COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Providing Access to Underrepresented Students

Abstract

Diversifying international education is a current “hot topic” in the field. Due to their missions of open access and the generally more diverse student body, bolstering education abroad efforts at community colleges are the solution to increasing diversity of students who study abroad. In an earlier time, community colleges were trade and technical schools whose primary purposes were to train students in specific and narrow specializations to enter the workforce in a relatively short period of time. Community colleges have since evolved into institutions that provide a wider variety of opportunities to students who, for many reasons, may not otherwise be able to partake in higher education. No longer is it relevant to prepare students to perform a narrow set of tasks without incorporating a broader perspective. Diverse student bodies and commitment to open access are characteristics that mean community colleges are uniquely poised to offer international education opportunities to a student body that mirrors the diversity of the community.

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Introduction

Despite challenges posed to international education in the post-9/11 era, students have continued to participate at a steadily increasing rate in study abroad programs. This is true despite of security and safety concerns and increased expense of study abroad coupled with limited family finances. According to the Institute of International Education’s (IIE) Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange, the United States as seen substantial growth in students participating in for-credit study abroad opportunities (Raby, 2008). This growth is explained by many factors, including increased program offerings, scholarship programs that support international education, and increased societal understanding of the value of study abroad. Although the numbers are steadily increasing, the numbers are still small, with under ten percent of the undergraduate population participating in international education.

A wider understanding of the importance of fostering global citizenship exists, as “over 90 percent of Americans believe it is important to prepare future generations for global society” (Berotte Joseph, 2007), but there is much work to be done to achieve the goal of a globally-conscious populous in the United States. The national agenda of global competence includes expanding and sustaining more accessible study abroad programs (Floyd, Walker, & Hurd, 2002). The working definition of global citizenship which will be used for the purposes of this paper is:

“students who, variously and in combination, have had exposure to other cultures, possess foreign language skills, have tolerance for those whose cultural backgrounds are different from their own, display a sense of curiosity about the world beyond their immediate experiences are adept at navigating in unfamiliar circumstances and show empathy for others” (Picard, Bernardino, & Ehigiator, 2009).

It falls to institutions of higher education to foster the global citizenship Americans seek by producing students with international perspectives (Chen, 2008). Indeed, “an educational system that pretends
the world ends at our national borders cannot be excellent” (Green, 2007). One of the effective ways in which higher education seeks to yield global citizens is through study abroad opportunities.

Although much of American society is coming to recognize the benefits of preparing future generations for an increasingly globally connected world, the current population of study abroad students fails to reflect the diversity of the United States. Increasing diversity in international education is one of the current “hot topics” in the field and the general belief is that, “the diversity we seek in our universities must be matched by a diversity of options, destinations, and duration of study abroad programs” (Martinez, Ranjeet, & Marx, 2009). Higher education administrators are familiar with the substantial benefits provided by increasing diversity on college campuses; the same can be said for increasing diversity in study abroad. In fact, it is a priority of the U.S. Department of Education to increase the ethnic diversity of Americans participating in study abroad, which demonstrates the general acceptance of this notion as a common goal. Those in the international education field have posited a variety of possible solutions to the lack of diversity in study abroad, including focusing on study abroad opportunities at community colleges, given that “community colleges enroll more racially diverse students than any other sector of higher education” (Floyd, Walker, & Hurd, 2002).

**Community College Characteristics**

Before demonstrating why bolstering international education efforts at community colleges is an answer to the issue of diversity in study abroad, it is important to understand the function and driving principles of community colleges. The community college is a type of institution that is unique to the United States. In the U.S., there are over 1,200 regionally-accredited community colleges that enroll around 11 million students annually (Raby, 2008). Almost all community colleges are state-funded, although there are a handful of private institutions of that type. Community colleges are accredited to
grant associate degrees (two-year degrees). In addition, a few offer four-year bachelor’s degrees. Community colleges also provide a high proportion of vocational training.

Many more students attend community colleges than one might assume. Indeed, the “typical” college student—one who attends a four-year institution, lives in the residence halls, and is a full time student—is not actually the typical college student. Around half of all undergraduate students currently attend community colleges. About half of the students at four-year institutions transferred from community colleges. Many students who attend two-year colleges will not transfer to four-year institutions and their entire higher education experience will be at community college. As Freedman writes, “overall, the largest group of students is neither four-year public college students nor four-year private non-profit students but two-year public school students” (2013).

