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Global Engagement at US Community Colleges

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In the United States, over 1,200 publically supported community colleges provide low-cost education and training for some 13 million students. Counterparts exist in some 80 countries around the world, variously known as polytechnics, colleges of further education, and TAFE (Technical and Further Education), among other terms. In many countries, these institutions serve a significant portion of adults and provide alternatives to highly competitive universities that are unable to absorb an increasing demand from nontraditional students.

The US community college sector is focused heavily on meeting local and national education and training needs. However, many of these institutions also actively pursue internationally oriented agendas. The focus is typically on producing graduates who can effectively navigate the complexities of the modern world and excel in a workforce based on a global economy. The American Association of Community College's (AACC) vision, *Re-Claiming Community Colleges* (2012), sets the current national tone in this vein, by defining the importance of a globally competent citizenry in an era of global competitiveness. And while AACC does not specifically refer to global engagement, it does set forth a foundation from which future practices can develop.

A Mixed Report Card

Despite recognition of the need to educate for a global context, community colleges show uneven progress with regard to internationalization. For example, the international student population on US community college campuses grew from 70,616 in 1999 to 89,853 in 2010 (an increase of 27%) and has consistently represented between 11.1 percent and 12.2 percent of the total international student population in the

United States over the last decade. Meanwhile, the number of community college study-abroad students has remained small, ranging from 3,941 in 1999, to 6,857 in 2007, and to 4,030 in 2010. The recent drop in numbers appears to be due to the economic crisis in California, which is a major source of US study-abroad students at the community college level. Specifically, California's recent elimination of summer and winter sessions in almost all of its 112 community colleges has effectively closed the door on study-abroad experiences for many students.

Again, likely due to funding constraints within community colleges, recent years have also seen fewer programs for internationalizing the curriculum, fewer modern language courses/levels offered, and less integration of languages into occupational courses. Unlike a decade ago, associate degrees in international studies and faculty/administrator mobility programs are rare. International offices, full-time positions focused on this work, and consortia membership are increasingly being eliminated.

Nonetheless, as a new generation of leaders takes the reigns at US community colleges, many of whom place a high priority on internationalization, global engagement is receiving renewed attention and support on many campuses.

The California Example

California hosts 112 community colleges, among which are many of the country's trendsetters for international education. California Colleges for International Education (CCIE), a leading US organization focused on internationalization for the community college sector, has conducted surveys on California community college internationalization since 1985. In 2008, responses to the CCIE survey on internationalization, from 76 community colleges, showed that 22 institutions were involved in global engagement programs, in 40 countries. Of these, 11 programs were of a nonprofit nature and focused on sustainable development activities, while 11 institutions had international contract education programs, designed as revenue streams. Another five institutions involved the establishment overseas of local business centers, and five also administered international training/retraining programs. Eight additional institutions had sister-city agreements. Examples of this kind of international engagement include College of the Canyons (in Santa Clarita, California) linking its honor student water project with fundraising to provide a water tank for Santa Clarita's sister city in Nicaragua; the delivery of a study-abroad program focused on literacy and volunteer activities in Santa Clarita's Chinese sister city; and facilitation by College of the Canyons staff of international delegation visits by sister city officials to the Santa Clarita community.

However, the questions on the CCIE survey about global engagement are often the ones left unanswered. This is likely due to the often passive nature of these programs in which overseas visits and even formalized agreements do not result in much substantive internationalization across the college and typically do not directly engage (many) students, since faculty and administrators are generally the targeted beneficiaries. Future research is needed to better understand these activities and the extent to which the California experience is replicated more widely across the country.

The Challenges of Achieving Depth and Breadth

As with other institutional types, community colleges are engaging the world in various ways. Keen to learn more and to develop collaborative relationships, ministry representatives from around the world frequently visit community college campuses, as do educators and Fulbright scholars. For their part, US community college presidents participate in familiarization tours, often arranged by the AACC and other organizations. In general, the agendas of such trips abroad and meetings with international visitors stress leadership traits, daily operations, and curriculum. However, these activities rarely result in formalized agreements.

Where formalized agreements do exist—for example, in the context of community college support for sister-city relationships or individualized memoranda of understanding at departmental or college levels—an exchange of visits by senior administrators may take place. These formalized agreements are usually not accompanied by substantive interinstitutional engagement. Resource limitations and lack of internal advocacy for international initiatives may contribute to this result.

