

Transferring Success – Save Thousands by Starting your Degree at Community College

Originally published in CareerFocus, Summer 2008

Ariele Sieling excelled in high school, earning an A average and dozens of hours in college credit through Advanced Placement courses. She seemed destined for a major scholarship and a successful college career. Then she took her SAT's.

“I just hate those kinds of exams, and I didn't do well,” she says. With university tuition skyrocketing and her test scores putting most scholarships out of reach, she did something she never expected to do: she enrolled in nearby Monroe Community College.

The decision wasn't easy. Sieling had always seen community college as a second-rate option for students who couldn't get into a university. “I was actually kind of embarrassed to tell my friends I was going there,” she says. “But I didn't know what I wanted to study, and I didn't want to spend a lot of money just trying to figure out what I wanted to do.”

She soon got a pleasant surprise: community college was nothing like the stereotype. “My professors were really awesome, and interesting,” she says. “They let you experiment with your ideas and not just give them rote answers. I was going to just get a job after graduating, but I liked school a lot more than I thought I would, and I wanted to keep studying.”

That's when Sieling got a second surprise. “I went to the career center, and they were almost entirely geared toward helping people get into four-year schools,” she says. “They gave me advice on where to look for universities, helped me fill out applications, and helped with some of the financial stuff.” With their support, she got a scholarship to the University of North Carolina. She transferred about 60 credits there last fall, saving herself roughly \$50,000 in tuition.

Sieling's experience isn't unique. Although students have traditionally used community college for job training, rising university tuition is leading many to view it as a bridge to higher education. But though transferring can cut tens of thousands off the cost of their degrees, money isn't the only reason students do it.

For Emily Miller, starting at community college helped ease her transition into university life. “The class sizes are smaller, so there's more one-on-one time with the teachers,” she says. “And there's lots of other help available. Like my school had a fully staffed homework helping room - and it was free.”

Miller made strategic use of that personalized attention. “People said that hard classes like organic chemistry would be very difficult at a university, because you’re in a big lecture hall,” she says. “So I got most of those classes out of the way before I transferred. If I had gone from high school straight to university, I probably would’ve flunked out!” Instead, she jumped from a C average in high school to a 3.97 GPA at Northeast Iowa Community College, before earning a 3.76 at Iowa State.

Transferring has become so common that most community colleges now partner with state universities to facilitate the process. For students like Francisco Torres, a Mexican who moved to California with dreams of becoming a doctor, those services make a big difference.

“When I came here I had no money, and my English was bad,” he recalls. “I wanted to get an education, but I was totally blind about community college. So I got a job picking vegetables to save money. It was the only job that didn’t require English.”

Fortunately, he soon crossed paths with a migrant program director, who encouraged him to apply to West Hills Community College. “When I started going to West Hills, I was just thinking of getting an Associate’s degree, learning some English and going to work,” he says. “I thought there was no way I could afford a university.”

But since West Hills offers transfer assistance to several universities offering medical degrees, his advisors convinced him to reconsider. “The financial aid office helped me apply for grants and scholarships, and for admission to different schools,” he says. “And the people there helped me get a job in the cafeteria, which gave me money to pay for my books and classes.”

Thanks to that support, Torres earned a Bachelor’s from the University of California Davis this spring. “I’m starting a Masters program there in the fall, then I’m going to apply to the UC School of Medicine,” he says. “It was hard at the beginning, and a lot of things were blocking my way. But now I’m here, and this is where I always wanted to be.”