Making an International Community

International students and study abroad help globalize community college campuses

By Ann McClure
March 2011

Massachusetts Bay Community College’s student trip to China was such a success that administrators are considering adding a course in Mandarin Chinese.

Preparing students to work in a global economy is no small feat, but it is a skill employers are requesting. According to “Raising the Bar,” a 2009 survey released by the American Association of Colleges and Universities, 67 percent of employers believe colleges should place an emphasis on providing students “the ability to understand the global context of situations and decisions,” and 57 percent want students to have a better understanding of cultural diversity.

“Many employers tell us that they are looking for people who are familiar with all parts of the world,” confirms Massachusetts Bay Community College President Carole M. Berotte Joseph. “You might be sitting here in Massachusetts but working with people in India and Russia.”

Community colleges are tackling the problem head on. Extended travel through study abroad programs can be challenging to the nontraditional students composing the largest part of a community college population. Another solution is to bring foreign students to them. According to the American Association of Community Colleges, 800 member institutions are registered with Immigration and Customs Enforcement through the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) to accept international students.
Producing globally aware students has to be a campuswide effort. “As we hire new faculty, we talk to them about the goal of diversifying and internationalizing the curriculum,” says Joseph.

Benefits

All students can benefit from exposure to different cultures, not just those planning a career with an international firm. “For instance a nursing student will deal with people from all walks of life,” says Joseph, citing research that shows students who study abroad have better GPAs than the general student population, the tendency of language acquisition to expand critical thinking, and the motivational effect foreign travel has on the desire to learn.

International students also bring diversity to campus and a different point of view to classroom discussions, says Diana Klinghagen, an international student services advisor at Tulsa Community College (Okla.). “One of the things we have to provide our American students is a global perspective and that really helps.”

They might also bring some healthy competition to class. “Faculty really love our international students because they take education seriously,” reports Klinghagen. “Last semester, our international students got a 3.5 GPA or above.”

TCC students get to trade ideas with their international counterparts in class and during meetings of the International Students Support Coalition, a student club launched five years ago. Klinghagen has noticed that not only international students attend but also American students interested in learning more about the cultures of their immigrant parents or grandparents.

Attending the club meetings has allowed Klinghagen and another international student services advisor to get to know students better. They also organize “transfer trips” to area universities to allow the international students to see the other campus and plan the next phase of their American education. “If you can get out of your office and spend time with them it really helps,” Klinghagen suggests.

Additionally, some campus leaders have found that the presence of international students can benefit the surrounding community as well as the campus. “When international students become involved in campus activities, the college and outside community is provided with a greater awareness of the wide diversity of Houston Community College,” shares Diana Pino, vice chancellor of student services there.

On the other side, the foreign students benefit from the smaller classes and campuses found at community colleges, which might be a less overwhelming experience than a large university.
Community colleges might also have less strict language requirements for admission with programs in place to help students improve once they arrive. TCC, for instance, teaches 11 languages, making it easy for foreign students to find conversation partners so they can both practice their new language—all of which can help a student acclimate before transferring to a four-year institution.

While most of the reasons to encourage international applicants are high-minded, the fact that they pay nonresident tuition can’t be overlooked in these tight budget times. Although Joseph began working to expand MassBay’s international efforts when she took office five years ago, she and other campus leaders with existing programs have noticed more colleges taking the international plunge. “There is a new law in Massachusetts that we can keep more of the dollars from out-of-state tuition,” she says, which has encouraged schools to step up their recruiting efforts. It may seem counterintuitive to be bringing more students to already crowded community college campuses, but it’s not, Joseph says. “They aren’t a strain because they come on a space-available basis; they have to wait until there is an opening.”

Even though foreign students will pay more tuition than a native student attending the same community college, it is still less than they would pay at a four-year institution.

Recruiting

Increasing the international population on campus is not as simple as throwing open the doors. Language barriers, visa requirements, and reporting requirements can all challenge college staff, making high-level support of the program important for success. Additionally, the lack of familiarity with the American education system in some countries can present the first opportunity for cultural exchange.

Not only do the students return changed, but they bring changes to the campus.

“In some of the more established markets, like Hong Kong and Korea, people already have a sense of what a community college is,” explains Daniel Tamayo, director student affairs and the international student program at West Hills Community College (Calif). “But for new markets like Russia and Brazil, you have to help people understand what a community college is all about and help them understand that we aren’t an inferior education source.”

