

Not Your Grandfather's

Bellevue Community College is providing opportunity and promoting diversity in the Seattle suburbs.

By Christopher Connell



When *Rolling Stone* magazine listed Bellevue Community College (BCC) a few years back among the nation's best two-year colleges, longtime president B. Jean Floten had this to say: "I think it's way cool they recognized us."

Almost from the day it opened in 1966 in an affluent, largely white, highly educated suburb of Seattle, Washington, BCC has been a showcase campus. It sends thousands of students each year on to four-year colleges and universities or into the workforce with coveted skills and credentials for jobs in nursing, nuclear medicine, radiologic therapy, criminal justice, information technology, telecommunications, and other fields. Nestled between Lakes Washington and Sammamish and framed by the Cascade Mountains to the east and the Olympics to the west, it has retained its Pacific Northwest beauty while growing ever larger, more diverse, and distinctly international.

As the community college grew and became more diverse, so has the surrounding community. After a surge of immigration from Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe, Bellevue now has more than 110,000 inhabitants, a quarter of them minorities and a quarter born outside the United States. In a region that prides itself on education—Seattle was second in a recent academic study that ranked the nation's most literate cities—Bellevue is the pacesetter, with 54 percent of adults' holding college degrees, twice the national average.



Amidst this affluence and these accomplishments, community colleges figure prominently in the higher education aspirations for Washington residents. With only six public four-year colleges and universities, the state relies extensively on its 34 community and technical colleges to prepare students for the workforce and for bachelor degrees. Washington ranked 33rd among the states in 2000 in the percentage of residents with bachelor degrees, but 6th in the number of associate degrees, according to the Higher Education Coordinating Board. BCC, with more than 20,000 students enrolled each quarter—half for credit and half for continuing education classes—is the largest feeder school for the flagship University of Washington, and at times for Washington State University as well.

A Pacific Rim School Changes with Its Community

BCC set out in the 1990s to attract more international students and better serve them. The sylvan campus boasts academic space and facilities that a university might envy, including a planetarium and extensive computer labs, but nary a single dorm. It is

Editor's Note:
Condensed versions of the profiles of the five winners of the Senator Paul Simon Award for Campus Internationalization are being included in IE during 2005. The full profiles originally appeared in Internationalizing the Campus 2004: Profiles of Success at Colleges and Universities, which was sponsored by the U.S. Department of State and Educational Testing Service.

Community College

a commuter college, with 85 percent of students living within 10 miles of campus. Some of the hundreds of international students who have discovered BCC live with host families and ride public buses or fight traffic in their own cars. Some come for intensive English instruction or to participate in a one-year International Business Professions Program that combines classroom work with unpaid internships at major Seattle-area employers. BCC's Center for Liberal Arts brought Tibetan educator Nawang Dorjee to campus in 2002-03 as the college's first international scholar in residence. Dorjee taught classes and lectured throughout the Seattle area on Tibet history and culture. Building on that success, the college was selected by the Council for International Exchange of Scholars (CIES) to host a visiting Fulbright scholar in 2003-04, Stella Williams, a professor of agricultural economics from Nigeria. The ebullient Williams, a fisheries expert and feminist who received her Ph.D. at Auburn University, presided over a faculty seminar, taught a regular class on the environment, and was part of an interdisciplinary team that taught a special course called "Size Matters: Growth, Prosperity, and Equity in the Global Village" that counted for a full three-course load in the spring quarter. More than 60 students signed up. BCC this fall welcomed a second visiting Fulbright scholar, Dr. Eduardo R. Gomes, a political scientist from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Floten, a former speech and communications professor and longtime community college leader, said, "When you sit on the Pacific Rim, your orientation needs to be global. When you also are in the midst of corporations that are global, you understand the importance of teaching our students to be good global citizens."

The international students at BCC, like other out-of-staters, pay roughly three times the in-state tuition of \$841 per quarter for 15 credits. Tight state budgets have led BCC to restrain enrollment, but international students are not affected since they pay the full cost of the courses they take. "We add sections to make sure they are not taking a Washington student's spot," said Floten.

"We enjoy a fabulous community here. The people are highly educated and really have opened up their

hearts and homes to our international students," said Floten. "Families write me letters about how their lives have been enriched due to international students living in their homes."

