

# CCBA Essay Contest Winner

The Community College Baccalaureate Association (CCBA) conducted a 7th Annual Essay Contest to determine what students think about community colleges offering baccalaureate (four-year) college degrees on their campuses. A \$1,500 scholarship, provided by Community College Week, and an all expense paid trip to the Eleventh Annual Community College Baccalaureate Association Conference, "Meeting the Challenge: 15 Million New Degrees by 2025!" was awarded to Domenic Caloia.

## Community Colleges Are Portals Of Hope And Transformation

**Domenic Caloia**, St. Petersburg College, St. Petersburg, Florida



When the economy nosedived two years ago I lost more than my job, I lost hope. At a time when friends were planning for retirement, I was refinancing my home and desperately looking for a job. I was heartbroken to discover that decades of work experience took a back seat to a four-year college degree, a requirement that I did not have. A four-year degree has become the new minimum employment standard, therefore, the time had come to return to school.

However logical that decision was, it did not come lightly. My 90-year old dad asked if I would be going away to school. He needed me nearby, and without hesitation, I told him I would always be there for him. Relocation was not an option. The dream that I grew up with of going away to college is rapidly being replaced with the reality of the college coming to the students, meeting them at their point of need.

Not everyone has an aging parent to care for, but life has a way of making demands on all of us. When that happens, the flexible options offered by community colleges such as attending part time, distance learning, and credit for life experience, can be the determining factor making higher education accessible.

Any possibility for a baccalaureate degree also had to be affordable. When I learned that many state community colleges offer four-year degree programs at rates well below university fees, it was like discovering a map to a secret treasure! For the first time in a long while, I had hope for a better future. I returned to school not knowing what to expect. What I encountered, was nothing less than transformational.

New ideas stretched my imagination and challenged my thinking. The encouragement I received from professors and students alike helped me to believe in myself at a time when the world was slamming doors on me. Working together with other students, my communication skills improved as we learned from each other. I gradually realized that I had good ideas worth sharing.

The benefits of attaining a bachelor's degree from my community college are not limited to increased employment opportunities alone. Returning to school may have begun as a desperate necessity, but it quickly became a personal pilgrimage of growth and self-discovery. Inspired with a newfound confidence and an optimistic outlook, I am actually planning to write a book and continue my studies in graduate school.

Whatever direction my life takes, receiving a four-year degree is a major personal milestone that launches a new me into the world. For me, as with many others, local community colleges are portals of hope and transformation.

## Finalists

**Patricia Arcuri, Miami Dade College, Miami, FL**

**Eric D. Bank, St. Petersburg College, St. Petersburg, FL**

**Domenic Caloia, St. Petersburg College, St. Petersburg, FL**

**Curtiss Elliott, Western Nevada College, Carson City, NV**

**Timothy R. Grubbs, Santa Fe College, Gainesville, FL**

**Richard D. Lucas-MacGibbon, Community College of Southern Nevada, Las Vegas, NV**

**Joanne Puryear, Brazosport College, Lake Jackson, TX**

**Randa Lynn Smith, Seattle Central Community College, Seattle, WA**

**Wendy Stryker, St. Petersburg College, St. Petersburg, FL**

**Bonnie Willis, Muskegon Community College, Muskegon, MI**

**Community College Week**

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