

Crucial Questions About Community Colleges

By Elena Garate

Advising Resource



Representative from UCLA recruits students at Santa Monica Community College.

International students are some of the most sophisticated consumers today. They and their parents are part of a vast network of friends and acquaintances seeking higher education at the most prestigious colleges and universities in the world. However, to many of them, the American community college remains an unknown and misunderstood option.

Here are some basic questions, in the order most often heard, that prospective international students should ask about community colleges.

1. Is the community college accredited?

A recognized accrediting body should accredit community colleges in order to meet academic standards set by the state and the Federal Government. The accreditation process for community colleges follows the same standards as a four-year institution, as set by the U.S. Department of Education and the state. For more information, visit: <http://www.ope.ed.gov/accreditation/>.

2. What is the transfer rate to selective four-year universities?

Many community colleges are a part of a statewide system that allows transfer to junior standing to four-year colleges and universities. Some community colleges focus on delivering high academic programs for this purpose, while others focus on short-term certificate and vocational programs.

3. How successful are the graduates from the community college?

Transfer and employment data about alumni are available from community college counseling and international centers as well as alumni offices.

4. What is the average class size?

What is the teacher/student ratio?

Community colleges, which focus on teaching rather than research, often have smaller classes, especially in the introductory courses in the sciences and math, taught by faculty rather than by graduate teaching assistants.

5. What is the course selection?

Can I study my major at your school?

Community colleges provide a comprehensive curriculum that covers the first two years of university study: General Studies or General Education. The concept of studying these foundation courses the first two years is new to many prospects who are more familiar with other educational systems.

6. What will be the cost of my education?

Community colleges charge additional tuition and fees for international students. A bank statement to guarantee the first year's total costs is usually required for admission. Some schools require a cash deposit for the first semester or year of study.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 11

7. Do I have to take English? Do you require a TOEFL score?

Most community colleges require a TOEFL score primarily for admission purposes. Not all community colleges offer ESL courses. Those that do have ESL programs may offer ESL classes for credit.

8. Where will I live? Do you have housing on campus?

Few community colleges have dormitories. Most have housing referrals for home stays, off campus apartments, and sharing with current students. Some have lists of temporary housing options on their website.

9. Do you have scholarships?

Some community colleges offer incentives such as a reduction in in-state tuition or may be willing to waive an application fee. Others offer scholarship cash awards based on academic achievement to prospects or only after the first year of study.

10. Can I work on campus? Can I get a social security card?

Depending upon the institution, international students can work on campus for limited hours. They are required to obtain a social security card in order to be employed on campus. Each school has its own way to assist in this process.

11. Can I get a job off campus?

International students on F-1 visas can work off campus in special circumstances only with the permission of the U.S. Government. During their course of studies they may file for economic hardship. After completing a full course of study, they may file for Practical Training and work full time in a field related to their major.

12. Can I attend before I turn 18? Can I attend without finishing high school?

Community colleges vary in their requirements for admission. Many, however, require the students to be high school (or equivalent) graduates and be 18 years of age. There are some programs that work with local high schools to assist the student in completing the high school graduation requirements.

13. Is there an International Students Office on campus?

Most community colleges provide support services for international students. These may include orientation sessions and courses, immigration status support, academic counseling, and student clubs. The staffing and hours of operation vary by school.

14. Can I apply online?

Many community colleges offer online applications for domestic students, yet not for international students due to the number of original documents required for admission. Students should refer to the prospective school's website for specific information about applying and meeting the deadlines for application and admission.

15. Can I transfer my credits from my current school?

Community colleges have academic relationships with other accredited colleges and universities. Many community colleges will accept some credits from other U.S. schools. Few community colleges accept course work from foreign schools unless there is a formal agreement between these two institutions. Prospective students should explore these possibilities with the community college academic counselor prior to applying.

16. Do I need an SAT?

Community colleges admit students in an Open Enrollment System, based on high school graduation and age. This open system allows prospects to forego taking placement exams such as the SAT and Advanced Placement tests. However, the community college or the four-year school where the student will transfer may accept some AP courses. Again, prospects should contact the community college academic advisor prior to applying.

Elena Garate, Ph.D., is Dean of International Education at Santa Monica College in California.