

# COVID-19 Impact Research Brief: International Students At Community Colleges

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Several recent reports detail how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted international higher education (e.g., Martel 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; NAFSA 2020). However, none of the reports have focused exclusively on community colleges (defined as public, two-year institutions). Community colleges, and especially the international students they enroll, may be particularly vulnerable during the COVID-19 crisis. Community colleges are less likely to offer on-campus housing to students, meaning that in situations where classes rapidly transition online, international students may find themselves challenged by being suddenly distanced—physically, socially, and emotionally—from their campus community. Moreover, community colleges, already funded at lower levels than their four-year counterparts (Century Foundation 2019), received comparably less funding through the CARES Act, passed by Congress to provide higher education institutions and students with emergency financial relief in the wake of the pandemic (St. Amour 2020). Finally, campus infrastructure that supports international education at community colleges generally is not as robust as at four-year institutions (Boggs and Irwin 2007; Raby and Valeau 2016), which may equate to less institutional support for international students in times of crisis.

This research brief summarizes key takeaways from a June 2020 survey of representatives from a randomly selected sample of 300 community colleges that reported international student enrollment to the National Center for Education Statistics’s *Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System* in the 2017–18 academic year, the most recent year for which data were available. The survey asked respondents about the COVID-19 pandemic’s impact on international students at their institution, resources and institutional support for international students at the onset of the pandemic, how international education had changed at their institution due to the pandemic, and how they viewed the future of international education at their institution.

Seventeen international education administrators responded to the survey, representing 17 institutions from 12 states (California, Iowa, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Washington). These institutions enrolled 127 international students on average. Survey participants occupied a variety of roles at their institutions, with the top responses for primary roles being international student adviser, lead international student administrator/PDSO, and/or working in international recruitment/admissions.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, three survey participants volunteered to participate in follow-up interviews, which were used to delve deeper into their survey responses.

The findings presented here will be useful to community college leaders and international education administrators as they make decisions pertaining to international students in the coming months. Given ongoing uncertainties around the status of international students studying at U.S. institutions, these data are also useful in advocating on their behalf, particularly those enrolled at community colleges.

### **1. Impact on International Student Finances**

The pandemic had an immediate impact on many international students' financial resources. While six survey participants indicated that international students at their institutions experienced no financial impact due to the pandemic, seven indicated that students lost on-campus employment. Such employment opportunities are especially important for international students who supplement personal savings with on-campus employment to pay for everyday living expenses while in the United States. As one interviewee stated, "There are [international] students who were working on campus, and when we closed all those jobs just ended."

The pandemic also financially impacted international students' families. International students are often supported on their educational journeys by their families or other sponsors (IIE 2019). Two survey participants indicated that students' families lost employment, meaning that the families could no longer afford to send money to their students in the United States.

In addition, the participants identified issues with support from sponsors. Two survey participants indicated that sponsors encountered problems sending money to students due to banking closures and delays, while one indicated that students lost financial support from their sponsors altogether. One interviewee affirmed, "This is worldwide. A lot of their sponsors lost money. So I think being financially secure was the biggest issue right away."

Interviews further confirmed that this financial impact had a direct effect on international students' ability to purchase food, remain in safe accommodations, and access the technology needed to pursue online courses. One interviewee explained, "Our college has an office [that] regularly supports students that have financial needs beyond money, connecting them to resources in the community. So food banks and shelters, all of those things. And the need for that support grew exponentially." Another interviewee concurred, "We called all the host families checking in with them, seeing if students needed to move into campus housing. [And] I reached out to all the students asking them, 'Do you need food? This is how you apply for the food pantry.' I delivered some food to students."

### **2. Impact on Campus Services for International Students**

International students at many U.S. community colleges were unable to return home after the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 due to canceled flights or closed borders. Six of the community colleges in this study offered on-campus accommodations for international students in spring 2020. Five participants indicated that their institutions allowed international students housed on campus to remain even after campuses closed, with one institution requiring a petition process. One interviewee indicated that she still had students staying on campus in July 2020 that "either couldn't get home or were afraid to go home because they wouldn't be able to come back." Another interviewee added, "Flights are grounded. We had students literally trapped here." Closed borders to several countries mean that many international students are forced to remain in the United States for the foreseeable future.

International students were also impacted by the termination of campus services, such as food services (as mentioned previously) and mental health support, due to the pandemic. Even when colleges did offer mental health resources, interviewees worried about international students' mental health as they navigate the

crisis given their necessary “willingness to seek [out mental health resources] and [the institution’s] ability to respond to what they need in a culturally responsive way,” as one interviewee pointed out.

