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# INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

An Unplanned Diversity

By Linda Serra Hagedorn

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## About the Author

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## About the Series

On July 30, 2018, the American Council on Education (ACE) convened close to 40 nationally recognized higher education researchers and scholars to discuss strategies to increase completion rates, close equity gaps, and support leaders at our nation's community colleges. Informed by that meeting, ACE invited proposals from the participants for a series of action-oriented briefs focused on key topics for community college leaders. This brief is the third in that five-part series.



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One Dupont Circle NW  
Washington, DC 20036

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**Suggested citation:** Hagedorn, Linda Serra. 2020. *International Students in Community Colleges: An Unplanned Diversity*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education.

**Cover photo:** College of DuPage welcomed 16 students from around the world through the 2019–2020 Community College Initiative program. CC BY 2.0.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The American community college was designed to provide low-cost, workforce/technical, and lower division college instruction at convenient locations. In response, colleges created student support structures to enhance nontraditional student accessibility to older, of-color, working, low-SES, parents, or other students with circumstances preventing them from attending four-year colleges and universities. Simply put, community colleges were not designed to attract and serve international students.

This brief examines why international students have chosen to enroll in community colleges, benefits that international students bring, as well as important instructions regarding what community colleges can do to attract and serve international students.

## Introduction



Plainly speaking, community colleges were developed for Americans. Initially designed to extend the education of local high school graduates, community colleges flourished with the 1944 GI Bill and as American veterans sought additional education (Hutcheson 2007). The 1947 President's Commission on Higher Education (or the Truman Commission) also promoted postsecondary education, further solidifying the role of local community colleges in serving Americans (Hutcheson 2007).

It wasn't until the 1980s and 1990s that community colleges sought globalization (Levin 2001). Many community colleges defined their role as training students to work in a globally competitive world (Levin et al. 2017), but very few tied their efforts to enrolling international students. While community colleges had sincere intentions when welcoming international students, they had little insight into or training on what globalization meant or how to achieve it. Despite the lack of effort to recruit international students, community colleges have done so and continue to do so.

Figure 1 shows the number of international undergraduates from 2002 to 2016 in both four-year and two-year institutions. While the figure indicates an increase in the number of international students in *all* types of higher education, the number of students enrolling in community colleges has been relatively constant. This is due not only to the aforementioned minimal recruitment efforts but also to an international lack of understanding of the transfer function of community colleges. However, while the number of international students at community colleges may seem low, it represents approximately 10 percent of the total international enrollment in degree-granting U.S. higher education institutions (IIE 2018a).

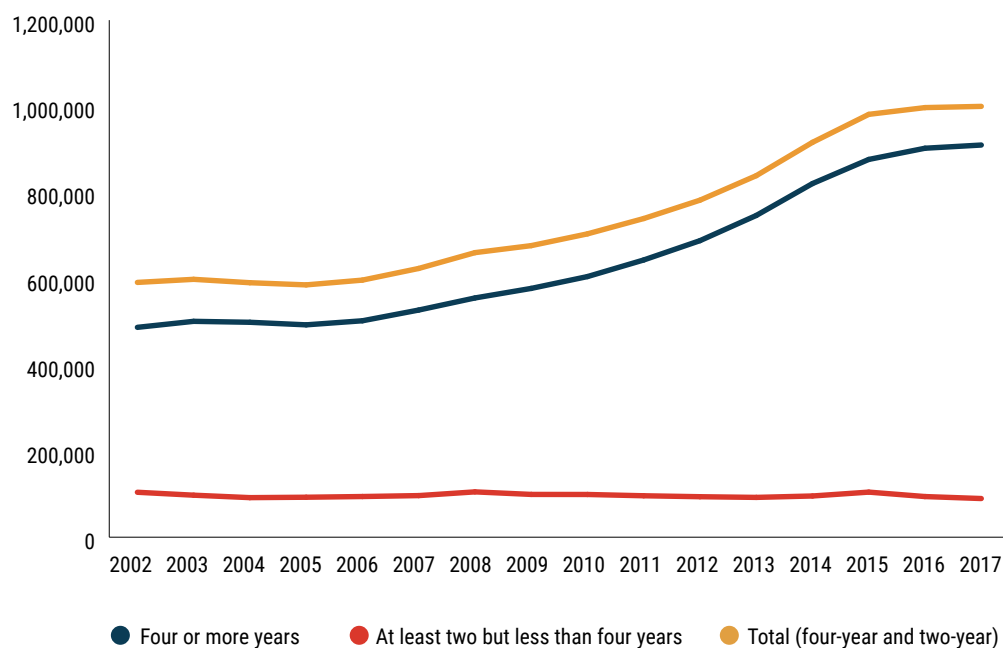
Recent changes, as well as some declines in enrollment patterns across all higher education types, have prompted many community colleges, like their four-year counterparts, to actively attract and recruit more international students. However, building a successful international community on campus is more than just a numbers game. International students can benefit a college (and its bottom line), but they must be supported to be successful.

