

Community colleges: A better alternative than a gap year

TOPICS: Commentary



BY LIZ KAPSNER MAY 27, 2020

Covid-19 has disrupted many of our lives, especially high school seniors who were excited to graduate and begin a new chapter at a university in the fall.

Much of the four-year experience is about exploring an extensive campus, living in the dorms, attending large lectures, enjoying big events and eating with hundreds of students in the cafeteria. But in the midst of a pandemic, this type of environment may cause more anxiety than excitement for incoming freshman.

Surveys have shown that graduating high school seniors are considering a gap year – delaying their plans to attend a four-year university. But a gap year in 2020 looks

much different than it has prior to Covid-19. A traditional gap year typically consists of domestic or world travel and volunteering, gaining real-life experience with an internship, or taking on a full-time job while living at home and saving money for college expenses. Due to the pandemic, travel has been restricted, human interaction limited and increased unemployment has caused economic vulnerability.

But amidst times of uncertainty – whether it's high unemployment and financial instability or not knowing what field to consider for a career – community colleges have been the solution for many young adults.

Below are five reasons to choose a community college over a gap year.

1. Get a head start

If you're not comfortable heading straight into a university just yet, and a gap year no longer seems promising, take the opportunity to check those required general education courses off your list at a community college this summer and fall. Community colleges such as [NorthWest Arkansas Community College](#) (NWACC) offers these as well as major-specific courses that can transfer to numerous four-year institutions.

And if you decide to only take a few courses over the summer, you'll start your freshman year a few credits ahead, saving you time and money.

2. Closer to home

Leaving home to travel or volunteer for a gap year, or packing up and moving your belongings to a university out of state, may limit your ability to easily get home to your family in case of possible shelter-in-place orders. Community colleges are located within your community and easily accessible with a short drive or if you need to remain home, by a click of a mouse. Being closer to home also gives you assurance that you'll be able to take care of yourself or a loved one if they were to become ill.

3. Quality education at an affordable price

COVID-19 has caused economic insecurity for many of us, and you, as well as your parents, may not be ready for the financial burden of a high tuition bill. While a normal gap year would offer more job opportunities and time to save up money, the current pandemic has decreased job openings and increased competition.

Community colleges are known for their affordability due to no campus housing fees, food plans and other overhead costs associated with a larger university, as well as more opportunities for students to qualify for financial aid like scholarships and grants. And affordability doesn't mean low quality. NWACC's academic standards are accredited by the Higher Learning Commission, so you can be rest assured that you're earning highly valued credits, certificate or degree.

4. Adaptive and accommodating

Due to their smaller sizes, community colleges can shift and adapt quickly, whether it's to offer new in-demand academic programs or career training, or if it's to swiftly accommodate students and offer different modes of instruction during a pandemic. While you may feel uncertain about the next year, community colleges like NWACC can offer you individual attention and a variety of options – day and evening classes, online, and this fall, a hybrid of in-person and online courses – all to fit fluid life circumstances.

5. Your safety is priority

Choosing a gap year may feel like the safest alternative to living in the dorms or sitting in large lecture halls, but lessening your human contact doesn't have to mean placing your college dreams on hold. Community colleges are able to really tap into students' concerns and provide answers and reassurance when it comes to their safety and academic experience.

With student feedback, NWACC has made plans to welcome students back to campus in the fall while having numerous safety measures in place and contingency plans on hand. NWACC's response to Covid-19 is easily accessible to students, employees and the community online: www.nwacc.edu/coronavirus

It's possible

Life may feel unsettled and your future unclear, but be assured, community colleges continue to make higher education attainable. NWACC and the nation's other community colleges can be your pathway to a bright future with a four-year degree or trade skills and a career that you've envisioned.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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WINDOW TO THE WORLD

STORY BY LIZ KAPSNER // PHOTOS BY VICTOR CHALFANT

"Bruce and I expanded our own life stories," says retired teacher and Northwest Arkansas local Ann Applegate, of her trip to Tuscany, Italy. "We gained an admiration for another culture and a better understanding of the Renaissance period. We developed priceless friendships through shared experiences."

In June, Applegate and her husband, Bruce, attended the international community trip Ten Days in Tuscany for a second year. The trip is one of those offered through the NorthWest Arkansas Community College (NWACC) Foundation, a nonprofit organization that serves as the college's philanthropic arm. The trip included Tuscany's historic sites, wineries, restaurants, and music. Excursions included tours of Florence, home to many masterpieces of Renaissance art and architecture; exploring Pienza, Montalcino, and Bagno Vignoni; and enjoying dinner in Certosa di Pontignano gardens.

"We took walking tours of Siena and Florence and visited wineries and castles," Applegate adds. "We marveled at Pienza's Renaissance architecture, and crafted Pecorino cheese, and explored Bagno Vigno and its medicinal hot springs. Best of all, we dined on Piazza del Campo, the town square that is the heart of Siena. Seeing the cobalt blue sky at night is a sight I will treasure forever."

