

How did community colleges *Expand the possibilities for your future?*

My Greatest Detour Became My Launchpad

My hands trembled as I clicked “submit” on my community college application. This was not how my American college dream was supposed to begin.

As the confirmation page loaded, the doubts and fears I had been desperately pushing down flooded my mind. Could I really put my education and my future on hold to take care of my family? The uncertainties of my mom's chemotherapy and my brother's acceptance to a four-year college painted the picture of financial constraints. The weight of it all - supporting my family, and dodging the judgment of others - nearly crushed me. But ultimately, my local community college gave me hope. It was a lifeline that I could cling to amidst the chaos, a chance to pursue my goals against all odds.

Starting my Associates degree in computer science at Houston Community College(HCC) allowed me to build genuine academic confidence through the supportive environment of smaller class sizes, my honors college cohort and caring professors who want you to succeed. Starting from my first dual credit class(college algebra) in high school in Mrs Christine Bernard’s class to currently being a graduating student in Professor Todd’s Zapata’s Physics 2 class, I have experienced the feeling of nurturing professors who take out time to ensure you genuinely succeed, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Crucially, HCC made the dream of a bachelor's degree financially possible by allowing me to inexpensively complete core requirements before transferring. This affordable start provided financial breathing room, removing a major barrier to pursuing my long-term goals. What once felt like an impossibly distant milestone was now in clear sight. In all of these I never failed to utilize the free tutoring services when I needed and the amazing academic counseling services whenever confused in the classes I needed to take.

And even career wise? My amazing community college education opened windows into thriving professional paths. Through coding bootcamps, student hackathons, and the Computer Science Association, I gained invaluable skills for well-paying roles in Texas' booming tech industry. A school-sponsored trip to SXSW allowed me to connect with AI researchers, cybersecurity experts, and developers, shattering my preconceived limitations. Each interaction revealed the vast possibilities within the tech sector, made accessible by HCC's limitless exposure and opportunities.

Outside of academics, my school allowed me to aim higher. As student Government President, I spearheaded initiatives to bridge the gap between community college and prestigious

universities, becoming an Ion Ambassador and earning national recognition in the NASA MITTIC competition as a top 4 finalist. Eventually, with the help of my community college professors, I was able to secure an Artificial Intelligence research internship at the number one public university in Texas. These weren't just lines on my resume; they were battles fought and won against stereotypes and self-doubt. With each success, my community college allowed me to gain confidence and momentum, driven to shatter limiting mindsets and discover new opportunities for community college students like myself. I realized I had only scratched the surface of what I could achieve.

I rebuilt my academic confidence brick by brick and refocused my drive. Earning a 4.0 GPA while juggling roles like Student Government and peer mentoring revealed my leadership potential.

Graduating from Houston Community College will be a bittersweet experience. The college served as a stepping stone for my academic journey, fostering my intellectual curiosity and equipping me with valuable life skills. In particular, Professor Jessica's python coding course increased my passion for the field, and the group research project I conducted in Professor Nausheen's class further amplified my determination to keep learning.

Likewise, Saying goodbye to my honors college will be hard. Through our shared experiences, I've embraced diverse cultures, from the serene moments of sharing Turkish tea with Emily to the lively beats of salsa dancing with Manuela. My Nigerian roots finding its rhythm in Afrobeats, hesitant steps melting into joy as strangers became family. Sharing my culture wasn't just about music; it was a bridge we built together, brick by beat. We learned, we laughed, we grew, each story unifying our bond. The memories made here will be with me always, because the honors college showed me the beauty of true community.

As I prepare for this next pivotal milestone of transferring to a four-year university, I carry the indelible lessons of resilience, resourcefulness, and determined self-belief instilled by my transformative HCC journey. My college dreams may have followed an unconventional detour, but it was that very detour that unlocked possibilities I never could have imagined. The path I once feared is now the launchpad propelling me towards amazing new experiences. My journey here transformed how I approach my career and goals. Rather than viewing barriers as permanent roadblocks, I now see them as temporary obstacles to navigate creatively. I'm confident that the unique perspectives and persistence I developed will propel me towards continued growth and impact.