



The Role of Community Colleges in Global Workforce Development

*White Paper from the NAFSA Global
Workforce Development Roundtable Series*

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Community colleges play an important role within the U.S. higher education system, connecting students and workers to the local economy and community. Public-private partnerships, training programs, and educational opportunities that take place at community colleges connect the educational institution's missions to the broader needs of their communities. And in the global economy and global marketplace of the twenty-first century, they must also connect the local to the global. Unfortunately, more than 50 percent of community colleges report a low or very low level of internationalization (ACE 2017) and only 2 percent of study abroad in the United States takes place at community colleges (IIE 2018b). NAFSA has long believed that U.S. higher education needs to do more to prioritize international education and ensure that all students are globally competent before they graduate. This includes studying abroad, welcoming international students, internationalizing the curriculum, forming international partnerships, and a host of other international activities. Community and technical colleges must be included in those efforts.

A significant portion of U.S. workers will never attend or graduate from a four-year higher education institution, but those workers will be competing in the same global economy as those who do. So, it is imperative to find ways to provide global learning opportunities to this important segment of the higher education population.

In October 2018, NAFSA convened a roundtable discussion on "The Role of Community Colleges in Global Workforce Development." This was a follow-up discussion to the April 2018 NAFSA Worldview Global Workforce Development Roundtable on "[The Economic Imperative of a Global Education](#)." We gathered higher education, business, and policy leaders together to discuss the unique role of community colleges within the international education environment and how to address the needs of their students in the twenty-first century.

For many years, NAFSA has worked to substantially increase the number and diversity of students who are able to study abroad. We have done this through our policy work by advocating for the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act and through partnering with the U.S. State Department on their regional initiatives, including 100,000 Strong in the Americas and 100,000 Strong China. Through these initiatives, we have piloted an institutional approach to increasing study abroad that provides higher education institutions, including community and technical colleges, additional resources to enact long-term systemic changes on campus to grow study abroad participation. The Simon Act has been endorsed by more than a dozen international and higher education associations, including the American Association of Community Colleges, and would be a powerful catalyst for internationalizing higher education across the United States. Its passage would have an outsized impact on students served by two-year institutions because of its focus on increasing the diversity of students studying abroad.

This white paper, based on the roundtable discussion, will explore the specific role that community colleges play in preparing their students for the global workforce.

The Labor Market

In the 2016–17 academic year, community colleges taught and trained more than 12 million students in the United States, with almost 1 million students graduating with an

associate's degree (AACC 2019). The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce has looked specifically at the job market for workers without a bachelor's degree and found that there are 30 million good jobs for these workers. Good jobs are defined as jobs that pay

at least \$35,000 per year with an average yearly salary of \$56,000 (GUCEW 2018). Its report, *Good Jobs that Pay Without a BA* (2017), found that across the United States there are still a significant number of job opportunities for workers without a four-year degree. The OECD's Skills Beyond School (2014) report estimated that at least one-third of job openings are for workers with some higher education, but short of a four-year degree. These "middle-skill" jobs represent a significant portion of the U.S. labor market and will continue to for the foreseeable future.

The Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce's analysis of the labor market trends for workers without a bachelor's degree found that despite losing 2.5 million jobs, manufacturing remains the top industry (GUCEW 2017), but that skilled services such as financial services and healthcare have seen the most growth. These are industries and occupations that are impacted by the global economy and require at least a basic level of global and cultural competence. The great recession showed that global financial markets are intractably linked, and health care workers on the front lines of delivering care, including nurses, home health workers, and EMTs, use global and cultural competencies every day. Even traditional blue-collared jobs in manufacturing and construction are impacted by international trade and commerce.

In today's labor market, it is almost impossible to be unaffected by the global forces influencing our economy. Students attending two-year institutions need to be prepared to live, work, and thrive in that global marketplace.

Leadership Buy-in

One roundtable attendee spelled out the many benefits of internationalizing community and technical colleges. Such an effort enhances the learning environment, strengthens the local economy, increases the prestige of the institution, and improves the global competence of students. These are all benefits that community college leaders generally acknowledge and understand. However, he went on to acknowledge that although many community college leaders recognize these benefits, some may also view international efforts as secondary to the mission of serving the local community and do not want administrators, staff, and faculty spending too much time on them.

Attendees talked about several strategies for building institutional support for internationalization activities. They suggested partnering with local businesses to develop study abroad programs, inviting international students to

participate in board of trustee meetings, and including administrators on international trips. There is also evidence that applying for competitive grants can build support for internationalization across campus. In a report released in 2016, NAFSA found that applying for an Innovation Grant from the 100,000 Strong in the Americas Innovation Fund increased support for internationalization activities and that support continued to increase even after the grant money expired. The report also found, unsurprisingly, that support from campus leadership was "extremely or very important" to the success of study abroad activities (NAFSA 2016).

Every institution will have its own unique challenges and opportunities when it comes to providing global learning opportunities for its students, but to be successful they all will need broad support from leaders across campus. Grant opportunities, like those that would be created by the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program, offer internationalization champions the opportunity to articulate the benefits, identify partners (on and off campus), and build crucial leadership support.