Ten Days in Tuscany was created by NWACC music professor Miles Fish and the NWACC Foundation to raise scholarship funds, making studying abroad an affordable option for students. The foundation has raised \$10,000 with plans to reach \$20,000 next year.

"The potential community partnerships that NWACC is building with international trips represent an investment in our young people and in Northwest Arkansas," Applegate says. "For these young people to study abroad, to enlarge their world view, is a win-win for students, for NWACC, and for us."

Italy is only one of the international community trips offered to those interested in traveling abroad with a guide and experiencing a new culture. A booked trip to Athens, Greece, will take place in September, and trips to Buenos Aires and Patagonia, Argentina, and Bonn and Cologne, Germany, are planned for 2020.

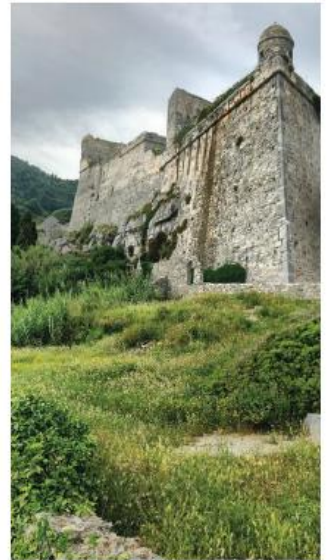
In summer 2020, Fish will host the annual trip to Italy, but with a new theme — NWACC Artists in Italy. Participants will enjoy painting and drawing in the hill town of Pienza, the medieval castle of Quattro Torra, and the historic Piazzale Michelangelo.

The NWACC Foundation has plans to continue to grow the international community trip offerings, and in return, raise scholarship funds for more students to study abroad. NWACC study abroad programs include Italy (NWACC in Italy), Germany, Colombia, Belize, and Greece. Also crafted by Fish, the NWACC in Italy program began in 2016. Fish partnered with Università per Stranieri di Siena to offer students an Italian course and a course taught by an NWACC professor on the university's campus.

NWACC student Bradi Matlock recently studied Italian and photography after receiving a scholarship. "I got to live like an Italian for a month!" Matlock says. "I spent time in one of the most historical places on earth. The scholarship helped tremendously! It astounds me that people are so gracious."

Fish believes traveling abroad is vital to one's growth, and is determined to make it accessible to everyone. "When we travel, we are to some degree changed, enlightened, and grateful. Grateful to have been a part of another culture, and grateful to return to our own," he says. "If I can play a part in offering this type of experience to community members and in the process, raise money for our student scholarships, then I want to do that." ■

Learn more about NWACC Foundation's international community trips by visiting nwacc.edu/ArtistsInItaly and nwacc.edu/ExperienceArgentina.



Feeding the Frontline

Ropeswing Hospitality Group and Brightwater join forces to feed NWA health care workers

As hospitals across Northwest Arkansas continue to endure the influx of COVID-19 cases, health care workers are putting patients first, while often sacrificing the time to eat, replenish and reset. A relief network created by Northwest Arkansas businesses and farms is determined to ensure that health care teams don't fight this battle hungry.

"As a hospitality company, our job is to serve our community," said Kurt Berman, chief executive officer of Ropeswing Hospitality Group. "It makes perfect sense to extend this service mindset to help our medical community during this time of great need. And to be able to do that with our local, thoughtful partners is what makes our region so special."

With food donations by Tyson and local farms such as Red Barn, Rios Family Farm, KT Produce, Vet Veggies and Fat Top Farms, Ropeswing Hospitality Group set forth preparing meals in one of its kitchens and partnered with Summit Aviation Bentonville to deliver, by car, the first 100 meals to Mercy Hospital Northwest Arkansas in Rogers on March 24.



"We are humbled by the response of our community to assist health care workers during this unprecedented onset of the COVID-19 pandemic," said Eric Pianalto, president of Mercy Hospital Northwest Arkansas in Rogers. "Our co-workers are working tirelessly to care for suspected and confirmed cases, while also preparing for the potential of a large number of hospitalized patients. Many times, our staff has difficulty taking the time to feed themselves, and the coordination of meals to help sustain their strength and focus is an exceptionally thoughtful gift."

Ropeswing Hospitality Group was soon exploring ways to ramp up meal production and serve more Northwest Arkansas hospitals and health care facilities and reached out to Brightwater, the culinary school of NorthWest Arkansas Community College, to utilize its kitchen facilities and labor force.

"We wanted to find a local partner with the ability to co-host production of these meals with our team. The facility

needed to be available, equipped and eager to participate; however, the most important consideration was the health and safety of our teams. We found this partner in Brightwater," explained Kurt.

Brightwater Executive Director Marshall Shafkowitz was happy to support the cause and join forces.

"Brightwater was honored and humbled to be asked by Ropeswing CEO Kurt Berman to partner with the group to feed those who are on the frontlines taking care of our community," said Marshall. "As a son and brother of health care workers, it's personally important for me to make sure that they are fed and let them know that our community is thinking of them."

