

28 Now More Than Ever: Community Colleges

Daniel Wister

Preview

When Miranda left for school at a faraway university, she thought that all her dreams were on their way to coming true. Then, once disappointment set in, friends began suggesting she check out her local community college. Soon, Miranda's life had completely turned around.

Words to Watch

culinary (3): cooking

gourmet (3): fine food

diversity (10): variety

ecstatic (11): thrilled, overjoyed

1 A few years ago, Miranda left home for college at a big four-year university nearly 1500 miles away from the city where she grew up. She had big dreams of being the first person to graduate from college in her family and even bigger dreams of becoming a successful professional some day. At first, Miranda was certain that nothing could get in the way of her dreams coming true. However, Miranda had barely been on campus for more than a few months before she started seeing her high hopes, and her dreams, fade.

2 To begin with, Miranda wasn't particularly comfortable with being so far away from home right after high school. She felt awkward living with a roommate she had never met, and she became increasingly homesick. Making matters

worse, Miranda's family didn't have enough money to fly her home more than once during the school year. And that was just the beginning of Miranda's problems. During her second semester, she realized that she really didn't know why she had picked the major she'd picked. She had chosen history because she'd always been kind of interested in the past, but now she wasn't so sure about her decision. However, at a tuition rate of nearly \$12,000 a year, Miranda felt pressured to stick with her choice. After all, she had taken out some serious student loans, and she didn't want to waste money by enrolling in a variety of classes in order to make up her mind. Miranda couldn't afford the luxury of taking the time to find out what she really wanted to do with her life.

3 Then Miranda realized that she would need a job in order to help pay for all the added expenses of attending college that her loans didn't cover. Her parents sent some extra money now and then, but it was never nearly enough. Miranda hoped she could work three days a week and take a few of her classes at night or on Saturday. However, Miranda found out that very few night or weekend classes were offered. Compounding her problems, Miranda was beginning to realize that she was not particularly interested in her chosen major, after all. What she had discovered was that she really wanted to major in culinary^o arts and become a chef. Gourmet^o cooking and creating new recipes had always been a passion of Miranda's. But a culinary arts degree wasn't even offered at her university. Miranda's grades began to drop, and soon she lost interest in college altogether. Finally, at the end of her freshman year, Miranda dropped out. She returned home without a degree but with thousands of dollars to repay for her confusing and upsetting experience at the university. And all her dreams had disappeared.

4 So what's the moral of this story? That it's a bad idea to go to college? Hardly. The moral is more along the lines of "Consider your options before committing to a four-year school." More and more high-school graduates are now turning to community colleges for either their associate degrees or their first two years of college education. Although community college education used to have a reputation for being



second best, that is definitely no longer the case. Today, in fact, four out of ten college students who go on to graduate from four-year institutions begin their education in community colleges. With more than 1600 community colleges nationwide and 11 million people enrolled in them, these schools are the fastest growing institutions in higher education. Why are they so popular? Well, consider the rest of Miranda's story.

5 After working full-time at an unfulfilling job for over a year to help pay off her student loans, Miranda was ready to make a change and move on with her life. She was still interested in a culinary arts degree, but this time she didn't want to leave home or spend so much money. She definitely didn't want to take out another loan. Friends had told her about the culinary arts program at the local community college. When Miranda looked into it, she was amazed to see that tuition was only a

little over \$1200 a semester! That was about *five times* less expensive than the tuition at the university had been. In fact, community colleges nationwide average only \$3000 a year, less than a quarter of what it costs to attend many universities. In addition, now Miranda could live at home, avoiding the huge added expense of living on campus.

6 However, Miranda still wanted to continue working part time in order to pay for school on her own and to eventually save for a car. After her experience at the university, Miranda was afraid that she'd have no choice but to put school off until she had saved all the money she needed. But when she looked at a class schedule, she was relieved to see that nearly all the classes she needed to take were also offered in the evenings. Some were even available on weekends. Because nearly *80 percent* of students who attend community college work either full or part time, most schools arrange classes to fit busy schedules. Miranda realized she could easily fit a part-time working schedule around all her classes.

7 Now, looking at the community college catalog, Miranda wished she had started college there in the first place. She noticed that there were nearly twice as many degrees offered. There was everything from architectural engineering to sign language to web technology. And because classes were so inexpensive, she could have sampled a number of classes before deciding on what exact career she wanted to pursue. The fact is, nearly 70 percent of all college students end up changing

majors. Now, if Miranda decided to change her focus from culinary arts, it wouldn't be a big deal—or a big waste of money. And speaking of money, Miranda's college, like most community colleges, was located near the center of the city where she lived. It would be easy and inexpensive to reach by public transportation (unlike a 1500-mile flight!) until she had saved enough for a car. Miranda began to understand why these schools were called "community" colleges.

