

Community Colleges Enjoy Surge in Popularity

Foreign Students Cite Affordability as the Main Attraction

by Robert Sedgwick
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An ever-increasing number of foreign students coming to the United States for higher education are choosing the affordability and flexibility of community colleges over traditional four-year schools.

Despite several years of level growth in the total number of overseas students attending American institutions of higher education — a trend that was only reversed last year (see Regional News) — international enrollments at community colleges actually rose significantly during the same period.

From 1993 to 1997, for example, overall foreign enrollments at U.S. colleges and universities increased only 7 percent while, at the same time, two-year colleges witnessed a 20 percent increase. During the 1997/98 academic year, there were 73,443 overseas students enrolled in U.S. community colleges, a 13-percent increase over the previous year.

Although community colleges did not play much of a role in educational exchange in the past, they are now both attracting and courting students from abroad on an unprecedented level. Of 624 two-year colleges participating in a 1995 national survey conducted by the American Association of Community Colleges, 80 percent responded that they offered international education programs of some kind. These included everything from student-exchange programs to overseas distance learning.

Moreover, 63 percent offer intensive English language programs. Overseas two-year transfer programs are also becoming more prevalent among community col-

leges.

Brookdale Community College in New Jersey, for instance, has a branch campus in Guayaquil, Ecuador, where students can earn credits and transfer to either Brookdale or other U.S. colleges and universities.

Likewise, Broward Community College in Florida, Regents College (the University of the State of New York) and Miami-Dade Community College in Florida have all established links with American-style schools around the globe.

The Appeal of Community Colleges

One of the biggest motivating factors in choosing a community college over a four-year institution is obviously money. After currencies were devalued in Indonesia, Malaysia, South Korea and Thailand, many Asians who were studying at four-year institutions transferred to cheaper community colleges.

But foreign students began flocking to two-year institutions even before the Asian crisis. With tuition costs mounting throughout the decade, more and more of these students have been taking advantage of community college programs that offer an affordable alternative to some of the more expensive four-year schools. Aside from the financial benefits, however, foreigners tend to gravitate towards two-year institutions for a variety of reasons.

For starters, students are attracted to the specialized, short-term training programs offered by community colleges.

"Students who come to the U.S. for higher education are not necessarily interested in pursuing the traditional four-year degree track," explained Audree Chase, coordinator of international services at

the American Association of Community Colleges.

"Many of them are looking to earn associate degrees and certificates through short-term programs not offered by universities in their home countries. These programs can last anywhere from six months to two years and provide certification in a wide range of vocations, including welding, accounting and technical training."

Still, other foreign students are only interested in coming to the United States to improve their English skills for a short duration before returning home to finish their studies and take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam. The numerous intensive and non-intensive language programs offered at two-year institutions give them flexibility to do this at prices they can afford.

Furthermore, the community college can serve as an ideal stepping-stone to a four-year degree program and, hence, functions as a kind of feeder system to the larger schools.

"If you're not at all familiar with the American system of higher education this is a good way to get your feet wet," said Nancy Predham, the international student adviser at Monterey Peninsula Community College. "They [foreign students] like the smaller classrooms, the hands-on help, student services and career counseling we provide.

"All these factors help build up their confidence enough to make the jump to a four-year degree program."

Recruitment and Outreach

Because the majority of community colleges do not have the resources or budgets to recruit overseas, most foreigners find out

about two-year programs through alternative channels.

Word of mouth is one of the biggest, according to Linda Korbel of the American Council on International and Intercultural Education.

"Very often, the pipeline of students from overseas to the two-year colleges in the U.S. comes through relatives living in the community or through faculty connections," she said. "Other times, they learn about a particular community college through a sister college relationship in their own country, or sometimes it's through institution-to-institution exchange programs."

Northern Virginia Community College is forbidden by its charter to recruit overseas. Despite this handicap, its five campuses took in a total of 2,626 international students last year. Some of these students initially heard about the school when they came to the United States to visit friends and relatives who live in the community. Others either transferred from four-year colleges or matriculated after completing a semester of one of the college's intensive English programs.

In addition, many schools attribute the surge in overseas enrollments to the Internet. Foreigners interested in coming to the United States to study have access to more information about community colleges at their fingertips than ever before thanks largely to new computer technology.

In general, today's international students are better informed and really shop around. They surf the World Wide Web, talk to friends and carefully read the colleges' guide books before choosing a particular school or program.

Finally, a growing number of community colleges have been actively recruiting overseas in recent years. Many of the strategies they use to attract foreign applicants are similar to those employed by four-year schools.

These include participating in international recruitment fairs, and setting up outreach seminars and workshops, in addition to advertising in both the local and the international press.

Dr. Paul McCuay, director of International Studies at Delaware County Community College, asserts that one of the major selling points that community colleges use when recruiting overseas is guaranteed matriculation.

"The community college is ideal for foreign students who have good grades but can't get into a four-year program because of low TOEFL scores," he said. "Enrollment at a two-year institution, in fact, pre-qualifies them for admission to a state university."

Overcoming Budget Constraints

Many of these colleges have found ways to circumvent the budgetary constraints that have inhibited their ability to recruit overseas in the past.

Representatives of Delaware County Community College, for example, travel to many countries as part of a consortium of five other American community colleges that pool their resources and increase their visibility vis-à-vis the larger colleges and universities.

Most two-year schools that have taken part in international recruitment tours have reported tremendous success. Santa Monica College, for example, enrolled a total of 2,400 foreign students last year — more than any other two-year institution. At present, the college has students from 110 countries. About 70 percent of these students come from Asia.

Europe accounts for 17 percent, and the college is trying to recruit more from the Middle East, Latin America and Africa.

Community Colleges Gain in Status

One of the biggest challenges community colleges have had to overcome with regard to overseas recruitment is how to sell the notion of a two-year degree program to foreign consumers of American higher education.

After all, the two-year college is a uniquely American institution that was specifically designed to serve and benefit the local community. Although the concept has been embraced in much of Asia, it has yet to catch on in other parts of the world.

Moreover, foreign students tend to be quite elitist when it comes to higher education in the United States. Many are not convinced that an associate degree earned from a two-year college will count for very much when they return home in search of jobs.

But Dr. Ravi Kallur, director of international student affairs at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, believes that many of the negative images associated with community colleges have been eradicated in recent times.

"For many years now, there has been this feeling that the level of education offered at American community colleges was not of a high quality," he said.

"However, as more and more two-year colleges go overseas to recruit and with more information about community colleges available on the Internet, this perception is changing."

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