Students can begin their higher education at a community college and continue on to make significant contributions and achieve high recognition in a variety of fields. Numerous leaders in government, entertainment, business, and science were once community college students. The education and experience they received at the community college prepared them for, and enabled them to contribute to, the changing world in which we live today. The community college played an important role in the educational development of the five alumni described in this section. They are inspirational role models because of the level of their achievements. See a more complete list of notable community college alumni on page 85.

R. Bruce Merrifield, 1984 Nobel Prize in Chemistry
Merrifield is best known in the scientific community for his solid phase peptide synthesis, for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1984. The Royal Swedish Academy of Science described Merrifield’s method as “ingenious” and “a completely new approach to organic synthesis.” Merrifield began his higher education at a community college, where he learned the basics of his field. Regarding the community college, he said, “The undergraduate teaching was better than at the big university.” After completing his associate degree, he transferred to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where he eventually earned his PhD.

Oscar Hijuelos, Author, 1990 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction
Hijuelos is the first Hispanic American winner of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction, which he received in 1990 for his novel The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love, which was later made into a movie, The Mambo Kings. After receiving his associate degree at a community college, he transferred to the City College of New York, where he earned his bachelor’s and master’s degrees. During an interview, Hijuelos said that growing up poor and being a lifelong resident of New York City, he did not have the money to travel abroad as had many of the famous authors he admired. But, Hijuelos explained, education, no matter where it takes place, can expand one’s mind to realize the possibilities which might otherwise go unnoticed. His novels have been translated into more than 25 languages.

George Lucas, Film Director, Writer, Producer
George Lucas first rose to international fame in 1973 with the enormous success of the movie American Graffiti. Then the movie Star Wars in 1977 made him a household name. Lucas graduated from a community
college in 1964 and transferred to the University of Southern California, where he earned his bachelor’s degree in 1966. He then began making movies. His media empire includes the visual effects company, Industrial Light & Magic (formed during the making of Star Wars), THX, and Lucasfilms. In 1992, the Board of Governors of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences honored Lucas with the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award, which honors “creative producers whose bodies of work reflect a consistently high quality of motion picture production.” Lucas also received the prestigious DigiGlobe Award in 1999 for his ongoing contribution to world culture and entertainment through the use of information technology.

Eileen Collins, Pilot, U.S. Space Shuttle Commander

After graduating from community college in 1976, Eileen Collins earned her bachelor’s degree at Syracuse University and her master’s degree at Stanford University. She went on to make history as the
first female pilot of a U.S. space shuttle and then as the first female commander of a U.S. space shuttle. During her outstanding career as a pilot and astronaut, Collins has received numerous awards including the Distinguished Flying Cross and the National Space Trophy. She was inducted into the National Women’s Hall of Fame in 1995, and the Encyclopedia Britannica has recognized Collins on its Web site as one of the top 300 women in history who changed the world. In 2006, the New York State Legislature passed a resolution honoring her.

Bola Ahmed Tinubu, Governor, State of Lagos, Nigeria

Tinubu is the former governor of the State of Lagos, location of the largest city in the most populous country in West Africa. He began his higher education at a U.S. community college. As a founding member of the pro-democracy National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) in Nigeria, Tinubu has said that he learned about democratic principles while living in the United States. After graduating from community college, he transferred to Chicago State University, where he graduated summa cum laude. In 1983, he returned to Nigeria to work for Mobil Oil. He eventually became treasurer of the company before entering politics in 1992 when he was elected to the Nigerian Senate.

For a more complete list of notable community college alumni, see page 85.

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