

The Two-Year Story: Best-Kept Secrets

Want to know a secret? Forty-five percent of the college students in the United States now attend two-year colleges. These schools are becoming increasingly popular for students with all kinds of goals.

Okay, so that's not really such a big secret. But you might be surprised to learn just how much two-year colleges have to offer prospective students. Everybody knows that community colleges are less expensive than four-year schools. But there is much more to the two-year college story. Here's a look at some of the "best-kept secrets" of America's dynamic two-year schools.

Top-Notch Instructors

Some people assume that because it costs less to attend a community college, students must settle for a second-rate educational experience. But it is a mistake to equate low cost with inferior teaching.

People who are concerned about the skyrocketing costs at four-year institutions may view the lower cost of going to their local community college as the main benefit. What they quickly discover when they enroll, is a consistent level of high-quality instruction.

"Community is the heart of community college," says Dr. Shaun L. McKay, President of Suffolk County Community College. "Community colleges have top-notch instructors who devote their time to teaching and to helping students achieve their goals. They thrive on direct contact with students and focus their energies on the classroom experience."

In fact, most community college faculty members have excellent credentials. Those who teach in transfer programs have at least a master's degree, and many hold doctorates. Many also have real-life experiences in the fields in which they teach, special certifications, or both. An important factor is that those who teach in two-year colleges tend to regard themselves as professional teachers rather than researchers.

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Small Classes

Two-year colleges come in all sizes, from small rural schools to large urban colleges that dwarf some universities. But a common denominator in virtually all of them is a commitment to limiting class size.

Indre Caikauskaite, who started at Suffolk before continuing on to Stony Brook University where she earned a bachelor's degree and is finishing her master's degree this spring, says that small class size is one of the biggest advantages of two-year schools. "The small class sizes and direct contact with the professors at Suffolk gave me a strong foundation, encouraged me to continue my studies and prepared me for a larger university," Ms. Caikauskaite notes.

Small classes in community colleges mean a lower instructor-to-student ratio. At Suffolk, average class size is about 23 students. Instructors know everyone's names and they keep up with students personally. The smaller classes help students get more involved, and student involvement is shown to be an important factor in retention and degree completion.

Special Programs

Community colleges are an excellent place to start if earning a four-year or graduate degree is the goal.

For instance, Suffolk currently has articulation, joint admission and "two-plus-two" agreements with more than 34 institutions, including SUNY colleges, and private and out-of-state colleges and universities. The College also offers certificate programs