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**Figure 1.** Total International Students and Total Two-Year College Students, 2002–17

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Fall Enrollment Component

## Local Community, Global Benefits: International Enrollment at Two Institutions

The word *community* connotes a focus and investment in the local, easily seen in the mission statements of most community colleges. For example, take the following quotations from a sample of community colleges: “meet[ing] the educational, training and cultural needs of the communities [we] serve,”<sup>1</sup> “serving the higher education needs of a diverse eight-county service area,”<sup>2</sup> and “being a student-centered and community-based community college.”<sup>3</sup>

While a handful of community college mission statements include references to globally informed citizens, I was unable to identify any mission statements that included a reference to serving international students. Despite an emphasis on the local environs, college and university leaders are aware of the positive financial perspective for enrolling international students, both for their institution and the greater community.

1 <https://www.waynecc.edu/about-wcc/mission-goals>

2 <https://www.roanestate.edu/?5453-Roane-State-Mission-Statement>

3 <http://www.wcccd.edu/about/mission.htm>

Analyses for the 2017–18 academic year reveal that the 1,094,792 international students in all types of postsecondary institutions contributed more than \$39 billion to the economy and have supported in excess of 455,000 jobs (NAFSA 2019). Indeed, these benefits extend to community colleges. To better grasp the financial benefits, specifically at the community college level, I present details concerning two contrasting states: California and Iowa. California serves as an excellent example since it hosts the largest number of international students. Iowa, on the other hand, resembles many states: not on either coast, attracting fewer international students, and typically not considered in decisions and discussions regarding international enrollments. Table 1 lists the five community colleges in each of these states that enroll the largest number of international students, as well as the financial benefits, measured by dollars to the economy and the number of jobs supported.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 1.** Financial Benefits of International Students in Select Community Colleges in California and Iowa

State	Institution	Dollars (in Millions)	Jobs
California	Santa Monica College	\$105.60	616
	Foothill College	\$56.90	329
	Orange Coast College	\$48.60	282
	Diablo Valley College	\$39.90	234
	Santa Barbara City College	\$36.40	212
Iowa	Kirkwood Community College	\$7.30	36
	Indian Hills Community College	\$3.10	15
	Iowa Central Community College	\$2.00	10
	North Iowa Area Community College	\$1.30	6
	Iowa Lakes Community College	\$0.63	3

Sources: NAFSA 2017a; NAFSA 2017b

Specifically, Santa Monica College and Kirkwood Community College have the largest number of international students in their respective states. Both colleges are also among the largest in their states and desirable for all transfer-bound students due to their geographic proximity to a highly ranked university that accepts transfers. Specifically, many Santa Monica students transfer to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), while many Kirkwood students transfer to nearby University of Iowa.

The 2018–19 fees<sup>5</sup> at Santa Monica College for non-California residents (which include international students) are approximately eight times as much as in-state students: an

4 NAFSA: Association of International Educators reports annually on the national, state, and district-level economic impact of international student enrollment in the United States. For more information about how these estimates are calculated, see the NAFSA methodology note in *The Economic Value of International Student Enrollment to the U.S. Economy*.

5 California charges “fees” rather than tuition.

additional \$300 per unit over the \$46 per unit charged to California domestic residents, along with a nonresident surcharge of \$24 per unit, resulting in a total fee of \$370 per unit. Hence, all international students pay eight times as much as in-state students for their courses.

In comparison, the cost of attendance at Kirkwood Community College in Iowa is calculated on a three-tier tuition structure in which Iowa residents pay \$169 per credit hour, domestic nonresidents pay \$215 per credit hour, and international students pay the highest rate of \$338 per credit. Hence, international students pay exactly twice as much for the same credit hour as Iowa residents.

When considering the financial benefits of international students, one should also add the contributions from the purchase of books from the college bookstore, food from on-campus vending, and in some cases such as Kirkwood, the utilization of student housing.

This two-state comparison indicates that although the specific financial benefits of international students to community colleges may vary, they are nonetheless significant and may serve to relieve some of the pressures community colleges face to become more entrepreneurial as state and local aid shrink (Redden 2016).