"Bellevue is not your grandfather's community college," said Kim Pollock, who has taught English and ethnic studies classes at BCC for 11 years. Last year Pollock, an African American with Creole roots who was born in Chicago, Illinois, and raised in Lafayette, Louisiana, got a green light to create a department of ethnic and cultural studies, offering interdisciplinary courses taught by faculty drawn from many departments. "There's administrative support for experimental programs. When I asked people two years ago if I could create a new department of ethnic and cultural studies, I was told, 'There's no money for it—but if you want to do the work, feel free.'" A half-dozen



**President
B. Jean Floten**

courses already have been approved and more are in the works, including a Middle Eastern studies course taught jointly by a history instructor and the world languages staff from the college's Continuing Education division. A professor from India is developing a course that will examine Southeast Asia through the lens of business and industry.

Pollock, who taught a class in hip-hop culture in spring 2004 said, "Ten years ago most of our students

were white. Now I have people from all over the world and every ethnic identification you can think of in my classes.”

ESL classes at BCC include local teenagers who need remedial help and immigrants or refugees with advanced degrees in their own countries who are starting life over again in the United States. “The diversity by age and background provides a very rich classroom environment,” said Pollock. “People who come to BCC are very serious about their work. Most are paying for it themselves. They are often working full-time jobs, going to school, and raising families.” To accommodate those busy schedules, BCC offers classes that start at 6:30 a.m. and go as late as 10:00 p.m.

Due to visa restrictions, most international students can’t have outside jobs so, Pollock says, “they are here all day. They tend to take over the cafeteria, particularly in the afternoon, while the other kids are at work.”

“This is home for them. This is where their connections are,” said Tika Esler, dean of student services. On occasion, U.S. students have complained to Esler about something that an international student or teacher said in class, often about religion. One student took umbrage at a Muslim student’s defense of Islam’s treatment of women. “People are very passionate about religion,” said Esler. “In every case that I possibly can, I try to use that as a teachable moment and ask the students, ‘What did you get out of it? What did you learn that you didn’t know before?’”

Enriching the Campus with Diverse Perspectives

“The international students bring a real global perspective to the college,” said Esler, who adds that perspective herself. She is a Cuban native whose family emigrated to the United States in 1962 when she was a girl. A church relocation program brought them to Seattle, where her father, an accountant in his homeland, found work as a janitor in an aviation service company.

Esler is convinced that diversity enriches classroom discussions. “The students’ point of view can be pretty narrow if they all grew up in the same area, have the same friends, have the same viewpoints, and even the same religion,” she said. “When those who are not like you enter a classroom, they bring a totally different perspective to any issue, whether social, economic, or political. That’s the piece I am most excited about [regarding] this institution: we make a concerted effort to ensure that we have that global perspective in our classrooms and curriculum.”



Kim Pollock, English and ethnic studies



Visiting Fulbright Scholar Stella Williams, Ph.D., from Nigeria



Dean of Student Services Tika Esler

“We are lucky in where we are,” added Esler. “When this college first started, Bellevue was an elite location where all the rich people lived. That is no longer the case. We’ve got a very multinational population. We have a large Russian population, Hispanic population, Asian population. The population around us has changed, and the institution has risen to that occasion and responded to that multiculturalism.”

International students dominate the student government and are actively involved in clubs at BCC, including nearly a dozen ethnic student groups. Angel Kelchev, 22, whose family emigrated from Bulgaria after his mother won a green card through the U.S. State Department diversity lottery program, was elected student body president in May 2003. “The whole environment here welcomes students from all over the world. All the resources attract ambitious students from throughout the world,” said Kelchev, who compiled a 4.0 grade point average and won a Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Scholarship worth \$30,000 a year to complete his undergraduate education at Stanford University, where he plans to major in economics or business and eventually pursue a career in international law.

He was not the only family member enrolled at BCC. Younger sister Nikoleta Kelcheva began taking classes at the community college while still in high school, and last spring was elected to succeed him as student body president when no one stepped forward to challenge her for the post. Their parents take ESL classes at night. The mother, a lawyer in Bulgaria, now works as a housekeeper, while the father, a former engineer, drives a truck. “For my parents the transition

is way harder. They had their education and careers in Bulgaria. We were pretty well off. Basically they abandoned that so my sister and I could have a better chance,” the son said.

An Internationalized Faculty

Diane Douglas, director of the Center for Liberal Arts, runs the International Scholar in Residence program and was instrumental in getting the Fulbright board to send Stella Williams and Eduardo R. Gomes to BCC. She was recently appointed to serve a two-year term on CIES that will review colleges' applications to host visiting scholars for 2005-06.