At times more dynamic than formal efforts at the institutional level is the work done by individual faculty to create synergies on an informal level. For example, in 2004, an interactive video conferencing program had US community college faculty from El Camino Community College (California) and colleagues from Dinproptetrovsk National University (Ukraine), University of Modena, Reggio Emilia (Italy), and Lebanese University in Beirut coteaching a “word cultures” class. Another example—now no longer operational but still illustrative—is a collaborative arts program that involved Los Angeles Harbor Community College (California), Los Angeles Pierce Community College (California), and Barnsley College of Further Education (England). This collaboration allowed students at each institution to participate in and put on plays via telecommunications and videoconferencing, culminat-

ing in student exchange programs for live productions. This initiative likely had an important impact on those students and faculty directly involved; however, little campus-wide institutionalization of collaborative engagement tends to result from such activities.

A Unique Agenda: International Development

Global engagement focused on international development is particularly relevant—but also challenging—for the community college sector. The first documented global engagement programs date from 1974 and involved a group of community colleges located on the East Coast. Since then, many community colleges have developed bilateral agreements to support the transfer of career skills pedagogy and programming to international partner institutions. These efforts have involved programs of various durations and included consulting activities or direct provision of support services to institutions overseas. Efforts have focused on everything from developing midlevel managers, to delivering paraprofessional, technical, occupational, vocational, and English-language programs and/or faculty training.

These programs are challenging because they require both support from senior administrators and active engagement of faculty. Still, more than 20 US agencies have provided grants for such activities, over the years. The consortium, Community Colleges for International Development (CCID), has helped to advance these programs.

International-development work involving community colleges may focus on a number of different priority areas. Some programs promote socioeconomic reform, for example, at the invitation of local educators, ministry representatives, or entrepreneurs. Others are part of a campaign of sorts that, since the late 1990s, has been aimed at exporting the US community college concept, largely through formalized outreach by the AACCC and systematic programming by CCID in this vein. Examples of these types of efforts include the initiative to create a “college of the people” by Daytona Beach College (Florida) in the Dominican Republic; building new economic foundations in the Caribbean and Central America by State Center District (California) in the SEED (Scholarship for Education and Economic Development) program, and AACCC’s involvement in the amplification of community college counterparts in Vietnam.

Policies advanced by foreign governments and nonprofit agencies also shape global engagement opportunities for US community colleges. Examples here include Vietnamese government ventures and outreach from the Aga Khan Humanities Project. In 2012, the British Council supported the Global Hospitality Competition, which involved

community college counterparts with strong culinary programs from five different countries.

Branch campuses aimed at enrolling local students overseas, often for revenue generation for the home institution, are another global engagement trend of note. Community college branch campuses date back to the early 1990s; yet, due to cultural, economic, and political issues, few sustained programs exist. The Los Angeles-Tokyo Community College branch campus is an early example. More current initiatives include LaGuardia Community College's Chile branch and the Houston Community College (HCC) branch campus in Qatar. HCC's collaborative relationships with Saigon Institute of Technology (Vietnam), Riyadh Community College (Saudi Arabia), and a new program in Brazil are expanding experience in this area.

In addition to nonprofit models for international development activities, there are privatized for-profit approaches to such work. Such initiatives, which often intersect with international aid projects, provide payment to a community college—for its expertise in training, curriculum delivery, and management. Areas where an institution has a particular specialty—such as agri-business, English as a second language training, deaf studies, and specialized workforce-skills courses—drive these programs. For example, in Canada, Southern Alberta Institute of Technology's international revenue generation in the area of energy-related training remains exemplary. However, over time, few of these programs have proven to be the money-producing ventures as envisioned.

Much to Do and Much to Learn

Global engagement for the community college sector makes sense in a context of shifting employment patterns and changing needs for skills and education across the globe. But, particularly in resource-constrained environments, there are fundamental challenges to implementing and sustaining this important work. Practical considerations begin with an assessment of how such engagement supports the college mission. Once engagement begins, institutionalization of practice needs to occur, with critical attention paid to moving beyond immediate interests, and ensuring these efforts are embedded in longer-term strategies for quality and relevance.