

## International Students at Community Colleges

**F YOU THINK** community colleges only serve home-grown students, think again. Today local communities are becoming more global as more people migrate across borders. Many new immigrants choose to pursue higher education. First stop? It's often the local community college. Officials at community colleges are starting to take note and are opening their doors to international students—both those who are already in the United States and those they are starting to recruit from abroad.

Nearly 1,200 regionally accredited community colleges in the United States enroll a total of approximately 11.6 million students, about 46 percent of all American undergraduates.

Two-year institutions have traditionally focused their efforts on serving local residents, and the primary focus is still there. But increasingly these schools are also actively recruiting students from around the world. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), nearly 100,000 international students are currently enrolled at community colleges, accounting for about 39 percent of the total number studying in the U.S. And it is a trend that is growing: according to the most recent IIE *Open Doors Report*, between 1999 and 2007 enrollment by international students at two-year institutions increased by 22 percent.

Given our increasingly global world and the changing demographics that have created more ethnically and culturally diverse populations in communities across the nation, the trend is a natural one. It is also the result of greater awareness at community colleges that for these reasons as well as others, the presence of students from other parts of the world on their campuses is desirable; and it reflects conscious efforts by administrators to increase enrollment by students from abroad.

“Community colleges are the largest and most diverse sector of U.S. higher education, and they strive to reflect the communities they serve,” says George R. Boggs, AACC president and CEO. “Increasingly that ‘community’ is global, so the colleges have expanded outreach to international students to enrich the learning experience on their campuses for all students. The growing numbers of international

students who choose community colleges are responding to this open and inclusive environment that truly reflects the face and the values of our nation.”

### Reaching Out to International Students

To assist community colleges in their international recruitment efforts and to raise global awareness of the U.S. community college system, from 2002–2008 AACC conducted a series of multi-country recruitment fairs in Asia, Latin America, and Europe. According to Judy Irwin, director of international programs and services at AACC, “These trips were designed to promote the U.S. community college concept, especially the 2 + 2 concept; to provide opportunities for U.S. community colleges to showcase their institutions at recruitment fairs dedicated to promoting community colleges; to introduce delegates to the EducationUSA Advising Centers; to give them the chance to visit embassies and consulates; and to learn from each other.”

While quite successful in meeting these goals, as of 2009 AACC is no longer sponsoring multicountry international recruitment trips. “Although ... participants benefited both professionally and personally ... it was evident that only a limited number of institutions had the resources and support to travel with us over an extended period of time,” Irwin explains. The concept has not been abandoned: plans for partnering with other organizations to arrange shorter trips are under consideration. But AACC is now focusing on other ways to help their members recruit and serve international students. Their Community College Toolkit for International Recruitment, an annual one-day winter workshop, provides participants with



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strategies for building and enhancing international recruitment programs, and ideas for developing successful recruitment strategies in a challenging economic environment. AACCC also offers their colleges the opportunity to participate in a Web site for international students: [www.communitycollegeusa.com](http://www.communitycollegeusa.com), and publishes an annual *Guide for International Students* that educates prospective students about the benefits of studying at U.S. community colleges, and showcases participating institutions. The guide is sent all over the world, and will go online this year.

While attending recruitment fairs abroad can be a highly effective means of attracting international students, it is certainly not the only way. "Given our urban location and proximity to Ohio State University, many international students seek us out and become aware of the college through our general marketing," says Martin Maliwesky, dean of enrollment services at Columbus State Community College (CSCC). Sometimes these students, or their spouses, are already enrolled at Ohio State and find out about CSCC once they're in the area. Although CSCC has had a "significant" number of international students for about 20 years, they only began active recruitment in 2007, by sending recruiting materials to fair promoters, a method Maliwesky calls

"armchair recruiting...a way for the college to recruit more cost-effectively, without the burden of travel expenses."

Cris Samia, assistant dean of international programs at Bellevue Community College (BCC) near Seattle attends recruitment fairs abroad and while he notes that the opportunity to interact with prospective students one-to-one is by far the most effective method of recruitment, he adds that "a combination of print, electronic and other media" can also be helpful in recruiting international students. BCC also subscribes to several international student recruiting Web sites, which helps attract student inquiries.