Becoming an international community college requires thoughtful planning and intentional efforts. Both Santa Monica College (SMC) and Kirkwood Community College have specific efforts and programs to recruit, orient, and retain international students.

At SMC, recruitment is multifaceted, including online advertisements and recruitment fairs in key regions, including those sponsored by EducationUSA. EducationUSA, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State,

is a network of over 400 international student advising centers across the world aimed at promoting U.S. higher education and helping international students find a college or university that best fits their need (EducationUSA 2019). Like some other colleges with targets for international students, SMC also works with paid agents. While this can be risky and may not be suitable for other colleges, SMC has found reputable agencies in countries of interest that have been instrumental in

recommending the college to students who would benefit from their programs. However, according to SMC's dean of international education, "the majority of our international students come to Santa Monica College after hearing about us from a friend or family member who attended previously. Our educational program and outstanding professors

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are the most important elements of our recruitment strategy.”<sup>6</sup> Of course, the college also benefits from its Los Angeles location, proximity to beaches, and its transfer programs to UCLA.

Once a student enrolls, orientation starts before students leave their home countries with online instructional modules. The college encourages new international students to arrive on campus at least one month before the start of their first semester to allow them to complete the orientation process and assessment tests while settling into housing. The college also offers international student peer mentors from students’ home countries to answer questions about student life and academics.

When students arrive on campus, Santa Monica College offers an international student services array, complete with a physical International Education Center and an international student counseling center. There is an International Student Club to help students connect with other international students. Web pages, translatable into 12 languages,<sup>7</sup> provide step-by-step admissions advice, information on health care and insurance, deadlines, orientations, counseling information, English language support options, visa regulations, and more.

Like SMC, Kirkwood Community College also invests in international recruitment. The college employs a full-time international recruiter who works with students from initial contact until they enroll. Kirkwood also utilizes the services of EducationUSA and posts scholarships to its website. Kirkwood has sent representatives to targeted recruitment fairs that EducationUSA hosts across the globe for prospective students. Kirkwood also works with paid agents. Often the agents will recommend a community college when students need English language support or need an opportunity to prove their academic proficiency prior to being accepted to highly ranked universities.

Students who choose to enroll at Kirkwood can expect services such as airport pickup, special orientation sessions, additional student advising specific to international student needs, tutoring, and the services of a writing center.

Other Kirkwood international recruitment tactics include reaching out to local immigrant groups to provide instruction on how American community colleges in general and Kirkwood specifically fit into the postsecondary education array in the United States. Kirkwood’s message to local immigrants includes not only how Kirkwood can assist them but also how the college can host

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**The best tactic in attracting international students is through word of mouth.**

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<sup>6</sup> Denise Kinsella, correspondence to author, May 8, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Having information in the languages of the countries in which the college recruits is especially important because parents are typically the decision-makers in the college enrollment process for their children.



their friends and relatives abroad who may be considering study in the United States. According to Kirkwood's dean of international programs, the best tactic in attracting international students is through word of mouth—much like at SMC. International graduates of their programs become ambassadors for the college after returning to their home countries.

While the lure of living in Cedar Rapids may not be on par with that of Santa Monica, Kirkwood does emphasize its proximity to the University of Iowa, its excellent transfer and articulation programs with both the University of Iowa and Iowa State University, its international residence halls, a lower cost of living, and a long history of serving international students.

International students bring more to their community colleges than financial benefits. International students also bring diversity, global fluency, and cultural awareness to their institutions and their domestic student counterparts. In many cases, an international student may be the *only* person from a specific country or geographic region that native students have ever met. At a time when cultural, racial, and ethnic relations are most needed, these students provide the opportunity for “just in time” lessons in humanity and diversity.

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## Community College, International Appeal

As community college leaders consider broadening their international enrollment, it's helpful to understand what attracts international students to community colleges, and how it might relate to their institution.

Some international students and their families purposefully choose to begin the American postsecondary journey at a community college to save money. Simply put, these international students join many domestic students in choosing to begin their baccalaureate education at a less expensive community college, then transferring to and achieving the same bachelor's degree as if they had only attended the four-year institution.

Others may choose a college for the quality workforce, career, and technical programs uniquely offered at community colleges. Many countries do not have quality opportunities for vocational/technical programs (OECD 2015). For example, many U.S. community colleges offer an associate degree and/or certificates in the area of engineering technology, a sought-after field by high-tech employers all over the world (Krigman

2014). Community college degrees in radiation technology, nuclear medicine technology, and medical sonography are examples of credentials in professions sought by international students to bring their learned expertise to their home countries. Students may also be attracted to community college education in the trades such as plumbing and heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC), as well as the apprenticeships and hands-on training unavailable in their home countries.

