

**REPORTING ON INTERNATIONALIZATION
AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES**

ISSUE THREE

In Case of Snow
*The Business of Rural Community
College Internationalization*

MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY



**Community Colleges for
International Development, Inc.**

Local Access * Global Opportunities

REPORTING ON INTERNATIONALIZATION AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

In Case of Snow The Business of Rural Community College Internationalization

Awarding over half of all associates degrees in the US, rural community colleges serve 3.5 million students through 600 institutions, which comprise the fastest growing sector of community colleges in the country. Sixty-four percent of community colleges serve rural communities and they account for 37% of total US undergraduate enrollment.

In the context of internationalization, a common perception is that rural institutions have insurmountable barriers to overcome before considering international programming as anything but “non-essential.” Limited resources, a stretched faculty and staff, homogenous populations, conservative stakeholders, and competing priorities are just some of the common reasons a rural institution might not consider global learning as part of its mission. Yet, some colleges have made great strides in their quest to ensure their students have every opportunity to make themselves relevant, marketable, and competent in these dynamic times. Leadership at these institutions doesn’t view global awareness as a luxury but rather as essential to the success of its graduates and to the community’s prosperity.

In fact, one of the greatest economic development needs for rural communities is leadership, making young people coming out of these colleges an extremely valuable asset. Institutions, therefore, need to keep pace with the impact of globalization and prepare

their graduates to navigate the interconnected world, not necessarily so they leave, but so they can contribute to the economic development in their home communities.

Fortunately, this does not require a grand investment or complete overhaul of an institution. It does, however, require taking a fresh look at the community to recognize how it will sustain and what role the

college plays in producing the requisite leadership and workforce. It also requires that the college develop a strategic business plan that includes leadership, market analysis, human resources, branding, financial allocations, pricing, and a strong internal and external marketing campaign.

There is no one correct way to internationalize any community college, but rural community colleges tend to require a more deliberate approach. Early stages usually consist of a number of unrelated, under the radar activities led by individuals pursuing personal interests or connections.

The tipping point toward a more strategic approach comes when dedicated staff is hired and a person with authority encourages – or requires – an inventory of these activities and the development of a strategic plan. Pooling skillsets and enthusiasm toward this goal is usually the easy part. The challenge comes in convincing the wider range of stakeholders that assigning resources to internationalization aligns with the college’s mission.

Large metropolitan campuses, often held as great examples of how to internationalize, do not necessarily offer the best

blueprint for small rural colleges. Their naturally diverse populations may be a result of proximity to international commerce or government centers, or prone to immigration. They may also receive, by default, international students from a nearby university for ESL, developmental coursework, or transfer degrees. Just because multiple cultures are present in the classroom doesn’t mean that intercultural understanding exists. Unless benchmarks and outcomes related to global competencies are integrated, such assumptions cannot be made, regardless of an institution’s location and size.

Rural colleges that have achieved some level of success on the internationalization pathway exhibit two key traits: (1) a supportive leadership, and (2) a commitment to open access and the “opportunities in place” mantra. Following is the example of how Snow College in Ephraim, Utah, has done just this.

The Case of Snow: Snow College, Ephraim, UT

What most rural institutions have in common is a unique story that defines their existence and characterizes their nature and role in the community. It’s this narrative that provides a foundation on which to build a brand and a case for international initiatives.

Snow College serves an area the size of Massachusetts and Connecticut combined. Most of its 4000 students come from small agricultural or mining towns that dot the landscape, with the campus offering the first opportunity for many of them to meet each other. Yet among this student body there are over 120 international students representing 34 countries, a robust TESOL program, a dormitory, and a Global Engagement Center charged with providing both local and international students opportunities for global learning. Snow began welcoming international students in the 1970s as a result of the Iranian revolution. It also had a small number of students from Japan. Why Snow? These students needed English language instruction, and Snow offered a strong and reputable program. This program was created first to teach English to Navajo Tribe members, an interesting part of the

college’s history. In fact, as a result of the language center, Snow is the only two-year college to offer a degree in TESOL, a popular major that naturally attracts students with an appreciation of another culture.

