

Through Her Son's Eyes

Longtime community college educator Elizabeth M. Benton writes of newly experiencing community college after her son enrolls.

By [Elizabeth M. Benton \(/users/elizabeth-m-benton\)](/users/elizabeth-m-benton)

// November 21, 2022

A few months ago, a social media platform announced the 18-year anniversary of my community college employment. Social media is not always truthful, but this time it was. In 2004, when my son was a toddler, we moved from Texas to Maryland. I began teaching English composition part-time at Montgomery College. Years later, I am amazed by the community college and department I serve. I could brag about the thousands of lives that have been changed by the community college mission. I could talk for hours about access initiatives such as [self-placement models](https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6g81k736) (<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6g81k736>), and [open educational resources](https://tech.ed.gov/open/) (<https://tech.ed.gov/open/>), or brilliant faculty who guide and support critical thinking.

Instead, I'm going to talk about my son, Ben, a learner with disabilities and a second-year student at the community college where I work. Ben's personal journey is his to share, but I've been given permission to share glimpses of what I have witnessed, both as mom and educator. I have marveled these past almost two years as Ben has been embraced by community college in ways I've always comprehended but not experienced.

Early on, we knew Ben's learning was not "mainstream." As an educator and instinctive parent, I understood and translated Ben's spoken language. "Ocar" was Oscar the Grouch from *Sesame Street*, and "aye" was "airplane" (that one took a few more context clues). These verbal stumbles were corrected by surgery (tubes that improved hearing) and speech therapy.

Later, beyond preschool, Ben's handwriting and coloring were labored. His spelling looked illiterate to the untrained eye. I learned to recognize "fritnd" as "frightened" and "tmrow" as "tomorrow." As his intellect developed, his mind chased after imaginative stories, impeding his concentration on the reality around him. His grandfather, wanting to enjoy time with his grandson, took him to a Spider-Man movie. Ben spent much of the next school day reimagining the movie, paying little attention to the instructions and expectations for cooperative learning. He was "on a red card" this and most days because he was "not paying attention" and was "asking questions at inappropriate times." The cycle of recurring "red days" and eroding self-esteem continued until an attentive school counselor and principal agreed to additional special education services.

Ben earned good grades in middle and high school and received excellent instruction and support from general and special education teachers and staff. Because he wanted to take academically challenging

courses, he also enrolled in [resource](https://www.thoughtco.com/special-education-resource-room-3110962), a form of study hall. This quiet period allowed him to complete assignments, receive additional help and manage social-emotional and academic stressors.

In the 11th grade, Ben declared that he wanted to go to college. He also said he wanted, during his first two college years, to live at home and attend community college. Despite my many years working at a community college, I wanted Ben to go away to a four-year college. Admittedly, I worried that perhaps he needed some nudging to leave the nest, so he and I bickered a bit. Despite our differences, he remained college-bound and enrolled in and successfully completed some requisite college-going steps: SAT prep, SAT exams, a summer college class and about five or six college visits.

In the fall of his senior year, Ben and I had yet another tête-à-tête about leaving home to go away to college. By this time, he had truly found his groove. He was working at a bakery—making deliveries, working at the counter two nights a week and managing a weekend outdoor market—and, in addition to making solid grades, had discovered a passion for mixed martial arts at a local gym. Ben spoke in a rehearsed tone: “Mom, my guidance counselor agrees with me.” He continued, “You and Dad are overruled. I am going to community college until I decide where I want to go and what I want to study. Period.” My son was only 18 and was making a consequential adult decision: to exert his agency and choose community college.

Ben is now a thriving community college student who is the beneficiary of the community college mission. In describing snippets of his day, Ben has shared with me curricular and pedagogical practices of our academic and student services divisions. One evening, when we were walking the dog, he said, “Mom, you should do a flipped classroom. My economics professor does it, and I really like it.” “Do you mean a [flipped](https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2017/05/17/author-flipped-learning-discusses-what-it-and-how-professors-can) classroom?” I asked. “Yes, whatever you call it. It makes a lot of sense to teach that way. You should tell the English department to try it.”

“If only,” I thought.

After learning that his first English composition paper had “room for growth,” Ben showed up for office hours. The professor was encouraging yet emphatic about a writing process that included revision and an optional visit to the tutoring center. As a result of that encounter, Ben found a tutor whom he enjoyed working with in the in-person tutoring center on a regular basis. Later, when he was called in for an extra shift at the bakery, he had to change to a remote tutoring session. Despite it not being his preference, he found good advice remotely from a different tutor. He received guidance on his assignment and made it to work without having to prioritize work over school or vice versa.

In another instance, he was overwhelmed with his job, his mixed martial arts team commitment and coursework, and so he sought out an adviser. They agreed for him to drop a 200-level class and take a less rigorous, late-starting, seven-week elective that would fulfill a general education requirement.

At the end of one term, Ben made a grave mistake. Thanks to the learning management system grade book, he knew he had an A going into the final exam. He did well on the exam and decided to skip a final assignment, not realizing it was the signature assignment in a general education course. A caring professor called his cellphone. “Ben, I’ve been trying to reach you. The final assignment is required. You should have known that. You have 24 hours to turn it in.” I credit the professor’s merciful approach to teaching, a likely small class size and Ben’s proven track record of commitment and capable work for him being given an extra day.

As I look around my office, 18 years of texts crowd my bookcases. Countless English composition, literary and leadership texts, as well as myriad publications by colleagues, invite me to work hard. Data reports and college initiative documents blanket my desk.

What lives in my mind’s eye now, however, is my son in the writing center, being tutored four and five times a semester by colleagues and friends. I see the economics professor who made Ben pay attention to pedagogy, the adviser who coached him through degree planning, the professor who considered his work ethic and gave him an extra 24 hours when he stumbled, and the countless instructors who met with him in conferences and office hours. I am in awe. I may be the community college educator, but my son has taught me a lesson. As it turns out, I’m a pretty good student, too, if I’ll just pay attention.

Elizabeth M. Benton is dean of English and reading at Montgomery College, in Maryland, and an adjunct faculty member in George Washington University’s Graduate School of Education and Human Development.

Read more by

By Elizabeth M. Benton (</users/elizabeth-m-benton>).