

Community colleges in the USA

US community colleges are starting to realise the value of international students and, as a result, many are expanding their international marketing strategies.

Studying at a community college is often not a first choice for international students going to the USA for educational purposes, mainly due to a lack of knowledge about what they offer. However, this situation could soon change as the sector has recently developed a more comprehensive international marketing strategy.

"The efforts of individual community colleges and especially the American Association of Community Colleges (AACCO) has greatly increased the profile of community colleges in the world," confirms Charles Hantz from Danville Area Community College in Danville, IL. He adds that the college started looking seriously at increasing international enrolments when it established its own international centre three years ago. "In 2002, DACC began its international efforts by subscribing to the AACCO's Internet service and hard copy brochure," he says. "Online fairs, advertising on the AACCO's website and DACC's own website have been the most successful recruiting tools."

At Aims Community College in Greeley, CO, the challenge of enlarging the international student body is also a recent development. "We recruit international students through the Internet, print publications, education fairs in the country, online fairs and sometimes agents," says Alan Hendrickson at the college, who adds that international enrolments are "maybe a little higher" due to the fact that they have "more actively started to recruit international students".

The most popular international recruitment techniques used by community colleges in the USA include word of mouth recommendations, the Internet and education fairs, with agents a long way down in the marketing mix. Hantz affirms, "Our strong belief at DACC is that you increase enrolments one student at a time by focusing on the quality of experience of our current students. DACC has never used agents and plans never to do so."

While marketing awareness may be increasing within community colleges in the USA, enrolment figures across the sector have yet to reflect the positive changes. According to statistics

from the Institute of International Education in the USA, international enrolments at community colleges in the USA decreased for the second year in a row in 2003/2004, with numbers falling from a high of 82,932 students in 2001/2002 to 75,830 students two years later.

Reasons for the decrease include factors that have been having a detrimental effect on the whole of the US education industry in recent years, including, for many, visa issuance problems. "It is still more difficult, not easier, to get a visa for the community college applicant," asserts Wendell Sparks from Lexington Community College in Lexington, KY. "Too often, the US consulates still do not know that the community college is an accredited 'real' educational institution with the two-plus-two agreements" – whereby students gain an associate degree in two years at a community college and transfer to a university to gain a bachelor degree in another two years.

Despite the overall decline in international enrolments, some community colleges are reporting promising figures for this year, and many point to the benefits for international students of studying at a community college rather than a university institution. "Community colleges are a great place for an international student to begin their study abroad [experience]," asserts Hendrickson. "Typically, the class sizes are smaller, tuition costs are less and they receive more personal attention. They can adjust to living in another culture and then transfer to a larger four-year university." He adds that an international student can also receive an "Associate degree of Applied Science which would prepare them to go back to their country and begin working in the area they studied".

The future internationalisation of community colleges in the USA has potential and looks promising, and some colleges are already reaping the rewards of being among the first to target new student markets overseas. "2005 is shaping up to be a phenomenal year," says Hantz. "There has been a 600 per cent increase in contacts and a projected 400 per cent in enrolments."

International students at US community colleges
2003/2004