There are distinctive characteristics that define community colleges’ missions. These characteristics are, “a community-first mission, nontraditional students, an institutional culture built on making do with limited funding, stakeholder conflicts, and a sometimes parochial orientation” (Frost & Raby, 2009). Community colleges on the whole have three distinct missions: to provide educational preparation for students who wish to transfer to four-year institutions, to provide vocational and technical training useful to those looking to enter the workforce, and to promote lifelong learning through continuing education, community service, and English as a second language for recent immigrants (Raby, 2008). In general, community colleges embody the philosophy of open access; many students who attend community colleges do not choose between those institutions and four-year institutions, but rather between community college and no further formal education. Community colleges represent opportunities for personal and professional growth that many students could not achieve otherwise.

Community colleges have become known for the democratization of adult learning due to their focus on teaching and learning for the masses (Floyd, Walker, & Hurd, 2002). They have made a
significant impact on American education by expanding access to those who were not otherwise served by higher education. This initiative can be harnessed for increasing access to study abroad for students who are not currently served by international education. “The community college mission emphasizes direct learning experiences to teach cognitive and social skills. Few educational opportunities offer as direct and immersive a learning experience as education abroad. Thus, education abroad is directly aligned with the community college mission” (Raby, 2008).

Community Colleges Serve the Underserved

A majority of community college students are defined as nontraditional, with an average age of 29, half being first-generation college students, and 64% being enrolled part-time (Frost & Raby, 2009). These characteristics, as well as the fact that community college students tend to have high financial need, are all populations that are currently underrepresented in study abroad. One of the reasons that so few community college students study abroad, making up only around three percent of the population of students studying abroad, is that “community college students are, as a group, the most diverse student body in America’s higher education system. Lives of community college students are often more complex than those of residential, four-year university students” (Floyd, Walker, & Hurd, 2002). Although few community college students study abroad, the population of those who do is more diverse than the population of students who study abroad at four-year institutions. Raby notes that, “since the general student body demographics at community colleges often reflect the multiethnic and multicultural character of the communities they serve, it is not surprising that this diversity carries over into study abroad at community colleges” (2008). It follows, therefore, that increasing study abroad programming at community colleges would increase the diversity of study abroad students on the whole. It is a problem that, although community colleges are known as “people’s colleges” due to their commitment to access, too few community college students have access to study abroad.
Why International Education at Community Colleges?

Missions of Community Colleges

Given that community colleges are responsible for providing open access to educational opportunities for students who would otherwise be unable to further their education, the issue of access to study abroad for all students is one of importance to the very mission of a community college. To cite Raby and Valeau, “removing or underfunding community college international education programs creates educational inequity” (2007), something which community colleges are historically known for battling. The very philosophy of community college, that of open access, is at risk if students at four-year institutions can participate in international education, but those at community colleges cannot.

Some who do not support increasing international education initiatives at community colleges state that international education does not fit the definition of “community” and is therefore unnecessary. A debate exists over what the community is, whether it is a geographic boundary surrounding the college. Traditionally, community colleges have met the needs of those within a specific geographic region, and some see international education as being incompatible with local needs. However, it is no longer functional to restrict education to the local community, as the world is becoming increasingly interconnected, and those with understanding only of the local community are becoming increasingly handicapped in the workplace by their lack of intercultural and international understanding. It is, therefore, irresponsible to deny access to international education for community college students; and to do so directly opposes community colleges’ mission of providing open access to all necessary academic experiences (Raby & Valeau, 2007).

To cite Floyd, Walker, & Hurd, “if all corners of the United States are going to achieve a goal of becoming more knowledgeable about international and global issues, then community college learners
are ideal candidates to serve as these ‘home grown’ experts on international and cultural issues” (2002). Furthermore, education abroad is a necessary tool that ensures national security and fosters politically knowledgeable and engaged citizens who contribute to our democracy (Raby, 2008).

**Increasing Underrepresented Student Participation**

Currently, the majority of study abroad participants are from upper and middle class families. Nonetheless, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who are highly represented at community colleges, can and should benefit from exposure to international education. Although study abroad numbers are increasing, those of minority students remain at “woefully low levels” (Picard, Bernardino, & Ehigiator, 2009). Positive qualities derived from study abroad, such as interpersonal skills, personal development, employment preparation, and foreign language competence are currently being missed by underrepresented students—students who already fall at the bottom of an achievement gap which is widened by the lack of opportunity to participate in international education (Raby & Valeau, 2007). Community colleges have offered international programs to a greater percentage of low-income and minority students than any other higher education institutions for thirty years, so it is easy to make the case that they deserve recognition and support (Raby & Valeau, 2007).