Marshall was eager to offer Brightwater's help and kitchen space, as well as utilize its affiliation with the NWACC Foundation to assist the culinary school in receiving cash donations to support its ability to participate in the free meal initiative.



The NWACC Foundation serves as the college's philanthropic arm and has created donation initiatives like the Student Emergency Assistance Fund for NWACC students struggling financially due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

Together, Brightwater and the NWACC Foundation created the NWA Medical Meals Fund. Monetary donations raised through the fund are helping Brightwater purchase produce from local farms, a necessity in sustaining the preparation of these meals.

"The NWA Medical Meals Fund gives our community the opportunity to show its support for our health care workers. They don't have to worry about where their next meal is coming from and can continue to concentrate on caring for those in need," said Marshall. "And it's a way to also support our local farmers who are feeling the effects of this pandemic, too."

The logistics of the meal preparation start with multiple workstations set up in Brightwater's kitchens, with specific care taken to follow the social distancing guidelines established by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Once the meals have been prepared, they are then delivered by Summit Aviation Bentonville. ■



Cheers!



18th Annual

SUMMER SALSA

chip dipping & margarita sippin'

Although we are unable to gather for Summer Salsa this year, we toast our sponsors & supporters:



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Celebrate Arkansas
CitiScapes Magazine
Mather Consulting LLC

Through this uncertain time, EOA Children's House continues to provide alternative services for local children that have been abused or neglected. We would not be able to do this without YOUR support!

Summer Salsa
will be back in 2021!

Favorite Places

Do you have a favorite place on the river? Tell us about it by letter, email or send us a message via Facebook.

Jeremy Smith's story, as told to Liz Kapsner

Life jackets, check. Canoe paddle, check. Worms, check. Looney Tunes "Tasmanian Devil" fishing pole, double check. Two young paddlers — six-year-old Ashlan and three-year-old Ethan were ready and waiting. Now for the canoe.

I secured the red solo canoe's bow on top of the car with a buckle strap. Now I'm ready for the second strap ... Where is that strap? I walked around the car and found it in Ethan's hands.

"Here you go, Daddy. I wanted to help," Ethan explained.

A short minute later, the stern was secured. It was time to visit our favorite place on the Mississippi River.

As we crossed the Highway 43 Bridge out of Winona, Minn., we could see the river bustling with activity below: barges slowly trudged past each other, fishing boats hurried along and jet skis jumped through the air. Shortly after crossing the bridge, I turned into an almost vacant parking area with a small boat landing and dock. With no activity, little current and numerous trees outlining the perimeter, this place always feels like our own private piece of river.

Locals call it the "rookery." It's an ideal place to take the boys, since it's protected, has clear water, no current to fight and big shady trees. It's a very kid-friendly spot.

The proper name for the rookery is Mertes Slough. Herons and egrets build big nests in the trees on the upstream end of the island. When the river's flooding, this slough is considered to be part of the backwaters. When levels are normal, it is disconnected and becomes a lake. It's a designated "electric motor only" area on the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge and a great place for fishing, paddling and bird watching.

With the canoe off the car and in the water, I loaded all our gear and



Ethan, Jeremy and Ashlan explore Mertes Slough.

the boys and sandwiched myself in between.

"Come on daddy. Let's go catch a big one," Ashlan insisted.

As we glided along close to shore, we rehearsed our paddling etiquette: never stand up in the boat and always stay still so we don't scare the fishes

They took turns casting and waiting, casting and waiting.

It lasted for only a few minutes, but to a child, it was a lifetime. No fish today.

away. We followed the shore through the trees' shadows, resting for long periods to cast. No nibbles. We tried another cool, shady area. No luck.

"Daddy, I want to fish from the dock," Ashlan said.

It was worth a try. We sometimes have better luck at the dock.

The boys quickly climbed from the boat onto the wooden planks and grabbed their fishing poles. "Daddy, watch! I'm a good caster," Ethan said.

They took turns casting and waiting, casting and waiting. It lasted for

only a few minutes, but to a child, it was a lifetime. No fish today. Time to play in the water.

Two blonde heads bobbed up and down in the water, one further from the shore than the other. "I can go further out. I've got my life jacket on!" Ashlan reassured me.

With no current, I felt at ease letting him go out deeper than usual. Ethan stayed near shore to show me how he can float on his back, toss big rocks and catch blue dragonflies. He also learned about poison ivy's features and form.

"Daddy, I'd never mess with poison ivy," Ethan promised me.

"That's good. No one wants the itches!" I said with a smile.

The sun began to take its toll. The boys and I were getting tired. It was time to pack up and say goodbye to our favorite place. In the distance, two friendly kayakers approached, eager to exit the water. Our private piece of river had been discovered. That's okay. We'll share. ■

Jeremy Smith lives in Winona, Minn. Liz Kapsner is Big River's marketing director.