

Uncertainty Solved—For Less

By Jack Hershey, President – Ohio Association of Community Colleges

Behind life and health, Covid-19's greatest casualty is probably certainty. How much longer will I work from home? Will I still even have a job in a month? When can I get my job back? Will the kids be able to go to summer camp and finally get out of the house—and my hair? Speaking of hair, when can I get it cut?

Some of these answers are beginning to emerge, but with so many unknowns still outstanding there are no guarantees things won't change. The uncertainty is frustrating and stressful.

For those planning to head to college for the first time this fall, the uncertainty is immense. Starting college is a long-awaited—and often long-saved for—rite of passage. The experience of moving out of the house, living more independently, and preparing for a career is transformative and deeply satisfying for young people. Sadly, no one can guarantee if in-person college instruction will happen, or that the tens of thousands of dollars families have saved for in-person instruction at a four-year residential campus won't wind up going for online courses taken from your living room.

Fortunately, community colleges have an answer that will appeal to many families and students: enroll now in your local community college and take your first year of general education classes online from home.

Not only does this defeat uncertainty by providing an immediate answer to the “where” and “how” questions, but it also costs significantly less.

While this idea might seem complex to some, it's actually easy to do.

Four-year institutions regularly allow accepted students to defer enrollment for a year, with courses taken from your local community college transferring seamlessly to any Ohio university, because most of these the classes are routinely submitted for review by university faculty on a statewide basis. In fact, students will likely find the online experience at a community college to be higher quality and a better overall value since we have been providing flexible online courses for years in order to meet the needs of our students who either told us they prefer online courses, or that they need to take a class schedule that is very flexible.

With more personalized attention and affordable online courses, community colleges know how to do this well, and we do so at a fraction of the traditional cost of a university.

Make no mistake, Ohio is fortunate to have a number of world-class public and private universities right here in our state, and community colleges are proud to have long-standing working partnerships with all of them that can make the idea of “Certainty Year” possible.

And, at a time when we are watching an economic downturn of epic proportions unfold before us and job stability is a question for many, saving money only makes sense. Hopefully that savings never needs to be used, but if something unfortunate happens to the family finances, it will come in handy.

For many students, a credential or associate degree sets them up perfectly for their career of choice, and for other students a year or two at a community college is the stepping-stone to a four-year institution. For those originally planning on going directly from high school to a university, doing a year now at a community college should not be seen as a replacement for the plans they've long dreamed of, but as a strategy for preserving them. Locking in next year's general education courses now—at a lower cost and in a confirmed setting, leverages community college's long-standing transfer pathways with our university partners as part of a family's solution to keep higher education plans moving forward while simply managing the uncertainty of the times.

But, if situations improve to make on-campus, residential life at our universities a reliably safe option, the "Certainty Year" at a community college can be set aside in favor of the original plan. That is something we all want on every level and for which we hope and pray will ultimately happen for the sake of the students, their families and the postsecondary institutions across the state.

There is no playbook for this. What matters is staying healthy and safe, realizing that we are all in it together and doing everything possible to manage the unknown. Certainly, moving forward with higher education is essential, and a statement of hope and confidence. Taking that positive step forward shouldn't be stressful, however. Answering next fall's questions now, by locking in a first-year at a community college, is a way to do it—and have one less thing to worry about.

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