Another reason why international students are attracted to American community colleges are open admission processes and English as a second language (ESL) support. This is especially germane because English language proficiency is typically the most eminent barrier to admission to students' American-dream institutions (Andrade 2006; Hagedorn and Li 2017; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui 2010; Yeh and Inose 2003). International students face narrow acceptance rates infused with high admission standards on English ability scores demonstrated by the TOEFL,<sup>8</sup> IELTS,<sup>9</sup> and ACT/SAT tests that leave many international students with few postsecondary options and attracted to the open-admission system of community colleges. In fact, not only do community colleges not require ACT or SAT tests—some do not require TOEFL or IELTS scores. International students will, however, be required to take an English placement test to determine the level of English support required. For those whose English is too poor to allow them to participate in credit-bearing courses, some community colleges have intensive English programs<sup>10</sup> that allow international students to study English exclusively until they are ready to enroll in college-credit courses.

There are also a number of situations that would result in international students enrolling in community colleges after or concurrently with enrollment at another U.S. postsecondary institution, namely for rescue from difficult academic circumstances (Hagedorn, Pei, and Yan 2016).

### **Low grades and academic dismissal.**

Although international students had to demonstrate high academic ability prior to acceptance at the four-year university, a significant portion of students struggle in an all-English environment taught in a different style from that of their country. Others may find it impossible to balance their newly found freedom with their academic responsibilities. Whatever the reason, international students threatened with academic dismissal may seek other options. Some students transfer from their original four-year university to the community college where they may seek more English support, often smaller classrooms, tutoring, and perhaps faculty without research pressures with more time to assist them.

8 TOEFL is the Test of English as a Foreign Language. It is the most widely used test to measure English ability among non-native speakers.

9 IELTS is the International English Language Testing System. It, like TOEFL, is used to measure English proficiency.

10 Some universities also have intensive English programs.

### The “bad” course.

Most college students, domestic and international, have faced at least one course that loomed as a formidable barrier to the degree. From the international student perspective, that course could be challenging due to a lack of interest in the subject, unusually high course requirements, or even a caustic instructor. Whatever the reason, if the course is offered at a community college, it may be a better fit for the student. Once the credits are earned, the students can transfer them back to their four-year institution and move beyond the barrier.

### English-language skills.

Despite high TOEFL or other language test scores, some international students find that reading, comprehending, speaking, and writing at the college level is harder than anticipated. Some have concurrently enrolled in non-credit ESL courses or even intensive English programs at the community college to ease the transition to an all English-speaking environment.

### The fear of public speaking (in English).

Related specifically to the fear of public speaking in a foreign language, a number of international students will find a transferable public speaking course, most often online, that is less intimidating than the one offered at their home university. Hence, taking the required public speaking course at a community college is surprisingly common for international students.

### The lure of the Internet.

The ability to take online courses at a community college is a real attraction for many international students. Whether they take an online summer course while back in their home country or add an extra online course to an already full-time load at the university to promote a quicker graduation, some international students use online offerings to their advantage. Students have found that online courses, especially those with nontraditional start times, such as a second eight-week course, are helpful if they needed to drop a course but need to keep their full-time credit load required for legal visa status.

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## The need to finish quickly.

Time is money—almost all international students budget for a four-year experience that, if stretched, will threaten their ability to afford to finish. Since international students are barred from off-campus employment, they typically rely on their families, who may have scrounged and scraped together all they could. An additional course at a community college can shorten the time to degree.

## Going Global on Your Campus

Of course, international students bring the same needs as their domestic counterparts, but also require an additional set of student support services that bring added expense and efforts to the college. Each college should decide if these additional expenses are worth the benefits of additional international students.

- **Emphasizing value and outcome.** The biggest obstacle to international recruitment by community colleges is international parents' lack of knowledge about transfer and articulation. Other countries do not have a community college system, and transfer from one institution to another is typically impossible, so explaining that students can attend a community college initially and successfully transfer to a host of excellent and highly ranked universities is critical.
- **Arrival assistance.** Students need assistance from the moment they land at the airport, so be sure that students know what to do after they arrive. Some students may have family or friends in the area to assist with housing, but many will be getting off the plane with nothing more than their luggage and hopes for a bright future. Students will benefit from assistance in everything from an airport pickup to finding permanent, adequate, affordable housing with transportation to and from the college.
- **Immigration services.** Assistance with visas and immigration services is needed at the point of application, through the enrollment process, and continued until the student graduates, transfers, or otherwise exits. International student services should be established and available at colleges serving significant numbers of international students.
- **Cultural adjustment.** Not only do Western teaching practices differ widely from that of most other countries, but the basics of day-to-day life can also be a challenge. Where can students shop, eat, buy groceries, or get a haircut? What transportation is available?
- **New student orientation.** The general orientation will not suffice for international students. A special session or, at the least, additional presentations must

be considered. Some colleges and universities require international students to be on campus several days earlier than domestic students for intensive orientation services.