According to Jessica Black, coordinator of international student services at the Community College of Philadelphia, a successful recruitment strategy "includes selecting a targeted region based on data and trends suggesting potential; researching economic and educational conditions in the region; establishing communication with colleagues in the region; advertising and promotion in the region, in addition to personal visits; a comprehensive follow-up plan to work with inquiries and applicants from the target region; and an assessment plan to measure interest and enrolment generated from the region."

Often motivated students take the initiative in finding their way to community colleges. When Diego Chiri graduated from high school in Lima, Peru at the age of 16, he wanted to come to the United States to study. He knew he wanted to find a school in Philadelphia, where his father was pursuing graduate work at Temple University. At a recruitment fair he attended at a hotel in Lima, he met a representative from the Community College of Philadelphia (CCP) who helped him not only by offering him "the best location and the best price," but who also "helped me make my transition to CCP more smoothly."

Jean Nataly, coordinator of international students at Tidewater Community College in Virginia notes that some students find their way to her campus by a process she calls "reverse transfer." "We have a lot of students who start at TCC: they realize the value of a community college education in terms of the cost, the smaller classes and more personalized services, and then at the end of their two years they transfer into a university. But we also have what we call 'reverse transfer' students who go to the large universities and get overwhelmed, and they need that more personalized touch that the community colleges can offer." Nataly says that getting to

know colleagues in international student offices at nearby four-year institutions can be “very helpful in terms of serving the students who move back and forth between these institutions.” In the Tidewater area, what began as informal professional friendships between international student advisers at TCC and nearby Old Dominion University has grown into a regional professional organization called HRFSA (Hampton Roads Foreign Student Advisors). “We meet once a month for breakfast, we talk about various regulatory issues that come up as well as

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discuss individual students. Sometimes we’ll meet on someone’s campus and have a more detailed conversation if there is something that requires more formal discussion,” Nataly says. The organization also has an active list-serve that is very helpful in facilitating the sharing of advice and support to local colleagues facing similar issues, helping educators draw on their collective expertise to more efficiently solve problems and better serve their students.

Of course, for students from developing countries, even the much lower cost of community colleges as compared to four-year institutions can be out of the reach for most families. The Community College Summit Initiative Program, launched by the U.S. State Department in the fall of 2007, funds talented “non-elite” foreign youth from six developing countries (Brazil, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, South Africa, and Turkey) for one or two years of training in certificate or A.A. programs in the United States that will enable them to contribute to their countries’ economic development. Eighty-four students participated in the first year of the program, and had nearly quadrupled, to 303 in the second year: plans to expand the program to other countries are under consideration.

### **The Benefits: A Two-Way Street**

All of the educators interviewed for this article were unanimous in their enthusiasm for the benefits of hosting international students on their campuses. “Not all Americans can travel abroad...but at least they can learn something from international students coming here,” Samia says. “You may talk about the Congo in class, but when you meet a student from the Congo you get more insight into what the Congo is all about...It’s a good educational experience for everybody.” Samia adds that

the presence of international students on his campus has also inspired professors to be more interested in globalization. “They want to go abroad too now...to be exposed to this teaching and learning process.” According to Maliwesky, “The most important contribution to campus life is the perspective [international students] bring to our classrooms. They are typically dedicated and persistent, and bring strong academic skills into the classroom.”

But it is not just in the classroom that international students make their mark. Many campuses have clubs for their international students, which offer a variety of opportunities for international and domestic students to mix and to encourage cultural interaction. Jessica Black, coordinator of international student services at CCP says, “Our international student club organizes events, trips, and cultural activities for the community.” International students also often take leadership roles in the campus community at large, joining clubs, and enthusiastically participating in community service activities and other campus-based activities. “There are years when our student government president has been an international student,” Samia says. “And this year we have five or six international students involved in student government, on the student newspaper ... They are really assimilated into

the entire campus. They are very integrated.” International students often also become actively involved in the off-campus community. “Some of our international students serve as student ambassadors who represent the College at official events,” says Black.

