To some, it may seem unusual for community colleges to embrace international education. “Community” implies a connection to our immediate physical surroundings. Pima Community College (PCC), which I have been honored to lead as chancellor since July 2013, is very much a part of Tucson—Pima County’s largest city—and Southern Arizona. We are woven into this wonderfully diverse region in numerous significant ways.

Each year, we provide some 50,000 students with education and training in more than 100 programs leading either to direct employment or to transfer into a four-year college or university. Our adult education program helps thousands of our Pima County neighbors take the critical first step on their education journey and our rising Workforce Development division meets the needs of local employers and industry. In sum, we are supplying the education resources for our hometown to thrive.

Redefining Community: Rationale and Impact

Simultaneously, we are engaged in a robust effort—aided by international student recruitment agents—to bring students from around the world to PCC, because we recognize that in 2018 our community can no longer be delineated solely as a small trapezoid of land on a map. It is true PCC serves Pima County first and foremost, but our executive leadership is acutely aware that our county is part of a vigorous transboundary economic and cultural ecosystem. Tucson is about 60 miles from the US border with Mexico, which, according to Census Bureau data, is Arizona’s top trading partner, surpassing the next eight trading partners combined.

Moreover, demographic realities are forcing us to look beyond the geographic areas we’ve traditionally relied on for students. The growth rate of the population of the Tucson metropolitan area was only 0.8 percent in 2017, ranking the city ninth among 12 metropolitan areas in the western US. PCC’s 2016 environmental scan shows Arizona is in the midst of a period of extremely modest growth in its grade 9 to 12 population, increasing only 4.9 percent from 2013-2020. According to a speech delivered at the 2017 Southern Arizona Leadership Council Annual Retreat in Tucson, the percentage change in Tucson’s 25-34 population from 2008-2016 was the worst among 53 US metropolitan areas, declining by more than 5 percent.
Against this backdrop, our state’s public education institutions are gearing up to rapidly internationalize. One of the University of Arizona’s strategic priorities is to graduate leaders who have the skills to “solve the world’s grand challenges.” Arizona State University aspires to become “a global center for interdisciplinary research, discovery and development by 2020.” One of Northern Arizona University’s strategic goals is to “advance the internationalization of the university to prepare students for global citizenship.” Similarly, PCC must prepare students for success in an interdependent world. I view the community referenced in Pima Community College to be one that spans our interconnected, interdependent globe, and encompasses all learners, wherever they live, who wish to fulfill their personal dreams through the promise inherent in US public education.

Specifically, PCC is committed to expanding and supporting diversity on campus; developing and increasing the student population through global education; and enriching our community through engagement. PCC board policy states that the college “will offer international education opportunities that encourage globalization of academic and occupational studies with the enrollment of students from other countries, study abroad, exchange opportunities and inclusion of international elements in the College’s curriculum.” The policy goes on to state: “These opportunities will include recruitment, marketing, new program development, instruction, and support services to meet the needs of participants in the program.”

CEOs of community colleges are expected to be prudent fiscal managers and PCC is no exception. Additionally, our institutional peers expect close alignment between strategic planning and budgeting, with both practices reflecting our values. I am aware of the ability of international students to drive economic development; for every seven international students enrolled, NAFSA’s International Student Economic Value Tool shows that three US jobs are created and supported by spending in the higher education, hospitality, telecommunications, transit, and health insurance sectors. I strongly support PCC’s historical commitment to keep resident tuition low, and recognize that our recent recalibration of international student tuition makes it competitive with other institutions while producing a return for each PCC enrollment. Given these realities, I would be remiss if I did not direct PCC to explore initiatives that diversify its revenue sources into the international arena. Further, it would be ill-considered if I did not direct our international development team to engage with prospective students through a variety of means, including through agent-based recruiting.
Agent-Based Recruiting: A Comprehensive Approach

Before I came to PCC I served as president of Shoreline Community College, near Seattle, where I supported a successful internationalization effort that involved, among other initiatives, the use of agents. Working deliberately and purposefully, PCC has embarked on a similar effort, one that has yielded steady gains. Before embarking on the endeavor, CEOs and senior leadership must understand the risks and opportunities inherent in an agent-based recruitment strategy, identify the resources necessary to make such a strategy a success, and evaluate agent-based enrollments against existing standards and expectations.

PCC currently engages 12 agents whose top recruiting areas are Japan, China, and Vietnam; by June, we project to engage 25 agents total. It is important to note that agents are one means among many that PCC employs for international recruitment. The recruitment staff within our Center for International Education and Global Engagement (CIEGE) takes part in face-to-face activities in a variety of nations. We also benefit from word-of-mouth recruiting by faculty, staff, and current students and use social media and web channels to reach prospective students. Partnering with agents gives us the advantage of having a day-to-day presence in a nation. Our recruiting activities adhere to the standards set by the National Association for College and Admission Counseling, and we appreciate NACAC’s guidance that international student growth is “not a get-enrollments-quick undertaking.”

While we maintain the highest ethical standards in all recruiting, the unique circumstances surrounding agents—they work remotely, often half a world away—compelled PCC to develop additional layers of assurance and to allocate appropriate resources. We use only agents belonging to reputable industry associations with defined standards. We also set contractual standards of conduct regarding representations of PCC to prospective students and the use of institution-approved recruitment materials. In addition, we notify students about our standards for agents, have students evaluate agents, and require in-person visits between agents and PCC staff. Additionally, and in recognition of increased (and welcomed) public scrutiny of student outcomes, we are exploring linking agents’ compensation incentives to student success (such as courses passed or semesters successfully completed) or making continued business with an agent contingent on reaching minimum levels of success.

International Education and Diversity

In 2017, PCC unveiled its first-ever Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Plan, which included Strategic Direction 6: “Prepare students, faculty and staff to adapt and succeed in a diverse, global, multicultural, multi-ethnic society.” This directive sparked a spirited public discussion, led by factions of the community that, essentially, argued for the primacy of local geography in our planning. We rejected the notion that being true to the diversity of our immediate community is at odds with our goal of a learning environment that is inclusive of students from all nationalities. We reasoned that our students and communities will reap the maximum benefit if PCC treats localism and globalism as mutually beneficial, not opposing, forces. For example, the economic reality of our region—Tucson regularly ranks among the 10 poorest US metropolitan areas of its size—means that many of our students, especially those traditionally marginalized and underserved by higher education, simply do not have the money to partake of the rewards inherent in study or travel abroad. Thus it is incumbent on PCC leadership to catalyze opportunities to “bring the world to Pima” through internationalization in order to provide our local students the benefits of interacting with students from around the globe.

A Personal Endnote

In summary, from a CEO’s perspective, agency-based recruiting is recommended provided it is but one well-supported implement in a community college’s internationalization toolbox; meshes with the institution’s overall student success goals and activities; and is but one means of enhancing the school’s commitment to global education and social justice.

Allow me to conclude with a personal perspective. I was born in Seoul, South Korea and grew up on three continents—my father served in the US Army and my mother was born and raised in war-torn South Korea—before our family settled in Olympia, Washington. I can attest to the power of listening to, learning alongside, and breaking bread with someone who is not like you. My experiences have convinced me that global solidarity is the humanizing force of the global economy. More than any other, the 21st century will value respect for and understanding of other cultures. Championing opportunities to bring together PCC students with their brethren from around the globe benefits everyone. It breathes new life into the meaning of “community.”