Both Douglas and Williams are keen on making the Fulbright exchanges a two-way street. Williams hoped to convince the Fulbright program to pay for BCC media specialists to visit her university, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria, to tutor faculty in online and distance education technology. She also planned to solicit U.S. businesses in Africa to provide scholarships for BCC students to study in Nigeria. Williams also has invited Cris Samia, assistant dean and director

of BCC's International Student Programs, to visit her campus to counsel Nigerian students on opportunities to study in the United States. "BCC has special internship programs that they run with the Japanese government. Cris could come and visit Nigeria to run workshops and market these programs to parents who want their kids to do that," said Williams. "Right now a lot of BCC students go to Europe to study abroad. I'd like to get them to come to Africa."

"Sending faculty abroad is another deepening opportunity for us, another way to internationalize our curriculum," said Douglas. "We will reap many, many benefits when our faculty come back."

Remaining Welcoming in Difficult Times

In the decade after the college created its International Student Services office, the enrollment trajectory was straight upward, peaking at 778 international students from 70 countries in fall 2001. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., U.S. visa policies were tightened.

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Alan E. Yabui,
Ed.D, speech
and intercultural
communications
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These changes were at least partially responsible for a drop to 646 from 64 countries in fall 2002 and to 541 from 57 countries in fall 2003. But international enrollments rebounded to 645 students from 58 countries—a 19 percent jump—in fall 2004. With its stature as a top community college and a track record of making international students feel welcome, Cris Samia expects that number to keep growing. To make sure that it does, Samia regularly shuttles to China, Europe, and Latin America on recruiting trips. “We are currently exploring other nontraditional sources of international students, such as short-term programs with specific universities overseas,” said Samia, who was born and educated in the Philippines. His office also has hired more multilingual advisers to help students from admission to graduation.

Ludmila Beleva Viesse, 30, came to BCC in 1995 from her native Chisinau, Moldova, to take ESL classes, then earned a two-year degree, followed by a bachelor’s in business administration at Northwest College. She became a Microsoft-certified systems engineer, then returned to BCC to study for a certificate in program management and to work in the Student Programs office. “BCC is not just international because we have a lot of international students. It’s internationally friendly,” she said. “International students aren’t treated differently than other students. That’s what makes this place so attractive for people from different countries. Everyone is treated as a unique person, but no different from others. Everyone has an opportunity. Everyone is provided with a chance to do something if they want to.”

René Adel Smith, 25, a nursing major from Emanguti, South Africa, who also works in the International Student Programs office, said, “Here the frame of mind is you can do whatever you want to do as long as you put your mind to it. Back home, you could either do this or this. They’d tell you, ‘Because of your grades, you can only do this. You would never be good at that.’

Here you can reach for whatever goal you want.”

Faculty, too, talk about this sense of inclusion as a principal reason why they were drawn to teach at the community college. Phil Lucas, a Choctaw Indian and Emmy award-winning filmmaker whose documentaries on Native Americans have aired on PBS and Turner Broadcasting System, joined the faculty four years ago. “What really convinced me was the openness here,” said Lucas, who was born and raised in Phoenix, Arizona. “Cultural diversity is something that I am very, very sensitive to. I promote cultural diversity as much as I possibly can. This place is Bellevue Community Cultural Diversity College in a sense, it really is.”

“It’s pretty amazing what we have here. Just look at the student body,” he added. “I felt at home right away. I’ve been nothing but welcomed here and treated with the utmost respect. It’s a nice feeling.”

Intercultural Communication

Among the most popular faculty members on campus is speech professor Alan E. Yabui, Ed.D., who draws 300 students a year to his classes on intercultural communication. They are required for nursing majors. “The nurses themselves asked for it,” said Yabui, a retired U.S. Air Force lieutenant colonel. The nursing program recognized that its students needed to improve their skills in communicating with the diverse populations typically encountered in hospitals—and not just the patients, but the healthcare workers themselves, from physicians and pharmacists to the aides, kitchen staff, and custodians.

Yabui grew up on Maui, Hawaii, during the territorial era. His grandparents were immigrants from Japan. Many newly arrived international students sign up for his intercultural communication course, but so do many U.S. students. Yabui tries to get both to understand that “people have different communication styles, and students from different cultures think differently than American students.” He stresses



**Filmmaker and BCC faculty member
Phil Lucas**

the importance of learning to listen for “what is not stated” and recognizing one’s own ethnocentrism and prejudices.

Intercultural communications at BCC, Yabui said, are “good, but can improve. International students are part of the community and yet are separate.” The international students who flock to the cafeteria every morning and afternoon “are often isolated and socialize in ‘geographic country of origin’ groups,” he said, just as African American students tend to sit by themselves and white students by themselves. “If the ideal is a ‘global’ community, we are a long way from there,” Yabui said.