The presence of international students on campus necessitated the creation of an International Student Center that was responsible for carrying out the services needed to support these students, from navigating the admissions process to transfer to the university to maintaining ties with alumni. As is common at many institutions, Snow’s satisfied international alumni became natural recruiters. Due to the rural nature of Snow’s college community, alumni were very



International students on the campus of Snow College.

connected to families and to Ephraim. It’s not uncommon for them to return to visit years later, relatives and children (aka future Snow students) in tow. So while Snow College hardly fits the vision of “America” that foreigners generally have (typically the Los Angeles or New York skylines), it was providing them with a quality education and lifestyle in a safe place, a pathway to a university, and a life changing experience.

But what was the tipping point that pushed Snow from a passive to a more strategic internationalization approach?

Things changed with an administrator who paved the way for the faculty and staff already engaged with international students to take it to the next level. For Snow, the next level meant finding a way to include domestic students in “global education” and putting the personnel structure in place to institutionalize these new structures.

In Snow’s case, this was a new Vice President who came from a university in Denver to assist with Snow’s accreditation process. While he was not hired to engage in international work, his former university had been heavily involved in it and he appreciated the positive influence of international students on campus. With his fresh set of eyes on the potential for Snow’s global footprint, he gave a top-down mandate to change the name of the International Student Center to the Global Engagement Center, sending the message that global education was intended for all Snow students. An appropriately credentialed Director was hired and given the

opportunity to shape the activities of the center, and a number of loosely organized student led grassroots organizations, such as the Japan Club, were brought under this umbrella.

A Global Engagement Advisory Council (GEAC), comprised primarily of supportive faculty, was established, which has proven to be a truly pivotal point Snow’s progress. GEAC’s activities included bringing in high caliber monthly speakers to engage students in topics such as human rights. For example, it had the *New York Times* delivered and established “*New York Times* roundtables” focused on global topics.

One of GEAC’s most important contributions was a result of a little luck in the timing of other initiatives at the college. The general education curriculum was getting overhauled to incorporate “high impact learning practices.” One component of this rebuild was to include service learning in certain classes and designate “SL” on transcripts for students who completed the required number of

courses. Following this model, GEAC is leading the charge to do the same with global learning that will provide a “GL” on transcripts. These curricular enhancements are institutionalizing internationalization at Snow. They grew in part from giving faculty and administrators the tools and support to do so through a series of workshops provided by a team from Florida International University. And it has worked. Despite a change in the presidency, the departure of the VP who expanded the Center’s mission, and the departure of the Center’s first director, the progress has continued and the current administration remains supportive.

Too often the narrative at community colleges, where changes in leadership are frequent, is that siloed activities or pet projects of

the former administration are swiftly moved to the new administration’s chopping block. This is often the case for international programs. Fortunately for Snow, internationalization had been integrated.

International Student Recruitment: The Uphill Battle

With international students still a key influence in Snow’s internationalization plan, the college pays close attention to how it is branded globally: a two-year residential college in a small town where you get to know the people in the community. For an additional fee, students can opt into the “Global Explorations” program that provides weekend adventure trips into Utah’s spectacular parks and wilderness areas. Snow capitalizes on the unique resources it has and ensures students get to experience as much of them as possible. A dedicated full-time student services staff member has been key to this program’s success. International students are also encouraged to get involved in leadership opportunities, as residence advisors, and as part of the president’s committee. Their visibility on campus sends the message that the college values diversity and provides them with enriching activities. Rural colleges need to invest in these types of activities more than metropolitan colleges do, even when students live on campus.

Snow’s approach to recruitment is diversity, and they are content in having small but steady flows from many countries. With a solid support infrastructure in place, they are well prepared to continue growing their numbers.

