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The Business of Rural Community College Internationalization
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The Case of Snow: Snow College, Ephraim, UT

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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 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 “Americana” 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?

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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 silenced 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 international student, this premise is appealing. As such, the college focused on establishing GEAC’s activities. With 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 students 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 into 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
Groups are enriched by the participation of non-traditional students. Danny John, left, was the team leader for “Group 5” on the 2014 Ireland project.

**THE BUSINESS OF RURAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE INTERNATIONALIZATION**

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.

**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 to 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 too cautious about efforts to internationalize. “We don’t want to be 1970s America in isolation. 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 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 communities 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.

**Take Calculated Risks**

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**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 one’s 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 “49th Parallel” program (where Traverse City sits), a study abroad excursion with programs to students in numerous countries, recently adding Cuba, Greece, and Ghana. Similar to the other colleges, MMCC took a major leap in its international activities when Bensley was moved from admissions to work in that 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.

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**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 “49th 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 with faculty at NMC to place the college in the top 9% 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 its international activities when Bensley was moved from admissions to work in that 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.”

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