International students also often bring to community college campuses a greater awareness of the cultural advantages U.S. students may all too easily take for granted. Ignace Komlan Hounwanou, from Togo, West Africa, is enrolled in BCC’s two-year nursing program. “I was very amazed at how organized the education system here is, and how many resources are provided to students,” he says, listing highly-qualified instructors, libraries, well-equipped laboratories, study areas, advisors, and scholarships among them. Hounwanou, who plans to return to his country as a public health nurse to work in rural areas, may also provide U.S. students with a better understanding of the kinds of challenges people in developing countries face.

### **Providing the Best Welcome: Preparing for Special Needs**

Certainly a more international student population at the nation’s community colleges is a good thing, providing invaluable educational opportunities for international students as well as greater opportunities for cross-cultural exposure and learning for both foreign and domestic students. But international students do have special needs, and it is important for administrators to plan carefully to be sure that international students will have sufficient support and assistance when they arrive.

The first thing administrators need to plan for is how to facilitate the transition for students coming from countries where the academic system is often very different than the one in the United States. “A good recruitment plan should be paired with a solid admissions and orientation operation so that all inquiries are helped along through the enrollment process and all new students are assisted on arrival,” says Black. At the other end of the process, for those students who plan to transfer into a four-year institution upon graduation, advance planning and effective articulation

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with other institutions can be very helpful. "Our college has a dual admissions program with several partner universities," Black says. "The program allows students to commit early to their transfer institution and receive advising as well as financial aid and scholarship guarantees." At BCC, according to Samia, "The process begins when the student applies. They write an essay that tells us what major they are interested in, and they are given an advisor who helps articulate that interest and who helps them plan for their transfer." According to Samia, careful planning and individualized attention pay off in the long run. "Most of our students graduate with honors. They transfer to the best universities. One of my students last year transferred to Cornell."

While most international students who make it through the admissions process are

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highly motivated and do well, most also arrive with special needs, especially during the crucial orientation period. When asked what advice he would offer educators at community colleges who are just beginning to actively recruit international students, Maliwesky says, "Be totally prepared ... You need to have enough staff who are experienced in international education, including immigration, SEVIS, and the evaluation of foreign credentials. ... Unfortunately, at most community colleges, one expert must be prepared to be the only person in the office to do it all. You may even find yourself driving to the airport with your own car to pick up a student and housing him or her in your own home temporarily until the student finds a place to stay." Nataly also stresses the importance of such commitment. "We have an ethical obligation to our students," she says. "If we're going to attract and bring international students to our campuses we have to serve those students and meet their special needs ... We have to take a good, hard look at ourselves and make sure that we're able to serve those students in the professional capacity that they deserve."

## Student Ambassadors, Promoting Global Understanding

The practical and academic skills they acquire is only part of what international students gain by studying in the United States. "My experience in the U.S. has been awesome and enlightening in the American people and their culture," Hounwanou says, adding, "I find Americans hardworking, friendly, helpful, and very curious about other peoples' cultures, but they are also independent and very individualist." Chiri, who is majoring in liberal arts says, "I have a better understanding of the advantages and disadvantages that [the United States] is facing than I would have had only through the media." Chiri plans to transfer to a film program after earning his associate degree. "My intention is to write my own stories and show

them to the world. I want to make good movies, full of quality and rich in visual language that captures the Peruvian reality, its problems and the possible solutions that would help my country," he says. And while he is confident and aware of his own talent, he is also grateful for the opportunity he was given to develop it by coming here. "I am a creative person and I know that I have the necessary skills to reach my goals," he says. "However, I need the tools. In order to obtain these tools, I came to the United States to study." He adds, "The U.S. has also been a window to the rest of the world. Now I have a lot of friends from different nationalities, races, and ages, with different customs and perspectives. It is fascinating and I feel that I am learning something new every day. Coming to the United States has been one of the best experiences of my life." **IE**

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