He does his part to foster communication across and among these balkanized groups. He assigns students to work in small, “culturally dissimilar” groups on projects that require teamwork on trips to such destinations as Uwajimaya, Seattle’s Asian food market. Although the name of the market is Japanese, there are merchants there selling foods and fruits from Thailand, the Philippines, China, and Korea as well as Japan. He has the students interview vendors and customers at the market and meld their quotes and insights together in a group report. To accomplish these tasks, the students are forced to overcome not only language barriers but also different perceptions of time, responsibility, and the proper approach to solving problems.

At a roundtable, six students from Yabui’s class spoke about what they were learning in the course. For all but one, it was an elective.

Izaak Williams, 22, of Seattle, expressed frustration with the ethnic enclaves in the cafeteria and with strangers who avert their eyes rather than saying hello to someone they pass in the street. “I find that separation hard, and that’s why I’m taking this class,” said Williams, who aspires to become a lawyer.

His cousin, Nathan Lucrisia, said it’s not the seating arrangements in the cafeteria that have to change. “It’s the understanding each person has to have with other groups and with each other. You can’t expect everybody to accommodate to your way,” said the well-traveled Lucrisia, who is originally from Cleveland, Ohio and formerly lived in Kauai, Hawaii. He is part Filipino and speaks Tagalog. “Somebody might be shy. You shouldn’t assume that they didn’t want to acknowledge you or speak with you just



BCC students (front, l to r) Hsin-ning Lin, Meron Emun, Crystal Matthews, (top, l to r) Izaak Williams, Chia-wei Yeh, and Nathan Lucrisia

because they didn’t look back. Perhaps they did when you weren’t looking. We’ve just got to learn different ways to blend in, adapt, or move around,” said Lucrisia, an international studies major.

Meron Emun, 23, an international student from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, said, “Back home you don’t look at [strangers] or say ‘hi’ to people you don’t know. When I came here at first I thought it was very strange that people looked at you and smiled or said ‘hi’ even if they didn’t know you. But after a while, it’s really nice.” Emun, who was wearing a stylish shirt that said *ATTENTION GETTER* and who speaks perfect English, has switched majors from fashion merchandising to nursing.

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BCC students
Salima Banu
Iezzi and Kanize
Khaki



Hsin-ning Lin, 24, of Magoun, Taiwan, who arrived in Bellevue this spring to study graphic design, said in her country, when students encounter each other, they often ask as a conversation starter, “Have you had lunch?” But, she added, it doesn’t mean they want you to dine with them. “It doesn’t mean anything. It’s like saying ‘How are you?’” she said. For “people who don’t understand our culture,” that phrase may leave them befuddled.

Student Diversity

BCC attracts students young and old. The average age of students taking courses for credit at BCC is 25. The continuing education students push the average up to 30. A quarter of students are still in their teens, while

10 percent are 40 or older.

Among the latter are Salima Banu Iezzi, a Nepali citizen who moved to Redmond, Washington, with her husband and daughter five years ago, and Kanize Khaki, a native of Tanzania, East Africa, who moved to this area 19 years ago with her husband, who is Microsoft’s corporate vice president for Windows networking. They signed up for classes after getting one of the catalogues the college regularly mails out to homes throughout Bellevue and the surrounding communities of Mercer Island, Issaquah, Snoqualmie Valley, and Skykomish.

Iezzi is a personal trainer and group fitness instructor who once taught aerobics on television in Nepal. “I had my own business. It was hard for me to start all over again,” said Iezzi, who is studying exercise physiology and teaches aerobics at several area sites, including to a women’s group at a Muslim academy. Both Iezzi and Khaki are Muslim; Khaki was wearing a veil as she ate the lunch she had brought from home.

“I could have gone to the University of Washington, but I came here for the small classes and the convenience,” said Khaki. “I’ve been a stay-at-home mom. I’ve always taken care of the family. I wanted my kids to go to college. But now I have inspiration to do that for myself. I would like to get a degree from here.” With two children in college—at Carleton and Whitman colleges—and a third finishing high school,

A Diverse Place Works Hard to Stay That Way

Even in an institution that prides itself on its domestic and international diversity, it can be difficult and unsettling for people to talk frankly about issues of race and cultural differences.

The faculty and staff at BCC who belong to the Diversity Caucus are doing their part to encourage what they call these “Courageous Conversations.” Kim Pollock, English and Ethnic and Cultural Studies instructor, and counselor Akemia Matsumoto were the driving forces behind the program, and business professor Leslie Lum and academic reference librarian Sayumi Irey have been active participants.