Institutions also benefit from their students studying abroad, as returned students enrich the campus overall. It is easy to see how minority students studying abroad at a higher proportion could benefit institutions by influencing their peers to study abroad and have a positive impact on recruitment and enrollment. These benefits would build on themselves and continue to increase underrepresented student study abroad. It is also beneficial for the institution, as "students who study abroad also tend to be more engaged in their studies and perform better academically” (Picard, Bernardino, & Ehigiator, 2009). Because study abroad provides the types of “high impact” experiences
that enhance cognitive complexity and intellectual engagement, it is imperative that underrepresented students have access to these opportunities (Martinez, Ranjeet, & Marx, 2009).

**Necessary for Workforce Preparation**

Participation in study abroad is becoming an irreplaceable aspect of an undergraduate education as it is becoming increasingly important that those entering the workforce be able to transcend national boundaries and understand their roles as members of an increasingly interconnected world (Martinez, Ranjeet, & Marx, 2009). Educators at community colleges are finding that enabling their students to access international education is a necessity for preparing them to enter the workforce (Berotte Joseph, 2007). Given that workforce preparation is one of the missions of community colleges, they cannot afford to ignore the fact that those who understand other cultures are much better prepared to work with increasingly global colleagues. Martha Kanter, Undersecretary of Education says that, “international programs...are essential to the future of our higher education institutions and they are also essential to the future of what young people will need to know and do in a global economy in a global world” (Loveland, 2010). Similarly, Raby notes that “international literacy is a basic skill needed in the workplace” (2008)

Increasing recognition of the importance of study abroad is shown by the fact that 75 percent of respondents to a survey by the American Council on Education agreed that students should engage in a study abroad opportunity during their time in college (Floyd, Walker, & Hurd, 2002). This has implications for community colleges, as many students do not transfer to four-year institutions, which are traditionally responsible for dispensing international education opportunities, and therefore, many students’ only way to achieve international literacy is through programs at community colleges. Many students do not partake in study abroad opportunities for financial reasons, but Berotte Joseph states, “the cost of not broadening one’s education with a trip abroad, the cost of not gaining a global
perspective on the world around you, can be much greater than the cost of travelling overseas” (2007).

This is literally true in the case that students with international experience will have an easier time becoming employed after graduation than those who do not. Therefore, an important challenge for institutions to surmount is to ensure accessibility to international education to all who desire to partake, including those of diverse economic and social backgrounds (Raby, 2008).

Internationalization Efforts at Community Colleges

History of Internationalization at Community Colleges

Efforts to internationalize community colleges began in 1967, when policymakers and administrators began to see these institutions as possible sites for international education opportunities. In 1976, a nonprofit consortium called Community Colleges for International Development (CCID) was formed to address internationalization efforts at community colleges. During the 1980s, community colleges began receiving national grants to help internationalize curricula and prepare students for global citizenship, in response to reports stating that students were internationally illiterate (Raby & Valeau, 2007). In 1998, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) published a how-to guide that described successful internationalization efforts at community colleges and defined the theoretical and philosophical purposes behind international education at community colleges. In the past twenty years, international student recruitment at community colleges has been intensified and diversification of study abroad have continued (Raby & Valeau, 2007).

Current State of Affairs

While it is encouraging to note that enrollment in study abroad programs by community college students is growing faster than in any other sector of higher education, little has been accomplished in terms of internationalizing community colleges since the late 1990s (Frost & Raby, 2009) (Raby &
Valeau, 2007). Also in accordance with national trends, community college students are choosing to travel to nontraditional destinations, such as China, Costa Rica, the Czech Republic, and Japan (Raby, 2008). The fact that only around two percent of study abroad participants come from community colleges indicates the lack of opportunity for this diverse group which comprises half of the higher education student body. Currently, there is a push to include international education explicitly in community college mission statements as a way to institutionalize internationalization efforts. The proportion of community colleges that have an internationally focused course as part of the core curriculum is about half that of four-year institutions. As of 2006, 73 percent of community colleges did not include internationalization in their mission statements and 80 percent did not have internationalization as a top priority in their strategic plans (Raby, 2008).

