



COMMUNITY COLLEGE
INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION
RESEARCH INITIATIVE

COMMUNITY COLLEGE CHARACTERISTICS AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES

WHICH COLLEGES ARE MOST LIKELY
TO PROVIDE ACCESS?

MELISSA WHATLEY, CHRISTIAN BOTWE NYARKO, AND ALENA
CHAPLYGINA

COMMUNITY COLLEGE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH INITIATIVE
WILLIAM & MARY SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Community colleges are critical facilitators of global learning experiences for their students (Raby, 2020). A recent Community College International Education Research Initiative (CCIERI) [report](#) documented the extent to which various approaches to international education are present in the community college sector. In brief, this report, which focused on the 2024-25 academic year, indicated that at least 42% of community colleges offer study abroad, 82% enroll international students, 4% support virtual international exchange programming, 5% offer a certificate or diploma program related to global learning, and 23% host internationally focused events and student organizations on their campuses.

Although the information provided in this previous report is immensely valuable for understanding international education's prevalence at community colleges generally, further information would generate better understanding of where these opportunities and activities are most likely to be found. After all, we know that not all colleges have access to the same financial resources from state and local governments, and neither do they all have the same curricular focus. For example, some colleges have a primary focus on career and technical education (CTE), while others tend to focus on four-year degrees, whether through transfer to a four-year institution or through offering bachelor's degree pathways directly at the community college. These institutional characteristics likely stratify access to international education at community colleges. Colleges with greater access to resources or with four-year degree curricular focuses may be more likely to offer international education opportunities compared to those with fewer resources or a CTE focus. Such patterns would align with institutional stratification theory, which has been used to explain differential access to educational opportunities not only at community colleges but across higher education (Bastedo & Gumport, 2003; Bastedo & Jaquette, 2011; Hearn, 1991; Karabel, 1972, 1986; Trow, 1984).

REPORT OVERVIEW

This report provides information about the extent to which community college characteristics lend themselves to the presence of five international education activities: study abroad, international student enrollment, virtual international exchange, certificate or diploma program(s) related to global learning, and on-campus internationally focused events and student organizations. Table 1 on the following page provides definitions of these activities.

While we considered a number of institutional characteristics in our full analysis (see the Appendix for a list), here we focus on those that were statistically meaningful in our results. These institutional characteristics are the following:

- Curricular focus: We define this characteristic using the Carnegie Undergraduate Instructional Program Classification, which divides community colleges into four groups:
 - Baccalaureate/associate's colleges: Both associate's and baccalaureate degrees are awarded, with most degrees awarded at the associate's level
 - High transfer: Fewer than 30% of degrees and certificates awarded are in career and technical programs
 - Mixed transfer/career and technical: 30-49% of degrees and certificates awarded are in career and technical programs
 - High career and technical: More than 50% of degrees and certificates awarded are in career and technical programs *or* no more than 75% of degrees and certificates awarded are in a single program
- Institutional finances: State and local appropriations per student¹
- Total enrollment

We chose these characteristics because they are institutional rather than state or student characteristics that vary across community colleges.

¹ Calculated as total appropriations divided by total fall enrollment

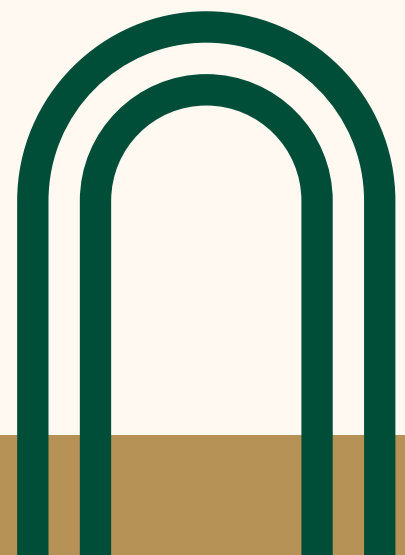


Table 1: International Education Offerings Included in this Report and Definitions

Offering	Definition
Study Abroad	Study abroad is a form of off-campus study that takes place outside the country where a student’s home institution is located and results in progress toward an academic degree (Forum on Education Abroad, 2025a).
International Student Enrollment	International students are students on a temporary, non-immigrant visa and are enrolled in coursework at a U.S. institution (IIE, 2025). This definition does not include students in international locations taking coursework through a U.S. institution online, but it does include students enrolled in Optional Practical Training.
Virtual International Exchange	Virtual exchange programs “use technology to connect people for education and exchange” and are sometimes facilitated by prepared and responsible adults, often faculty and staff (Stevens Initiative, 2024). Virtual exchange often involves technology-facilitated collaborative projects and discussions among students and faculty from different parts of the world (SUNY COIL, 2025).
Certificate/Diploma in Global Learning	A certificate “refers to an award granted for the successful completion of a subbaccalaureate postsecondary program of study. [...] Certificates are usually awarded in a career education field and may cover the same coursework as an associate’s degree, but without the general education requirements” (NCES, 2025). The U.S. Department of Education’s Common Education Data Standards (2025) define a diploma as a recognition of instruction in a given area that is less than two years. In both cases, certifications are supplementary to a student’s primary program of study and do not represent a full degree program. Here, certificates or diplomas have a global, international, or intercultural focus.
Internationally focused Cultural Events and Clubs on Campus	Internationally focused cultural events and clubs have a definite global focus. Internationally focused cultural events include reference to at least one international location, such as a city, country, or culture. International travel club, global exploration club, or international students club are examples of clubs with an international focus. However, clubs that are specific to students from a particular background (e.g., a LatinX students club) are not internationally focused, as students who identify as LatinX are not necessarily from another part of the world.