“The Diversity Caucus started as a grassroots movement ... to make sure the curriculum reflected the multicultural nature of our college, of our students, of our community, and of our world,” said Lum, who was born in Vancouver, Canada.

The Diversity Caucus has arranged and held two week-

end retreats where up to 60 faculty, administrators, and staff came together for frank discussions about race and making room for other cultures in the classroom and everyday campus life. Irey, a University of Washington graduate who was born in Nagoya, Japan, said the purpose was not to enforce uniformity of thought, but to encourage everyone to make room for other cultures at BCC. “We want to make sure that students from different countries and different parts of the United States and with diverse points of view are comfortable in the classroom and participate and learn,” she said.

The Diversity Caucus sponsors events and speakers on campus, but Lum believes the heart of its work is getting people to talk. “It’s not event-driven. It’s not just eating the food. Usually the joke is, if you eat the food, then you’re multicultural, right?” she laughed. “Something basic is happening here that’s going to make us truly a pluralistic community.” **IE**

it's possible she could receive a diploma at the same time her children get theirs.

Both friends described BCC as a perfect fit. "This community college is really good—very multinational," said Iezzi, who was born in Kalimpong, India, in the foothills of the Himalayas.

Floten, the college president, has a nephew enrolled at BCC whom she spotted carrying a history of the Persian Empire. It turned out he was reading the book not for class, but from curiosity. "He's made friends here from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, and Armenia, and he is interested in their history," she said.

Floten, whose office is appointed with artwork from Asia, sees the entire community benefiting from the international path that BCC has chosen. "Having this diverse community—which means diverse thought, diverse religions, diverse ethnicities—enriches our classroom discussions and helps students gain a different perspective about the world," said Floten. The campus radio station, KBCS, a noncommercial station run by a small professional staff and relying largely on volunteers, plays its part, too. Its 8,000-watt signal, serving up jazz,



KBCS's Steve Ramsey and colleagues

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folk, and world music, along with the BBC and “Democracy Now!” news broadcasts, can be heard across the Puget Sound. “I’m very proud of our radio station. I can’t tell you how many events I go to and people comment about the radio station and how much they like the world music and the perspective about democracy,” said Floten. The radio station, which recently moved off campus to roomier quarters in a shopping mall, raises \$250,000 a year from listeners. “It’s a great model. It’s an outreach effort for the college,” said Steve Ramsey, the general manager. “We’re telling 45,000 people every week about Bellevue Community College through what we offer on the air.”

While international enrollments at BCC dropped after the terrible events of September 11, 2001, those attacks also “made all of us profoundly aware of how global we are, with all its negative connotations as well as positive. There was a resurgence of interest in the world outside of Bellevue from our students’ point of view,” said Floten. “Students wanted to know more about Islam, more about fanaticism. They wanted to understand the world and to make a contribution ... I see students concerned about a society greater than their own community.”

Looking Forward

BCC, like other public colleges in Washington and across the nation, has had to deal with constricted state funding. Against its nature, it has had to restrain enrollment growth. It is looking at ways to keep growing and keep itself open to new ideas and directions. “We’re developing a curriculum in telecommuting. Now there are work teams that cross all time zones in this community for product delivery. We’re seeing more jobs moving offshore. We’re seeing corporations’ trying to manage that phenomenon. I certainly want to make our [U.S.] students competitive, but I think as we become more globalized, people need to understand how to work in the global community,” said Floten. “Our students are studying telecommuting, teleconferencing—things that make our world smaller—with their challenges and opportunities.”

BCC also is eager to expand its capabilities in distance education. Floten wants to bring more Chinese students to study on this campus. “Here we have this sleeping giant of a country and right now they are trying to absorb how to do business and how to really enter the world that we have,” she said. “I believe we ought to be fostering those connections.” She is also looking for partnerships with colleges and universities

in Australia and New Zealand “to expand the vision of the Pacific rim to a deeper grasp.”

BCC has been blessed with a great location and excellent facilities. It houses the National Workforce Center for Emerging Technologies, which is a National Science Foundation Center for Excellence, bolstering its strength in information technology. It retrains hundreds of workers and offers more continuing education classes than any of the state’s 33 other community colleges. It has formed an alliance with Eastern Washington University (EWU) that allows students to earn an EWU bachelor’s degree without leaving the BCC campus. BCC is, as the editors of *Rolling Stone* judged seven years ago, a model of what a community college should be. Its international programs are an important part of its distinction, and this has happened not by chance but by design. **IE**

CHRISTOPHER CONNELL is a veteran Washington, D.C. journalist and former assistant bureau chief for The Associated Press.

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