In keeping with their tradition of coming up with creative solutions to offering open access to education under budgetary constraints, “community colleges that offer study abroad programs have found creative ways to allow their students to sample life, language, culture, and education overseas” (Berotte Joseph, 2007). Many schools have decided to offer short-term programs, often over a vacation period such as winter or spring break. Over 75 percent of all community college study abroad students participated in short-term study abroad programs (defined as summer programs or those that are eight weeks or less) (Raby, 2008). Other schools have incorporated work or internship experiences abroad into their study abroad opportunities, allowing students to gain practical experience during the time overseas. To address students’ financial limitations, most community college programs allow students to pay the regular tuition rate for study abroad (Berotte Joseph, 2007). Another trend that allows community colleges to reduce costs is to form partnerships with larger U.S. schools that already have programs.
Barriers and Solutions

Lack of Institutionalization

Some of the barriers to international education at community colleges are not sector-specific, but rather are demonstrated at a higher degree than at four-year institutions. On the other hand, there are also key characteristics of education abroad at community colleges that oblige a distinct approach to developing opportunities. One of the major barriers to expansion of education abroad at community colleges is that it remains in the periphery. Indeed, “departments and other units on campus [are] often unaware of internationally focused expertise or programs elsewhere in the institution and international initiatives [remain] largely in their separate silos” (Green, 2007). The low numbers of students who participate maintain international education on the peripheries, which leads to chronic underfunding and undermines efforts to increase participation. It is, therefore, important that an international education office is centrally located and maintain a high profile and visibility so students and other members of the institution are aware of programs and internationalization initiatives.

Another obstacle facing international education at community colleges is the idea that underrepresented students often have that study abroad is not for them. This could partially explain the low numbers of community college students who study abroad, as there is a “sense that study abroad is a privilege intended for white or rich students; they view study abroad as the ‘icing on the cake’ of college and not an integral part of an education” (Martinez, Ranjeet, & Marx, 2009). Many nontraditional and minority students at community colleges come from low-income families that see study abroad as frivolous or selfish, and not worth the cost. Martinez, Ranjeet, & Marx propose that innovative and nontraditional programs be developed to reflect the diversity of interests and circumstances of a diverse population of students. It is also important to institutionalize international education at community colleges so that there is a sense that international education is paramount to
workforce preparation. Not doing so does a disservice to students who would not otherwise see education abroad as necessary.

A lack of institutionalization of international education at community colleges is an important barrier. Green (2007) cites a lack of support from institutional leaders as the most powerful obstacle to internationalization. This is true at all institutions, not just community colleges, but it is more prevalent at community colleges at this time. “A dichotomy exists between the verbal and the actual support that community college leaders give international education” (Raby & Valeau, 2007). Therefore, it is important that community colleges adopt internationalization as a top priority and incorporate international education in their mission statements. Demonstrated support from the top down and a sense that administrators are “putting their money where their mouth is” are fundamental to affording access to international education at community colleges.

Raby and Valeau identify “eight traditionally recognized elements needed for true systematic change to occur…the more of these elements a community college is able to incorporate, the more likely it will institutionalize its international programs” (2007). These eight elements are:

1. Clearly include international education in college documents.
2. Ensure organizational leadership at all levels.
3. Create connections between international education and other programs.
4. Create international committees on campus.
5. Create a line item for international education in the college budget to secure constant funding.
6. Secure visible office space and staff.
7. Provide counseling services and student advising.
8. Create coalitions with regional and national advocacy groups to share best practices and ensure recognition for international education (Raby & Valeau, 2007).
According to Raby and Valeau, a commitment to incorporate each of these eight elements is necessary to successful internationalization of any higher education institution.

One community college system that has been recognized for its internationalization efforts is the Lone Star College System, in the greater Houston area. This college system won the 2014 Heiskell Award for the category of Internationalizing the Community College, given by IIE, for its Faculty International Exploration program. This program awards faculty members with funding to perform research abroad in the aim of internationalizing the curriculum and developing study abroad programs. This innovative program has affected students in a variety of ways, by increasing the options for internationally-focused courses on campus and by adding a significant number of study abroad programs available to students (IIE, 2014).

Financial Constraints

While institutionalization of international education at community colleges is an important step, financial barriers also prevent students from studying abroad. Financial barriers exist for both institutions and individual students. “Small, rural community college leaders may want to offer study abroad opportunities but simply are unable to afford the resources to organize and administer the programs due to limited faculty and staff” (Floyd, Walker, & Hurd, 2002). Institutionalization of international education cannot exist without the funding to follow. Although institutional leaders may understand the importance of international education and want to incorporate it into the mission of the institution, many cannot do so due to lack of funding. According to a survey administered jointly by the Institute for International Education (IIE) and California Colleges for International Education (CCIE), “eighty-three percent of respondents...cited costs and fees to students as a leading challenge to expanding education abroad” (Raby, 2008). The barriers of lack of institutionalization and lack of finances form a cycle, in that without institutionalization, funding is not adequately distributed to
international education efforts, and without funding, education abroad keeps a marginal status. As Green writes, “the problem of insufficient resources exists on nearly every community college campus and is the most frequently cited barrier to change...Insufficient funding is further exacerbated by the marginal status of internationalization on most campuses” (2007).