Because recruiting overseas requires a large financial and time commitment, WHCC joined a consortia with Skagit Valley College (Wash.), Moraine Valley Community College (Ill.), Delaware County Community College (Pa.), and the College of Central Florida 15 years ago to share labor and financial resources. “Normally, a school our size would not be able to do international outreach because it’s so taxing.”
At Tulsa Community College, cultural sharing activities help local and international students get to know each other.

The campus directors and their supervisors meet once a year to strategize and review program results. Each director is responsible for several foreign markets, researching opportunities, creating travel schedules, and developing marketing strategies. “We try to be experts; we learn about the demands and trends and make decisions for the entire group.”

As he sees similar consortia forming, Tamayo points out it’s important not to compete with partner institutions for students. Say a student at a recruiting fair expresses interest in an East Coast college. “I won’t try to convince them to come to us instead,” he notes. That trust and division of labor allowed him to be confident that WHCC’s interests were well represented during the group’s trip to Korea in February even though he wasn’t able to attend.

Schools that don’t belong to a consortium and aren’t large enough to go it alone can take advantage of support services offered by the international office of the AACC. In the past, recruitment fairs to Asia, Latin America, and Europe have been organized. Colleges can also submit information to the annual print publication “Profiles of U.S. Community Colleges: A Guide for International Students,” which is distributed to prospective international students. (Registration opens in Spring 2011 for the 2012 edition.) The information from the guide is also used on the interactive AACC International website for potential students.

With many resources and schools already working on starting these programs, says Joseph, “You don’t have to start from scratch.”

“I’ve had three schools in the past year contact me for information,” says Tamayo, noting that the more competitive market will be a discussion point during the next consortium meeting. “Many schools that would never consider going overseas are starting to reach out.” While many people overseas are interested in obtaining an American degree, an introduction can be helpful when approaching a new market. Unlike the atmosphere in the United States where a “may the best school win” attitude prevails, “the people we work with overseas are very loyal,” he cautions. “Once they start working with you, and they are happy, they pass on new schools.” He experienced the other side of the issue when his consortium began making inquiries in Sweden, which was already working with schools in California.

A hard court press is not always necessary. Word of mouth is as effective overseas as it is here at home. “I think, as more international students are becoming aware of the value of community colleges, we are getting more [interest],” says Joseph. “They aren’t getting
lost in a 300-student lecture hall. I’m sure they are telling their friends about it.”
MassBay currently hosts students from five continents and 27 countries.

Most of the 150 international students attending TCC came through word of mouth. “We have many international companies in Tulsa. We might get students of those employees, or their cousins,” says Klinghagan.

Attesting to the more intimate atmosphere on community college campuses, TCC often accepts transfer students from larger campuses. “They come to a big university, get overwhelmed, come to us, then go back,” she says.

HCC also benefits from word of mouth with faculty members suggesting the college to family and friends overseas, as well as its location in a big city providing exposure to large employers. Campus leaders also network with local organizations, chambers of commerce, and international embassies and consulates to find students, says Pino.

“I was disappointed when I heard another school say they only serve U.S. students,” says Tamayo. “I think by having foreign students on campus you are serving U.S. students.”

Study Abroad

Although mingling with international students on the home campus can expose American students to different cultures, nothing opens their minds like studying abroad can. “Challenges of funds, schedules, and family commitments can make it difficult for community college students to participate in study abroad programs,” says Joseph, but MassBay still manages to send students to Costa Rica, Romania, Taiwan, China, and Puerto Rico. “I’ve had students say they came to MassBay because of the opportunity [to study abroad].”

Programs consist of a three-week course of study. The first week is at MassBay, the next week is abroad in the country being studied, and the final week is back home to debrief and complete the project required to get credit.

“When it is a course, they can get financial aid for it,” Joseph says. “We work with other colleges to stay in dorms or with families to keep costs down.”

Creative solutions have been found to address challenges students might have. In some cases, students have brought along their children who attend summer camp while their parents are in class. Fundraisers and scholarships are regularly used to help finance trips. “We don’t want to hear that a student wants to go abroad but can’t because they can’t afford it.”

Not only do the students return changed, but they bring changes to the campus. Prior to a trip to China, students took introductory Mandarin classes organized on the college’s Framingham campus in partnership with the local Chinese community. “The students were so excited [when they came home] we are looking into offering a class in Mandarin so they can continue their studies,” Joseph shares.