8 When Miranda began her classes at the college, she worried that her teachers might not be as good as those at a four-year university. What Miranda discovered was a pleasant surprise. These professors weren't better or worse, but they were definitely different. Some of her culinary arts teachers actually worked as chefs in addition to teaching one or two classes a semester. And one of her teachers owned the most popular restaurant in the city! It was a great experience to learn from master chefs who knew exactly what a student needed to know in order to be successful. The years, even decades, of hands-on experience that many of her teachers had was something that Miranda felt was invaluable—and yet the classes were so inexpensive. Also, Miranda found that some of her full-time teachers seemed to have more time for her and her fellow students. In general, this is true at community colleges, because teachers are not required to do research or write papers and books the way they are at four-year universities. All of their time at the community college is devoted solely to teaching.

9 Miranda had also been concerned that she would be older than most of the students in her classes since she had spent several years working and was now in her 20s. At the university, nearly all the students were the same age. Not so at the community college. In many of her classes, students ranged in age from 18 to 65! Miranda became good friends with a 64-year-old woman who said she wanted to open a cupcake bakery when she retired. Miranda also met plenty of people her own age who had not been certain what they wanted to do when they graduated from high school. Some had taken a few years between high school and college to explore and consider their options. Others, like Miranda, had tried four-year schools and realized that direction was not for them.

10 In addition to the broad age range at her college, Miranda was also impressed by the diversity^o of the students. Because most community colleges offer courses for developing English-language skills in reading and writing, they attract students for whom English is a second language. These students often need basic courses before progressing on to their career classes. Also, because all community colleges have an open-door policy (meaning no one with a high-school diploma can be turned away, regardless of GPA), Miranda met a number of students who had not done very well in high school, but still wanted a college degree. These students were determined to “re-do” themselves and prove that they could be successful and well educated in spite of their pasts.

11 When Miranda graduated, less than two years after beginning the culinary arts program, the job placement office at the college helped her set up some interviews. Because many of the teachers in the program actually worked at or owned restaurants, they knew where and when jobs were opening. Two of Miranda’s chef/teachers let her use them as references. Miranda was ecstatic^o when she was offered a job at an upscale French restaurant within three weeks of graduating. Community colleges are often more successful than four-year schools when it comes to placing their graduates in jobs shortly after graduation. This is because many of the degrees offered at two-year schools are in big demand. Popular community college programs such as nursing and computer science have a nearly 100 percent job placement rate.

12 Today, Miranda has worked her way up to sous-chef (one step away from head chef) at the French restaurant. And on weekends she helps out her now-retired classmate in the cupcake bakery. She’s not entirely certain that she has any natural talent for decorating cupcakes, but it’s a lot of fun and pretty tasty, too. And because Miranda has now finished two years of college, she can transfer to a four-year university as a junior if she decides one day that she’d like to continue her education. Already, Miranda has begun thinking about getting her bachelor’s degree in business administration so that she can be better prepared to open her own restaurant some day. So much for faded dreams!

First Impressions

Freewrite for ten minutes on one of the following.

1. Did you enjoy reading this selection? Why or why not?
2. Do you know of anyone who decided that a two-year college would be more financially realistic than a four-year school? Did the decision turn out to be a good one? Why or why not?
3. Miranda got a job shortly after graduating because her culinary arts degree was a marketable one. Think about your major. What are the chances that it will help you get a job in today's world?

Vocabulary Check

- _____ 1. In the sentence below, the word *compounding* means
- A. creating.
 - B. increasing.
 - C. solving.
 - D. without.

"Compounding her problems, Miranda was beginning to realize that she was not particularly interested in her chosen major, after all." (Paragraph 3)

- _____ 2. In the excerpt below, the word *moral* means
- A. clearly.
 - B. beginning.
 - C. funny idea.
 - D. lesson.

"So what's the moral of this story? That it's a bad idea to go to college? Hardly. The moral is more along the lines of 'Consider your options before committing to a four-year school.'" (Paragraph 4)

- _____ 3. In the excerpt below, the words *devoted . . . to* mean
- A. given to.
 - B. needed to.
 - C. saved by.
 - D. taken from.

"Also, Miranda found that some of her full-time teachers seemed to have more time for her and her fellow students. . . . All of their time at the community college is devoted solely to teaching." (Paragraph 8)

Reading Check

Central Point and Main Ideas

- _____ 1. Which sentence best expresses the central point of the entire selection?
- A. Many students are surprised by how difficult it is to adjust to college.
 - B. For a number of reasons, a community college is a better choice for some students than a four-year college.
 - C. Community colleges offer more opportunities than four-year colleges, and the teachers have more time to teach.
 - D. Four-year schools are often far more expensive and demanding than community colleges.
- _____ 2. The main idea of paragraph 5 is that
- A. Miranda had to work at an unfulfilling job to save money.
 - B. friends helped Miranda see the advantages of attending community college.
 - C. Miranda found out how affordable attending community college could be.
 - D. it is not necessary to take out student loans when attending community college.

