tend to treat students as numbers--they can always get more
- University professors are often hired to do research; teaching is secondary
- Smaller schools are more "personal"; research is not important for teachers
- Classes are much smaller at small schools
- Community College instructors tend to be people with industry experience

Large colleges and universities tend to treat students as numbers rather than people, because there are always more wanting to get in. CC, on the other hand, are required to accept all applicants in most cases (there are exceptions such as nursing programs, for lack of places). Every college works to recruit, because they want to attract the best students available.

I attended a small college, and then Duke (which is smallish but has a big reputation) for my doctorate, in part to avoid being treated as a number, and it generally worked. Classes in large colleges, primarily in the first two years, tend to be very large, even in the hundreds of students. The professor may never learn your name, let alone know you. Much of the time you will be taught by assistants, usually "graduate assistants", that is, graduate students who are earning money by working as assistants while studying for a masters or doctoral degree. This means some of them will be interested in teaching and some will not.

Of course, the same can be said for the professors. Teaching is a secondary job for the professors in many cases. Well-known universities often hire professors to do research first, to teach second. I know one person who teaches just one class a term because he's so well-known as a researcher. When you see articles rating colleges and universities, the rating is usually based on research (publications and reputation), not on teaching. After all, how can a magazine or book author rate teaching for the entire country? The ideal rating would be, how well do students do (in jobs, in further schooling) after graduating, but that data is too hard to obtain.

Smaller schools (two or four year) tend to treat students more as persons. Classes tend to be much smaller. I was in just one class at my small college that was larger than 25 or 30 people; as we were not a university, we had no graduate students, so there were few if any assistants.

This varies with the intent of the teacher, of course. Some teachers don't want to know the students. Some don't think they should know the students (this is an old-fashioned idea, definitely not recommended for the current generation of "millennials"). Some want to get to know the students the way a coach on a team gets to know his players. And so on.

Instructors at CC often have experience working in industry; professors at four-year schools often have no experience. The chances that you'll be taught something that has nothing to do with reality are, I think, much less at a CC than at a four-year school.

Options

Where I grew up (Michigan), it was common to go to junior college (which is what we call community colleges) for two years, then transfer to a four year school. Until about 15 years ago that was impossible in North Carolina. The community colleges used a trimester system, not semesters, so it was easy for the University of North Carolina system to refuse transfer credit for these shorter courses. In any case, UNC system did not want competition. They were finally forced to agree to take transfers provided the CC changed to a semester system.

It is still the case that the UNC system will use every trick in the book to avoid giving meaningful credit for CC classes. Consequently, when you pursue a technical degree at a CC, many of your class credits might not transfer. So you may need three years at the four year school to complete your four year degree. This varies, with East Carolina being one of the most accommodating. ECU also runs "distance ed" classes; we had a Web student at CCCC who finished her two year degree with us, took classes via distance ed with ECU and now has a master's degree without ever attending classes in Greenville. Frankly, I have little use for distance ed as Education, but if your objective is to get a degree while working, this is the way to go.

However, when you take the university transfer classes in CC, the state system **MUST** take those classes because of that 10-year-old agreement, so you transfer as a junior. **CC students as a group do better in four year schools after transfer than the students who started at those four-year schools as freshmen!** This may be because they're in smaller classes and are treated better at CC and get a better foundation, or because they aren't distracted by the partying, fraternities and sororities, and sports at the four-year school for their first two years, or it may be other reasons, but that's the way it is.

This is not to say that CC are dull. There may be parties, but not on campus (because the school isn't residential). There ARE extracurricular activities, but not many compared to most four-year schools.

So you have several choices from a CC:

- take the university transfer classes and after two years transfer to a four-year college;
- take technical classes to learn computing (or whatever), then get a job in the field, and be able to get a four-year degree later
- take both university transfer and technical classes (this will take at least three years, not two), then have all options open

In the fields I was interested in when I went to college (physics and history), a graduate degree is required to find jobs. I wanted to play basketball, and I didn't want to be at a big college; fortunately for me, I got a scholarship to a well-known small college (Albion) not too far from home. (And in the end I didn't play basketball, as it became "too much like work", though I was good enough to play.) So I didn't consider junior colleges.

If you're interested in schools for game education I strongly suggest you read "Identifying a good game school" by myself and Ian Schreiber, http://www.gamecareerguide.com/features/838/identifying_a_good_game_.php