One of the ways some community colleges have found to remove some of the financial barriers is to form consortia with other community colleges or with four-year institutions that have established programs. Floyd, Walker, & Hurd assert that institutional leaders and supporters should, “encourage partnerships among local, regional, and state stakeholders to assist with removing the financial barriers to study abroad access” and to “articulate broad transfer agreements that ensure senior colleges and universities will accept credits from students who enroll in courses that incorporate study abroad opportunities” (2002). These transfer agreements can ensure that any student who participates in a consortium study abroad opportunity will be able to count his/her credits earned toward a degree at his/her community college, or toward a four-year institution if he/she wishes to transfer. When institutions work together in consortia, it allows for program costs to be lowered, as each institution does not need to administer every part of every program individually. “Consortia allow colleges to work together (nationally, state-wide, and locally) to coordinate and market programs, share costs, and accept the transfer of credits while keeping individual costs low. Consortia models also make it easier for programs to achieve the necessary critical mass, as individual colleges may be able to send only one student” (Raby, 2008).

One example of a successful consortium is California Colleges for International Education (CCIE), which is a consortium of 84 community colleges in California that, “through advocacy, collaboration, and communication...supports community colleges to send students on study abroad” (Raby, 2008). Another consortium example is Community Colleges for International Development (CCID) whose “Troika model combines at least three colleges who jointly offer a 17-day or shorter program” (Raby,
2008). A third example is the Illinois Consortium for International Studies Programs (ICISP), which “facilitates nearly 600 faculty and administrator professional exchanges in nine countries, as well as semester and summer study abroad programs in ten countries. ICISP sends 2,000 students abroad annually” (Raby, 2008). The ICISP is a particularly impressive model, if no more than due to the sheer numbers of students, faculty, and staff involved.

Martha Kanter discusses some ways of helping students understand the financial aid available to them for study abroad. She states that, “NAFSA can take a leadership role in understanding that students who receive federal student aid can and do participate in study abroad. We don’t want to exclude any student that could benefit. This is especially true at community colleges that serve hundreds of thousands of students who receive federal student aid” (Loveland, 2010). Martha Kanter also emphasizes the importance of connecting financial aid or federal student aid directors with education abroad directors, so that financial aid information is readily available for students who wish to study abroad (Loveland, 2010). Encouraging communication between financial aid and study abroad offices allows both offices to have more information about the other and to be able to answer students’ questions and explain the opportunities available to them. Raby also stresses the importance of disseminating information on the fact that study abroad will often not cost students more than staying home. Raby states that, “while education abroad may appear to cost more than community college tuition, when housing and food costs are included, overall education abroad costs may in fact be quite similar to living locally” (2008). When this is the case, it is important that students understand, as they may not have an accurate idea of the true cost of study abroad as it compares to the cost of staying in the United States.

One institution that has been recognized for its efforts to eliminate financial constraints for students who wish to study abroad is Pitt Community College. Pitt won the 2013 Heiskell Award in the category of Internationalizing the Community College, given by IIE, for its International Education Travel
Scholarship program (IETS). The IETS program provides full scholarship funding for students to participate in a Pitt Community College Abroad program. Students who receive these scholarships also become ambassadors for international education at the college by finding creative ways to share their experiences with the college and community, and by writing letters to the Global Education committee, explaining how their experiences abroad affected them academically, professionally, and personally. This is an innovative program that has sought to deal with the financial barriers to study abroad while also working to internationalize the college on the whole (IIE, 2013).

Conclusions

Americans can no longer afford to ignore the importance of incorporating international education as an essential element of any higher education opportunity. Although there is an upward trend in terms of appreciation for the necessity of international education, student participation in study abroad is still at strikingly low levels. Of the small percentage of students who participate in study abroad, most are upper or middle class white students, so the study abroad population is not representative of the vibrant diversity that makes up the United States. International education professionals are struggling with how to increase access to study abroad for underrepresented students, and increasing international education efforts at community colleges is a way to do this. Community colleges are uniquely suited to assist in taking on diversifying international education due to missions of open access and workforce preparation. Although financial constraints and a lack of institutionalization of international education at community colleges create barriers to study abroad, there are solutions on the horizon, some of which many institutions have already incorporated.
References