Table 2 presents the results of our analysis. In this table, green indicates a positive, statistically significant ($p < .05$ or lower) association between a given college characteristic and the international education activity listed at the top of a given column. Red indicates a negative, statistically significant relationship. No color represents a relationship that is not statistically significant. For curricular focus, comparisons are made to the mixed transfer/career and technical category (e.g., Baccalaureate/associate's-focused colleges are more likely to study abroad compared to colleges with a mixed transfer/career and technical focus).

Table 2: Community College Characteristics and the Presence of International Education Activities

	Study Abroad	International Student Enrollment	Virtual International Exchange	Certificate/Diploma in Global Learning	On-campus Cultural Events and Clubs
Baccalaureate/ Associate's (vs. Mixed degree)	+	+			+
High Transfer Colleges (vs. Mixed degree)	+				+
High Career and Technical Degree (vs. Mixed degree)				-	
State Appropriations Per Student	+			+	
Local Appropriations Per Student	+		+		
Total Enrollment	+	+	+	+	+

This table displays results of logistic regression analyses. Each international education activity was entered into these analyses as a binary outcome variable that included the predictors listed in the Appendix. Note that green cells with a plus sign indicate positive, statistically significant relationships, red cells with a minus sign indicate negative, significant relationships. Empty cells represent relationships that were not statistically significant. We consider findings $p < .05$ or lower to be statistically significant. The comparison group for curricular focus is mixed transfer/career and technical.

CURRICULAR FOCUS AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ACTIVITIES

When examining community colleges by curricular focus category, our results indicated that Baccalaureate/Associate colleges were more likely to offer study abroad and enroll international students compared to colleges with a mixed degree focus. Baccalaureate/Associate colleges were also more likely to support clubs and events with an international focus on campus. High Transfer colleges were also more likely to offer study abroad and support on-campus clubs and events with an international focus, but this curricular focus was not significantly associated with enrolling international students. Colleges that fell into the High Career and Technical degree focus category were less likely to offer certificates or diplomas in global learning compared to mixed-degree institutions.

INSTITUTIONAL FINANCES AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ACTIVITIES

Both state and local appropriations exhibited a positive relationship with study abroad. Thus, greater amounts of state and local appropriations per student correlated to an increase in the likelihood that a college would offer study abroad. However, for virtual exchange, only local appropriations per student showed a positive association. For globally focused certificate or diploma offerings, only state appropriations per student showed a positive association.

TOTAL ENROLLMENT AND INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ACTIVITIES

Total enrollment had a positive relationship with all five of the international education offerings included in this study. In general, colleges with greater enrollment were more likely to support all the international education activities we considered in this study.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND IMPLICATIONS



TAKEAWAY #1

The study finds evidence of unequal access to global learning opportunities in community colleges. We theorize that these inequalities reflect broader patterns, where higher education institutions with more resources and perhaps already more advantaged students have more opportunities to offer global learning options. Our study points out several examples of such inequality.

TAKEAWAY #2

Degree focus of a community college relates to international education activities: community colleges that are focused on degree programs that can lead to four-year transfer were more likely to engage in global education. This creates a situation wherein students with these academic interests and goals are advantaged over students more focused on career outcomes and immediate employment. We recommend community colleges support international education offerings regardless of students' degree focus, as all students deserve a chance to participate in meaningful international experiences. Career and technical education fields hold particular promise for initiatives that aim to provide global opportunities to all students, especially given recent arguments that employers are looking for globally competent employees (Forum on Education Abroad, 2025b).

TAKEAWAY #3

Community colleges with higher state and local appropriations per student are more likely to offer international education opportunities, a practice that disadvantages students attending less well-funded community colleges and contributes to stratification across the sector. We encourage community college leaders and advocates for international education to communicate benefits of such opportunities to the local communities and states where they are located to ensure better funding of such programs.

TAKEAWAY #4

Colleges with higher enrollment are more likely to offer all five international education opportunities, which can be connected to the fact that they have more students interested in such opportunities, making programs more cost effective. We recommend smaller colleges consider partnering with nearby organizations and institutions to make such programs possible for their students.

TAKEAWAY #5

Access to global education is uneven in community college settings. Internationalization at home opportunities, which do not require travel abroad, may be especially helpful to address these existing gaps. We also recommend strengthening advocacy for international education and using regional partnerships to help sustain global programs. We hope this report inspires community colleges to expand international education opportunities to make them more accessible to all students.

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APPENDIX

Characteristics included in our analyses:

- State appropriations per student
- Local appropriations per student
- Total assets per student
- Total enrollment
- Percentage part-time student enrollment
- Percentage full-time instructional staff
- Curricular focus: High transfer, Mixed transfer/career and technical, High career and technical, Baccalaureate/Associate's
- Percentage of students receiving Pell funding
- Percentage of students identifying as Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, white, and more than one racial/ethnic group (alongside a race/ethnicity unknown category)

ABOUT THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION RESEARCH INITIATIVE:

The Community College International Education Research Initiative (CCIERI) is a research group organized by Dr. Melissa Whatley in William & Mary's School of Education. Our work focuses on all aspects of international education in the U.S. community college context. We are especially interested in unconventional, less common, and new approaches that promote access to international learning opportunities for underserved populations and that result in outcomes that lead to a more just world.

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