In August 2015, Snow’s Global Engagement Center Director, Eric Peterson, participated in Partners of the Americas trip to Colombia to learn more about SENA (Colombia’s national technical college system) and find potential partners for a 100,000 Strong grant specifically for community colleges. Snow was eventually awarded one of the five grants and has already sent a group of students there as part of an exchange. Even at the time of the exploratory trip, Snow was not fully convinced that sending faculty and students to a country on the US Department of State’s travel warning list was going to work. However, Peterson’s testimonial, support from Partners of the Americas, the fact that the grant itself was

supported by the Department of State, and the ability to find travel insurance supported the decision to pursue this opportunity. While the grant is relatively small (\$40,000), Snow is now trailblazing in yet another country and providing opportunity for its students and faculty that few Americans get. Success with this grant will inevitably help in future competitions. The invitation to the White House for the announcement of the award winner was another feather in Snow’s cap and signaled to others at the college that they must be doing something right.

Snow College provides an illustrative case study to rural colleges. It has achieved an admirable level of success across a number of internationalization components, from recruitment to study abroad to internationalization of the curriculum. Objectively, most might assume that a college of this size located two hours from a large city in a state that does not necessarily come to mind when thinking about international education would be a challenge for anyone to internationalize, not to mention the juxtaposition of its name against the perceptions of life in sun drenched places like California, Texas, and Florida. Yet it has turned all of these attributes into selling points, which is a great lesson to other rural institutions.

Some key takeaways:

Know your Market and Brand Accordingly

Community colleges are often accused of doing a poor job of telling their story. A large metropolitan institution in a crowded market may have to do a better job at this, and with branding itself, out of necessity. A rural community college, on the other hand, may be the only option for local students, which could lead to complacency as far as branding in a national and global context. Colleges should consider what unique history and early leadership influenced the institution? What sectors, local and global, does it serve particularly well? What natural resources are nearby? What alumni success can be highlighted? How does this

International students’ are encouraged to get involved in leadership opportunities, as resident advisors, and as part of the president’s committee. Their visibility on campus sends the message that the college values diversity and provides students with enriching experiences.



Snow College students and teachers learn about trimming and growing cacao plants in Santa Fe de Antioquia, Colombia, an experience made possible by the 100,000 Strong in the Americas Innovation Fund.

institution mirror the geographic region in which it's situated? Basically, how does this institution differ from the other 1100+ community colleges around the US?

The answers to these questions should inform the strategic plan for internationalization.

Influence the Community's Mindset

Community and industry stakeholders may not readily understand the connection between “global” or “international” and the mission of the “community” college. Speak to this in terms they understand. Ephraim has a strong agricultural base, and farmers are all tuned in to the global markets for their products. According to Peterson, the “older” generation is not always as supportive as the

younger population in the area. However, by drawing attention the alfalfa markets these farmers sell to (Saudi Arabia and Japan for example), it's clear that Ephraim and its surrounding areas cannot survive in isolation.

But Tim Nelson, President of Northwestern Michigan College, advises that leaders can't be parochial about efforts to internationalize. “We don't want to be 1970s America when we would say ‘here's a product,

know find a place to sell it.’” Today the world is interconnected on every level, and students need to be exposed to diversity and different ways of thinking. Soft skills and global competencies are highly sought after by companies that understand they are a necessity. Communities should want residents who are open minded and can think critically. Nelson adds, “The future requires that for people to be successful, they need to understand and value diversity. What safer place to do this than at our colleges?”

Be Intentional

Just as with any other initiatives on campus, international programs require a strategic plan with appropriate staff and budget attached to it. A cabinet level administrator should be the designated person

to provide oversight and to hold others accountable. If one doesn't already exist, a global committee should be formed to ensure proper vetting and promotion of activities. Put out a call for volunteers, seeking a cross section of campus but being careful to not require people to have particular expertise in internationalization. For example, frontline staff should be part of this committee as they play a vital role in any international student programming. If international activities are already in place, conduct an inventory of them and of the various skills faculty and staff bring to the table, particularly with international partners and languages. While it would be ideal for this person to have some background in international education, more often than not this person simply provides a platform for other champions to carry out their work. International activities should be a standing agenda item at board meetings.