Supporting Details

- _____ 3. What percentage of community college students work either full- or part-time jobs?
- A. 30 percent
 - B. 50 percent
 - C. 80 percent
 - D. 100 percent
- _____ 4. According to the author, the reason many professors at community colleges have more time for their students than professors at four-year schools do is that
- A. they teach only part-time.
 - B. classes at community colleges tend to be smaller than classes at four-year schools.
 - C. they usually live in the community, so they don't have to commute far to work.
 - D. they don't have to write papers and books to keep their teaching positions.

- _____ 5. According to the selection, which community college programs have the highest job placement rate?
- A. Culinary arts and law enforcement
 - B. Computer science and nursing
 - C. Drafting and interior design
 - D. Early childhood education and dental assisting

Inferences

- _____ 6. On the basis of the selection, we can reasonably infer that students at community colleges
- A. are usually taught by professors who hold other jobs besides teaching.
 - B. often major in practical subjects for which there is a strong demand.
 - C. don't have to do as much school work as students at four-year schools.
 - D. all of the above.
- _____ 7. The selection suggests that
- A. many students automatically enroll in four-year schools without seriously considering community colleges.
 - B. in the future, most students will attend community college before going on to a four-year school.
 - C. for most careers, a degree from a four-year college or university is no longer necessary.
 - D. it is a bad idea to work and attend college at the same time.

The Writer's Craft

- _____ 8. Wister's main purpose in this selection is to
- A. inform readers of the benefits of attending community college.
 - B. persuade readers to attend community college instead of a four-year college.
 - C. entertain readers with a true story about how a young woman overcame obstacles to achieve her dreams.
 - D. persuade readers to take time between high school and college so that they can avoid the mistakes Miranda made.
- _____ 9. Who is Wister's intended audience?
- A. General audience of all ages
 - B. Teachers in higher education
 - C. Anyone, young or old, who is considering college
 - D. High-school seniors

- _____ 10. In paragraphs 5–9, the author mainly
- lists the many kinds of programs available at community colleges.
 - describes, in time order, the steps in the process of applying to community college.
 - compares the advantages of community colleges and four-year schools.
 - contrasts Miranda’s concerns about enrolling in community college with the advantages she discovered there.

Discussion Questions

- Has reading this selection changed your opinion of community colleges? Explain.
- As the author points out, community college education has grown rapidly in popularity recently. Why do you think a two-year degree has become more popular?
- The essay mentions that 70 percent of college students end up changing their majors. What might account for this high percentage? Have you decided what you want to study in college? If so, how did you arrive at this decision?
- Sometimes people judge community colleges unfairly because of their policy of allowing anyone with a high-school diploma to attend. Do you think that the open-door policy of community colleges makes these colleges better—or worse? Why?

Paragraph Assignments

- Like Miranda, many of us have big dreams that don’t work out exactly as we’d planned. Write a paragraph about a dream you’ve had that either didn’t come true or, as in Miranda’s situation, came true in a way different from what you had imagined. In your paragraph, describe your dream, and then describe what actually happened. Conclude your paragraph by pointing out what you learned from the experience.
- The author points out that the “moral of the story” is definitely *not* that it’s a bad idea to go to college. Nonetheless, there are some people who believe that college is a waste of time and money. Have you ever known someone who disapproved of college or thought that it was unnecessary? What was that person like? What was his or her life like? Why, in particular, was this person opposed to college? Write a paragraph that describes this person and his or her point of view.

Essay Assignments

1. Have you ever failed at something, only to discover that the failure actually led to another door opening for you? Think about Miranda's story. She thought she had failed when she had to drop out of college and work at a boring and unfulfilling job. However, coming back home actually led her to the school and career that were right for her.

Write an essay about how a failure ultimately turned into a success for you. Structure your essay by first discussing your "failure." What happened? Then devote a paragraph to describing how you felt and what you did following this difficult time. Finally, write a paragraph about how this failure eventually resulted in a success. Alternatively, you might write about three separate experiences where disappointment or failure eventually led to better paths and directions.

You might consider concluding your essay, as Wister does, by looking toward the future and speculating about how your life might become even better.

2. Imagine that you are a high-school counselor. Write an essay for seniors that presents what you believe are the three most important bits of advice to consider before heading to college. Before writing, think about Miranda's experience. She left for a university 1500 miles away without considering that she would not be able to visit home more than once a year, and she became homesick. She didn't enjoy living with someone she had never met. And she clearly had not carefully considered her choice of major or how expensive college life would be. There are, of course, many other unexpected problems that college freshmen might run into. Choose three of these problems, and devote a paragraph to each one. In each paragraph, present the problem, and then suggest ways to be prepared for it or ways to handle the problem when it comes up.

If you need some help coming up with ideas, search the Internet for phrases such as "common college problems" or "problems faced by college freshmen." As you might imagine, there are plenty of articles about these topics!