- **Advising.** In short, international students will require more advising throughout their enrollment than the typical domestic student. Consider the need for specially trained advisors on campus who work solely with international students.
- **Academic issues.** International students will require and will likely seek more academic support. Whether in the form of general tutoring, writing support, or just visiting faculty during office hours, international students will need and likely expect assistance.
- **Faculty and staff development.** Colleges generally understand the need to support and provide direction to international students as they acclimate to a new culture. Similarly, faculty and staff also benefit from support and training in accommodating international students. Problems may be averted if faculty and staff understand cultural differences and expectations as well as possible classroom issues that may emerge and how to handle them.
- **Integrate wherever possible.** Many of the suggestions involve additional or special services for international students. However, to avoid encouraging isolation, consider integrating the international students with their domestic counterparts whenever possible. For example, include international students in the general orientation sessions while also creating additional orientation sessions for them as an “add-on” with information especially keyed to international students.
- **Issues of discrimination.** Unfortunately, some international students may encounter discrimination and other forms of bias. Be sure that students are informed of how to report negative experiences and how to stay safe.



## FIRST STEPS TOWARD INTERNATIONALIZATION

Building a sustainable, successful international community on your campus requires an ongoing and intentional effort, but there are a few key steps to consider first.

- **Create an internationalization plan.** Actions require careful planning. Consider creating a strategic plan specifically for internationalization or adding internationalization plans to an existing strategic plan. Prepare documentation that sets goals, objectives, and a timeline that provides guidance and conveys the importance of the tasks.
- **Create a recruitment plan that includes an international recruiter and target a specific country or geographic area.** It is easier to recruit students from countries that send many students to the U.S., such as China, India, or South Korea (IIE 2018b). By concentrating on one country initially, the college

### Key steps to consider:

- Create an internationalization plan.
- Create a recruitment plan.
- Sign up with EducationUSA.
- Build an international-friendly website.
- Identify available housing.
- Use orientation as a tool for acculturation and college readiness.
- Have adequate staff.
- Provide the supports that international students require.
- Create programs and organizations to ease students' transition.
- Prepare for a few bumps in the road.
- Take advantage of the Fulbright Services.

is more likely to attract a critical mass of students that can form a support network once in their new environs.

- **Sign up with EducationUSA and provide copies of recruitment materials to be available at their advising centers.** Attend an EducationUSA recruitment fair held in a country targeted for recruitment.
- **Build an international-friendly website.** In most countries, parents play a major role in students' final decisions. Have your website translated into the languages matching your recruitment plan. While prospective students can read English, their parents (and other family members) may not.
- **Identify available housing (preferably furnished), shopping, transportation, and other services that are international-friendly.**
- **Use orientation as a tool for acculturation and college readiness.** Use the opportunity to help students settle, take placement tests, and become oriented to the campus and the community.
- **Be sure the college has sufficient staff to process all necessary paperwork and reports for the U.S. Department of State to allow students to smoothly apply and enroll.**
- **Provide the supports that international students require.** Tutoring, writing centers, and other supports that are necessary for all students may be used more intently by international students. Be sure that the students know of these services and are welcomed when they use them.
- **Create programs and organizations that can ease students' transition to the United States.** Examples include an international student club or a formal international center.
- **Prepare for a few bumps in the road.** International students do not leave their cultures in their home countries. Differences in dress, food, religious beliefs, and even eye-contact expectations can create tensions on campus. As a college increases the number of international students on campus, faculty, staff, and domestic students can be included in the opportunity to welcome students, but also alerted to key cultural differences.
- **Take advantage of the Fulbright Services, such as hosting visiting scholars or scholars in residence.** The Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence Program provides opportunities for academic exchange by bringing international scholars on campus as instructors (Fulbright Scholar Program 2019).

The American community college system is unique in the world, and its ability to assist Americans to achieve a college education is unduplicated anywhere. Colleges that want to attract international students must be ambassadors for the U.S. community college system—one of America's proudest inventions, on par with baseball and apple pie.

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