### **3. Impact on International Student Recruitment**

The survey findings also indicated a number of ways in which the pandemic had impacted recruitment of new international students at community colleges. Among the most prominent strategic responses selected were considering online submissions of application and immigration documents (n=9), offering deferment of admissions to a later semester (n=8), and offering online English proficiency testing (n=6). Additional responses indicated that some institutions are offering virtual communication, webinars, and yield events (n=4); institutions have extended application deadlines for the fall 2020 semester (n=3); institutions have enrolled in virtual recruitment fairs sponsored by providers (n=2); and one institution is now working with in-country partners and agents on local recruitment.

Survey data also indicated that recruitment efforts at U.S. community colleges have been altered or halted altogether. Six participants indicated that all current international recruitment travel had been suspended, and five participants reported that all domestic recruitment travel (e.g., visits to international high schools) had been suspended. In terms of the upcoming academic year, two participants indicated that their institutions were not recruiting international students for 2020–21, and three additional institutions were not going to be recruiting international students for the foreseeable future. Interview participants commented further on this halt to recruitment travel, connecting it to an anticipated decrease in international student enrollment in future semesters: “I think [enrollment is] definitely going to slow,” predicted one interviewee.

Indeed, when asked about their concerns for international education at their community college, five participants listed international student enrollment as their greatest concern. One participant was worried about the “collapse of international enrollment due to the closure of U.S. consulates and the inability of prospective international students to [conduct] visa interviews online.” Another participant similarly expressed concern about visa appointments and travel restrictions.

### **4. Impact on International Education at Community Colleges**

The pandemic also had, and continues to have, an undeniable impact on the field of international education more generally. Community college international education administrators expressed that they had seen changes in plans for international student recruitment, the announcement of new admissions policies, and repercussions for the budget of their institutions. One participant explained, “the college president decided...no one’s traveling internationally.” Another interviewee stated, “I have agents that I’ve been working with in terms of recruitment. I’ve just had to tell [them] I can’t because our contracts expired and I can’t renew them.” Survey participants indicated that they especially saw impacts of the pandemic regarding decreases in international student enrollments (n=13), suspension of education abroad programs (n=9), and decreased interest in education abroad (n=7). Participants also expressed that international education at their institutions had lost support from senior level administration (n=4), mid-level administration (n=3), or their board of trustees (n=1). Two participants indicated that they were either creating or expanding virtual exchange programs.

### **5. Impact on 2020–21 Budgets**

A bright spot in the survey data was that most participants (n=10) indicated that international education was included in their 2020–21 budget; only three participants indicated that international education was not included. Other participants indicated that international education was included but not as its own

line item (n=1), that they were still waiting on final budget decisions (n=1), or that it was included but cut dramatically (n=1). “I don’t even know what my budget is for the coming year,” explained one interviewee. For one interviewee in this study, this meant loss of professional memberships, including access to resources such as the NAFSA Adviser’s Manual 360, a comprehensive resource of immigration policies and procedures and “a necessary tool to run an international office.” Loss of access to professional resources and subsequent limited access to professional networks that are critical to the work of international student advisers can have long-term repercussions for their institution and its international students.

For other participants, college leadership is considering reallocating staff from international offices, reflecting a shift in institutional priorities. One interviewee explained, “The person overseeing [education abroad] has been moved to a completely different unit right now for most of her time, so there’s not even an interest in trying to maintain some kind of virtual exchanges.”

## Implications

Like other sectors of U.S. higher education, community colleges have experienced a tremendous shift in resources, infrastructure, international student recruitment strategies, and new enrollments due to COVID-19. The key takeaways outlined in this brief have important implications for community college administrators, faculty, and leaders who are involved in international education:

- Regarding international student finances, community colleges can find creative sources for scholarships and/or reduce the cost of enrollment for international students who have lost employment or sponsorship from their families or other resources. For example, institutions can charge international students domestic tuition prices during the pandemic. Survey participants reported pulling together funds from their college’s foundation and other external sources to cover unmet financial need and emergency aid for international students.
- Regarding housing, international educators at community colleges can begin planning early in the case that another emergency shutdown puts international students in uncertain housing situations. These plans may include the negotiation of short-term emergency housing agreements and should involve key stakeholders on campus, such as faculty and food services staff.
- Regarding other on-campus services, international education leaders at community colleges can leverage potential collaborations with local community resources, such as emergency food banks and mental health support services. Beginning these conversations now can mitigate future confusion and stress.
- Short-term international student recruitment strategies will need to rely on strong existing partners. As one interviewee stated, “I think we’re fortunate...that we have strong partnerships with international partners. I think we have decent pipelines coming in. But I think it’s definitely going to slow. But I am hopeful that we will continue. And then we’ll be able to grow again.” Innovative recruitment strategies may leverage participation (especially virtual participation) from current international students or alumni.
- Finally, to justify the continued funding of international education in institutional budgets, community college international educators can draw on data, including this brief, to advocate for international education’s contribution to the college.

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<sup>1</sup> Eight respondents indicated each of these roles. Respondents were able to select more than one option.

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