

Why Community College

Dr. Brian Harris

Do you encourage your students to continue with their music-making while at college? And when they ask you about colleges to attend, do you include among your suggestions the local community college?

Although many of your seniors may know where they want to attend college, what about the ones who are uncertain or might be facing financial obstacles? Each year more and more students decide to begin their collegiate studies at the local community college. They are making it their first choice for post-secondary education, not just a “back-up plan” if they are not admitted to their college of choice.

Since the mid-1990s, more Texas students have chosen to attend a community college their freshman year rather than a public university. Recently the *Houston Chronicle* reported the annual tuition and fee costs for Texas community colleges was less than one-third of the costs for Texas public universities (\$1,607 versus \$5,940). That’s just tuition and fees; by the time room and board are factored in, you can understand why the savings can be substantial.

It is true that many students want to move away from home

for their college experience, but consider how much money can be saved by putting in that first year or two of studies at the local community college.

Those hundreds of saved dollars can bolster a student’s college savings account or result in substantially less debt accumulated in student loans. Partially funded through your property taxes, community colleges can offer transferable classes at substantially lower costs than universities.

Community colleges give students the perfect opportunity to adapt to collegiate-level studies while maintaining the familial support system in a familiar environment.

Some community colleges have dormitories or college-owned apartments for student housing. In fact, it is becoming increasingly more common for students to move hundreds of miles from their hometown in order to attend a community college. Many students do this to

take advantage of the lower tuition rates or substantial scholarship offers. Some are enticed by an institution’s reputation, faculty,

location, or program offerings. Other students prefer a community college’s campus and class size as well as the personal interaction with faculty.

All work and no play?

Attending a community college does not mean there will be no opportunity for socialization with other students. Student organizations,

college-organized activities, and athletic and participatory fine arts programs are common and continually becoming more prominent at community colleges. Most campuses offer some type of music ensemble so students can enjoy performance opportunities after high school. It may be a concert band, a “town and gown” community band, a jazz ensemble, or various chamber groups.

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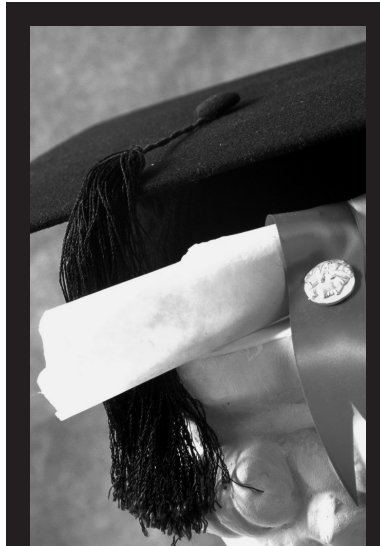
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As a music teacher, encouraging your students to continue with music in college, whether as a major or non-major, is one step closer to a true goal of music education – to create a public that is involved in the lifelong enjoyment of making music. Many colleges are willing to substitute college ensemble experiences as credit towards satisfying a fine arts/humanities requirement.

How familiar are you with the music offerings of your local community college? Most colleges offer classes specifically for music majors. Since most baccalaureate degrees in music (music education, performance, etc.) are virtually identical during the first two years of collegiate studies, these classes can be taken at the community college and then transferred to the university. Schools with music programs usually offer all the classes a student needs during their freshman and sophomore years. This generally includes the first four semesters of theory and ear-training, music history/literature classes, private lessons, large and small ensemble experience, and class piano.

Many colleges supplement their faculty ranks with part-time instructors who are freelance professionals, performers with local orchestras, or even teachers from other nearby colleges and universities. Sometimes a student can study with the same



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instructor for hundreds of dollars less by coordinating it through the local community college. You will never study with a graduate assistant at a community college! Suggest to your seniors that they contact the applied lesson teacher. Most faculty would be delighted to offer a potential student a free lesson.

What you should know about your local community college so you can inform your students:

Does your local community college offer different types of performance genres for students? Can the student choose between symphonic, jazz, chamber, and other types of ensembles? Is there a pep band for athletic events or a marching band? If the community college does not have a marching band, students who wish to continue participation in a marching band can, in some cases, attend a community college but participate in a nearby university's program.

Who conducts the various ensembles and what experience do they bring to the groups? Is the band program large enough to offer an ensemble composed entirely of students? In many cases, the band is small enough to make each player essential to the success of the group. Again, suggest to your students that they visit the college and observe a rehearsal.

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Contact the band director ahead of time and they will probably invite the student to bring their instrument and play along in rehearsal, too. It is a terrific way to evaluate a school's offerings and meet the faculty.

Most community colleges offer some type of scholarship or financial assistance for students who participate in a major ensemble. Some require students to audition for a scholarship, while others award it automatically upon registration. In most cases, students do not need to declare themselves a music major in order to receive the funds. This is often not the case for universities. Sometimes these music scholarships can offset most of the expense of the student's tuition and fees – simply for playing in band.

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A Collegiate All-State Band

There is one experience unique among Texas higher education institutions and available only for students at community colleges: a collegiate all-state ensemble opportunity. For over 30 years, the Texas Community College Band Directors Association (TCCBDA) has auditioned, organized, and presented an all-state ensemble for community college students in Texas. TCCBDA currently sponsors both a jazz ensemble and a large symphonic band. Like their high school counterparts, the community college all-state groups rehearse and perform at the TMEA convention in San Antonio. Guest conductors are

selected from prominent Texas college and university band directors, providing the student members with the unique experience of rehearsing and performing with directors from colleges which they might later choose to attend. Visit www.TCCBDA.org for more

information about this year's groups, guest conductors, and concert times and locations.

Keep 'em playing!

Students choose to begin their collegiate studies at the local community college for a variety of reasons. These might include the reputation of the school, a substantial scholarship, or the size of the school. Others might have financial concerns that hinder them from moving away to attend a university. Still other students may attend when they are not accepted to their college

of first choice. Whatever the reason, your local community college music program has opportunities to keep students making music. Check out the community college in your area and pass along the information to your students. The community colleges thank you for your work and support!

Dr. Brian Harris is Director of Bands at McLennan Community College in Waco, Texas. His responsibilities include conducting the college band, the community band, the Waco Area Youth Wind Ensemble, and the MCC pep band. He serves as president of the Texas Community College Band Directors Association.