Dr. Chris Hammond at Mid Michigan Community College is taking bold steps at her two-campus rural institution. Despite the relatively small size of the college, she has hired a full-time International Programs Director to drive this new initiative. Due to proximity to Central Michigan University, MMCC has seen an influx of international students, growing from five to 130 international students in less than five years. Hammond paved the way for an international student club and has made a strategic effort to ensure the support services offered to local students are accessible to international students as well. These students have enriched the classrooms and have given the college an opportunity to build capacity for other global opportunities. MMCC is committed to strategic expansion. For example, Hammond is taking into considering the college's latitude as a reference point when seeking opportunities and institutional partners around the world as, it makes sense to operate with those who share similar natural resources, climate, crops, etc. to partner with on curriculum and exchanges for students.

A similar idea was considered a number of years ago by Jim Bensley, Director of International Services and Service Learning at Northwestern Michigan College. He proposed the “45th Parallel” program (where Traverse City sits), a study abroad excursion with stops in regions with a similar winemaking industry. While the program did not materialize (due to the cost), Bensley has worked



International students visiting Arches National Park in Utah as part of Snow College's Global Explorations program.

with faculty at NMC to place the college in the top 6% of community colleges sending students abroad, exposing students to numerous countries, recently adding Cuba, Greece, and Ghana. Similar to the other colleges, NMC took a major leap in it international activities when Bensley was moved from admissions to work in this capacity. A true testament to the commitment of President Nelson, he and his wife generously created a fund to support student study abroad that provides \$1000 scholarships to NMC students. The college also provides significant funding for faculty professional development, of which international programming is a big part. Nelson and Bensley agree that a key to getting broad participation is to embed global learning into the curriculum. Nelson adds, “It cannot be an option or something additional; our students don't have the time or money for that. And, we need to send the message that this is important for all of our graduates.”

Institutionalize Global Learning

While international students and study abroad are key components to an internationalization strategy, they tend to engage only a small number of students.

A strategy a number of colleges have implemented is a global certificate or endorsement that students can achieve by participating in a prescribed number of courses and activities that are global in nature. This approach can be particularly useful at rural

colleges as it requires little more than organizing what already exists in the community, at the college, through a university partner, or virtually.

For example, students at NMC can pursue Global Endorsement on their transcripts by accumulating 100 points through various activities ranging from attending community events that are global in nature, participating in a study or service learning abroad experience, taking certain courses that have global learning outcomes, or volunteering at a global organization, as just some examples. The full program can be found at <https://www.nmc.edu/student-services/international-services/global-endorsement/index.html>.

Take Calculated Risks

While more rural colleges are stepping into the global space, it is by no means commonplace. Expanding an institution's global footprint brings inherent risks, particularly when there really is no blueprint. It's vital that a capable person at the institution is charged with evaluating and mitigating these risks. Associations such as NAFSA: Association of International Educators (www.nafsa.org) provide resources and access to experts and peers with decades of experience in this area, so there is no need to go this alone. Having buy-in and participation from across campus and the community will also help to think proactively about potential problems.

The positive side to the internationalization challenge at rural community colleges is that most are a blank slate. Creative and innovative leaders are finding appropriate and meaningful ways to bring global opportunities to their local constituents in a strategic manner. A strong case can be made that it's even more vital that these advancements occur in rural communities, as success in the 21st century depends on interconnectedness. Creating world class opportunities “in place” is no longer just an option.

SERIES EDITORS

Carol Stax Brown, Ed.D.

Sarah Singer, Ph.D.



MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY

International Business Center

Broad College of Business
645 N. Shaw Ln., Room 7
East Lansing, MI 48824-1121
U S A

PHONE **517.353.4336**
WEB **ibc.msu.edu**
EMAIL **ibc@msu.edu**