Meet Students Where They Are

There is no one correct way to internationalize a community college or structure a study abroad program for students at a two-year institution. Across all of higher education, "nontraditional" students are becoming the norm and this trend is even more pronounced at community colleges. Community college students often work to financially support themselves and pay for school and many have families. In fact, 15 percent are single parents (AACC 2019). Community college students are also generally from lower socioeconomic statuses, with almost half reporting that they have "run out of money" at some point during the year and had to take out loans or borrow money to make ends meet (AACC 2017). Because of the demographics of the students and the fact that they have less time to complete their degrees, roundtable participants asserted that it is necessary to "meet students where they are" and make internationalization work for them. This is done by internationalizing curricula, sharing classrooms and campuses with international students, utilizing technology, and creating education abroad programs that fit the needs and realities of the student population.

A community college president who attended the roundtable said that she views internationalization as a three-legged stool that includes study abroad, enrolling international students, and providing professional growth

opportunities for faculty. It can be challenging, but it is possible to internationalize a community college education, including providing study abroad programs. Each of these activities work together to expand students' worldviews and create a window into the world outside of their community and state.

International students enrich the campus culture and academic environment. They bring different worldviews and enable their classmates to engage more critically with their coursework through debates and conversations inside and outside the classroom. Including these different points of views in class increases critical thinking and teaches students how to work collaboratively in multicultural environments.

Similarly, studying abroad increases critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork skills. Although studying abroad can be more difficult for community college students, it is not impossible. The key is to make study abroad work for the student population. Summer and winter programs, short-term offerings, and a commitment to ensuring that students will not miss credits needed for graduation is important. One community college represented at the roundtable has a 20-year history of taking students to Vietnam during the summer. During one trip to Kenya, students participated in archeological digs where a 13-million-year-old ape skull was discovered. The service-learning and medical programs that the school developed in Honduras provide emergency medical technician (EMT) students with relevant experience focused on major blood loss due to traumatic events. Another program in Guatemala supported a local community by building a new school facility. The school prioritized internationalization by engaging with stakeholders, including their foundation, faculty, donors, and businesses, and have developed programs that appeal to their students and meet their needs. Despite the challenges, the benefits of studying abroad become clear when students who have never previously left the state return from a program with greater poise, confidence, and an understanding of the world outside of their community.

Global Competence Can Save Lives

The business community needs globally competent workers. A survey of U.S. businesses found that global competency was valued in both line workers and management (Daniel, Xie, and Kedia 2014). This survey confirms the anecdotal evidence from international educators across

the country who speak to employers about the skills they are looking for when hiring.

A representative of an international medical device company provided an illustrative example of his need for global and cultural competence. He cited his experience selling medical devices in different countries around the world saying that consumers react differently based on their unique historical and cultural contexts. A strategy or product that works for the majority of clients in the United States will not necessarily work in countries with different backgrounds. For example, a population of consumers who are skeptical of authority based on a history of oppression or abuse by those in power needs to be treated differently, especially when it comes to invasive medical procedures, than consumers who trust authority more inherently. If a company attempts to enter a new market without fully understanding the cultural context in which they will be operating, they risk losing trust in their brand and product as well as the financial investment. The stakes are high for any company trying to break into a new market, but global competence is even more important when the product can literally save lives. Businesses, like this one, look to hire workers who have global experiences and can demonstrate their global competence.

Several attendees also expressed interest in global apprenticeship or internship programs as an exciting option for community college students. These types of programs provide students with hands-on work experience combined with global and cultural learning and allow community colleges to partner with the businesses that will be hiring their students after graduation. Working with employers also ensures that the students will be gaining the exact skills and knowledge that they will need in the workforce. This is a promising new path for global learning for community college students.

Conclusion

With almost 40 percent of college students in the United States pursuing an associate's degree and a third of job openings requiring less than a four-year degree, the role of community colleges in preparing the next generation of workers is clear. Yet, the level of internationalization and study abroad opportunities at two-year institutions is lacking. Almost as many students study abroad from New York University annually as do students from all community and technical colleges combined (IIE 2018a). This leaves far too many students on the wrong side of the global divide and increases the likelihood that they will fall behind.

It is possible for community and technical colleges to internationalize their campuses and provide meaningful international education programs for their students despite the challenges that exist. Innovative programming that meets students where they are, dedicated leadership that understands the value of global learning, and strong partnerships with the business community can help narrow the global divide and ensure that all students have equal access to quality global learning opportunities.

This is not a problem that community and technical colleges can address by themselves. It will take a concerted effort from the higher education community, business leaders, and policymakers to create a higher education system that values international education at all levels and provides the same global learning opportunities for students at all types of institutions.

Congress can act by passing the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Program Act to encourage global learning by students of all backgrounds and by advancing immigration policies that attract and retain international students and scholars.

Business leaders can act by strongly articulating the global skills and experiences that they desire and by working with community and technical colleges to develop programs that provide those skills.

Higher education can act by prioritizing international education on campuses and integrating internationalization into curricula.

NAFSA is committed to advocating for policies that create a more welcoming, globally informed, and globally engaged United States, and we will continue to develop resources that equip international educators on college campuses around the world to better serve their students.

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