Community colleges and the transfer process remain, almost exclusively, an American concept. While there are a handful of instances where community colleges or their equivalent may exist outside the US, no other country has as strong a presence of these schools within their system of higher education. Indeed, almost half of US undergraduates enroll in one of 1,100 community colleges in the country at some point along their path to a postsecondary degree.

Despite widespread unfamiliarity of the community college and transfer process outside of the US, 9 percent of all international students in the US, or 95,000, were enrolled at community colleges in 2015–16, according to the Institute of International Education’s annual Open Doors Report. Although this represents a small number of students compared to domestic numbers, this population has continued to grow over the last decade.

Benefits of Starting Out at a Community College

Concerns relating to English language proficiency play a major role in many international students’ decision to begin at a community college in the US. Many community colleges offer intensive English programs, allow students to start taking classes while working on their English, and provide extra services for speaking and writing English. Nita Thirza, an international student from Indonesia at Green River College (WA), said extra services, such as the writing center, make a big difference for international students overcoming language barriers. “A lot of international students aren’t that confident about their English so these resources are really helpful,” she said. In addition, community colleges often have lower TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System) requirements for admission compared to four-year schools or offer separate assessments to test English language ability for admission.

International students also attend community colleges for similar reasons domestic students do: lower-cost tuition, smaller class sizes, and more opportunities for individualized attention. In International Education at Community Colleges, authors discuss how finances can be a major concern for international students, the majority of which rely solely on personal or family funds to pay their tuition costs. “International students have very limited opportunities for scholarships or financial aid, and they are not eligible for any kind of federal student aid . . . [they] are required to be enrolled full time during their study and can only work part time in on-campus authorized jobs (often difficult to get), thus restricting their opportunity to help support themselves while studying,” they wrote.

In addition, whereas large four-year schools have average freshman class sizes in the hundreds, the same courses at a community college may have 20 students, which could be a huge benefit in getting to know faculty and adjusting to school in the US. “They can acclimate to the US college experience in a smaller environment than what they would have at [a large four-year]. They’re able to get used to what a registrar is, what’s an academic advisor, understand the culture a little more, and maybe feel more prepared when they transfer,” said Kailey Posterick, international admissions counselor at the University of Houston.
WHO, WHY, AND WHERE
- Almost half are from five countries: China (19.1%), Vietnam (9.6%), South Korea (7.5%), Japan (5.7%), and Mexico (4.8%)
- Top fields of study: business, STEM, and intensive English
- Top hosting states: California, New York, and Texas

BUILDING TRANSFER PARTNERSHIPS
Green River College, which currently hosts over 1,700 international students and ranks 10th in international enrollments among community colleges in the US, partners with about 25 universities across the country to provide guaranteed admission agreements for students in their international transfer pathway program. When students are admitted to Green River, they get their acceptance letter, I-20 form (certificate of eligibility for nonimmigrant student status), and conditional admission letter to partner four-year universities. Bjorn Myhre, director of international recruitment, noted that these partnerships originate from both sides. “Sometimes the universities approach us... and other times it’s the community college that approaches the universities. It’s always student first and then we take action,” he said. In the absence of formal guaranteed admission agreements, community colleges and four-year university partners serve students well by making the transfer process clear.

The University of Houston (TX) has articulation agreements with the Houston Community College System (ranked No. 1 in international enrollments among community colleges in the US), Lone Star College, San Jacinto Community College, and several other two- and four-year colleges. “Our [community college partners] are very open to us having a presence on campus...” and other times it’s the community college that approaches the universities. It’s always student first and then we take action,” said Wood.

Whether partnerships are domestic or international and involve high school students or college transfer students, connections among professionals are always key. Dawn Wood, director of international programs at Kirkwood Community College (IA), stresses this point: “I think it’s really important that your international student staff are connected with the university people. It’s all about building relationships to make the most success for your students.”

RECRUITMENT
Below are some of the main ways international students learn about starting their postsecondary education at a community college and transfer options in the US:
- **Staff travel** to visit high schools internationally and talk to principals, students, and families.
- **Transfer fairs** for international students in the US (often held at community colleges).
- **Alumni and word of mouth.** "I found out about Green River college from a high school friend. Her brother studied there and told us about the program," said Thirza.
- **International agents.** "We work with good, reputable agents. They come visit our campus, we visit them, we give good updates about our school and services and it seems to work well for us. We spend our time and energy with good partners and we work hard to screen them," said Myhre. (In 2013, NACAC modified its Statement of Principles of Good Practice to permit members to utilize agents, providing they ensure accountability, transparency, and integrity when doing so. Read more at [www.nacacnet.org/SPGP](http://www.nacacnet.org/SPGP)).
- **Education USA**, a US Department of State network of over 400 international student advising centers in more than 170 countries.

Diversity within an institution’s locale and student population can be a major draw when recruiting international students. According to Open Doors, “…urban areas continue to be a draw for international students in the US “due to “broad ethnic diversity” and a “variety of cultural and historical offerings.” When asked about the best part of studying at Green River College, sophomore Kentaro Nagashima, an international student from Japan, replied, “Making friends from all over the world... I’ve lived with students from Malaysia, Vietnam, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, and Indonesia. It’s good to learn about people from all different cultures.”

Furthermore, even though international students in the US are evenly dispersed across the country by region, international students from certain countries may be more concentrated in certain areas due to geographic distance from home and migration patterns. For example, Nigeria is one of the top places of origin of international transfer students at the University of Houston, which mirrors the fact that Houston has the second largest Nigerian population in the US outside of Nigeria.

SERVICES FOR STUDENTS
Community colleges and four-year colleges and universities can support international transfer students by providing on-campus jobs, year-round housing, and advising/programs tailored specifically to international students.

Green River College has six or seven full-time advisors and four part-time advisors to work with students on degree and transfer planning, as well as immigration and student visa requirements. “We advise students a lot on the front end before they come here, about the transfer options. Then when they get here, they get information at orientation and throughout their whole time here on the importance of good grades, getting involved with transfer clubs and organizations, application deadlines and requirements... We are very intentional about what they need to do to set themselves up for transfer success,” said Myhre. Green River also has an international peer-mentoring program called Foundation for Success, for international students to mentor other new students.

At Kirkwood, the international student office works with the transfer advising team to train them on communication styles and cultural differences: “We provide intercultural communication workshops for advising staff so students can feel comfortable going to them with questions and staff can feel comfortable that they can communicate well,” said Wood.

University of Houston’s Transfer Advising Program (TAP) advisors help transfer students “maximize the transfer experience and take classes that are most helpful for their pathway.” In addition, Posterick said it’s critical, when considering institutional program or policy changes, to remember international and transfer students. “Ask that question—how will this impact those students? Sometimes we don’t ask that question enough,” she said.

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Learn about reverse transfer and international students on the Admitted blog.