

Attending Community Colleges

The Next Wave for Indian Students

—Jing Luan, Ph.D



When Mr. Sunit Survase, President of Indo-American Society asked me to write this article, I was very delighted to oblige, because he is a visionary CEO of his company and a rising star in international education, and most importantly, he cares enough about the Indian students' wellbeing to make sure they take advantage

of American community colleges to get full access to American top universities.

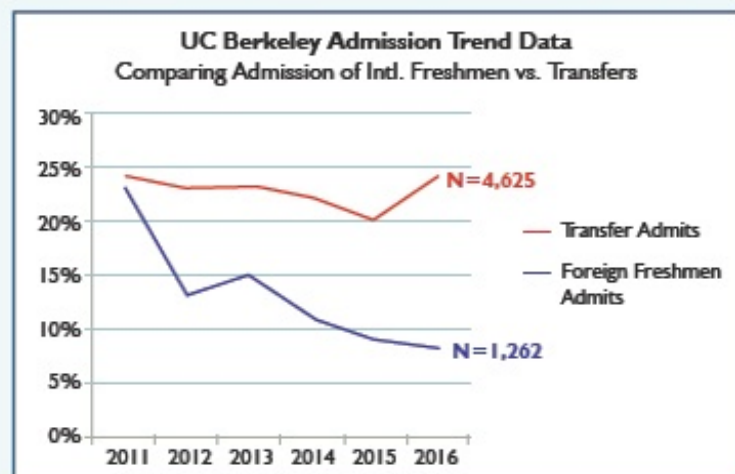
As an executive in one of America's largest community college district (San Mateo Colleges of Silicon Valley), I visit India to encourage students to attend community colleges as I would in America, but the paradox I saw and challenges I faced are incredible. As former Chairman of Study California with most of California's top universities as members (UC Berkeley, Stanford, USC, and members from all 4 segments of California higher education), I'm disturbed but not shocked to notice Indian students focusing almost exclusively on the very top tier schools. This is fine except that they seem to only focus on one traditional and very complexed approach to get into the highly selective top tier schools. An approach is not at all the best way to enter US universities: University Freshmen Application.

In 2016, I brought UC Berkeley Transfer Center's Assistant Director with me to India and our message was that American public ivy universities like UC Berkeley, UC Santa Barbara and private Ivy League universities such as Cornell and Columbia tend to admit more transfer students than international freshmen. As the 2016 data released by UC Berkeley, the ratio is almost 1:4, with 1,262 international students admitted to UC Berkeley,

and 4,625 admitted as transfer students. Doing simple math by dividing 200 countries and regions into the 1,263 international freshmen admitted by UC Berkeley would mean India would have its share of 6 students. Fortunately, the actual number from India was several times higher than 6. Despite that, it cannot even beat out my 3 colleges in sending students to UC Berkeley. My own colleges (Cañada College, College of San Mateo, and Skyline College) combined, transferred over 300 to UC Berkeley and UCLA yearly. We have maintained 95% admission rate into some of the public ivy universities, such as UC Davis.

As UC Berkeley stated in our speech in India, it does not take nationality into consideration when admitting transfer students. It does, however, consider a dozen items as part of its "comprehensive review" of applicants. Also called "Holistic Assessment", many top tier highlight selective universities adopt this approach when admitting domestic and international freshmen. After a student reaches eligibility to apply for the university, the student must provide test scores (SATs and TOEFLs), high school transcripts, class ranking proof of leadership, class ranking, letters of recommendation, etc. It is fairly challenging for American students to satisfy these items and it is even more challenging for international students, because they must deal with the difference in cultural, geographical, and resources and compete for the few seats for international freshmen. In other words, they must do a better job than most American applicants. If that is the only way, it is worth it for Indian students to prove that they are indeed the best among all applicants, but American universities seek talented students who choose to do their lower division classes close to their home, often for a fraction of the cost, and then look for universities while studying university courses. To transfer, most universities do not require SAT, ACT, high school transcripts, and for international students, no need for TOEFL or IELTS, plus your application is assisted by American college professionals on an American college campus (who have monthly visits from top tier universities to my three colleges)! Therefore, to get a degree from a dream university, Americans choose community colleges.

They choose community colleges in large numbers. According to research by Columbia University and the Association of American Community College (AACC), close to 46% of American baccalaureate degree students start their studies in a community college. The data from the universities also support this. On average, 36% of the junior class in the University of California system are transfer students from community college and 53% for the California State Universities. At UC Berkeley, for example, 25% of the seats in junior classes are reserved for transfer students. If a student choose a community college, s/he



can have one additional year of internship, which is extremely valuable to foreign students.

It took America a long time to get here. It took about 100 years to fully develop its community college system, it took 50 years to get the universities to articulate courses with community colleges, and it took laws to have guarantee transfers, so now students can try their chances of either applying as a university freshman for a public ivy university like UC Santa Barbara, or simply attend a community college to complete the two years of lower division classes, obtain a GPA of 3.5, fill out an application for transfer (like I mentioned above, with much fewer items to tackle), you are 100% assured of your admission. Or they can do both.

I have seen some positive change toward American community colleges among other nations, except India. In the past 5 years since I have been traveling abroad to promote community colleges, China, Vietnam, Myanmar, and some western nations like UK and Canada, all have increased their applications for community colleges. For undergraduates, almost 8% Chinese students who come to study in the US would choose community colleges, even higher percentage for the Vietnamese students. Indian students, on the other hand, remain very low. It's estimated that among 70,000 undergraduate applicants, fewer than 1000 attempted a community college: less than 1%.

As one of the most amazing countries in the world with a large number of the most talented and hardworking students, India should embrace American community colleges, as UC Berkeley and I pointed out repeatedly in our speeches, community colleges are the next wave of international education everywhere. For many deserving Indian students, we must work hard to make sure they have full access to American higher education. In India, I spoke with countless parents, high school counsellors and government officials (both Indian and US diplomats) to conclude that there is one main reason for a low turnout: lack of information.

Indians lack information on the number of American students attending community college; nor do they fully understand that the 2 years of lower division studies in a community college are essentially the same courses taught at a university and they can carry with them to the university much the same as they do if they have IB and AP course credits. Since transfer is a "domestic" practice between universities and community colleges in the US, there is no exhibit or webinar to foreign high schools. This also means that most university undergraduate admissions staff who come to recruit are almost exclusively trained and focused on university freshmen, not students who do two years of community college studies. Another important benefit is in savings. Many Americans also use community colleges to save money. Everyone knows it costs roughly \$6000 in tuition for a year at a community college, but \$36,000 at any of the University of California campuses. So it does sound too good to be true: the lower division courses between community colleges and the universities are the same, but the cost is not; it is several times more likely to be accepted as transfer than as freshmen; attending a community college is equal to getting a scholarship of \$60,000 or obtaining a tuition discount of 40%; and you can get all that without having ever attempted TOEFL

and SAT, for someone in India hearing about this for the first time, it absolutely sounds too good to be true.

Because of the lack of information above, Indian students are left with the only thing they know: go for the university freshmen application, which is like what I describe a treasure hunt with a high stake of failure. Victors are hailed as national heroes, which further reinforces the notion of attempting the impossible is a badge of honor, win or lose. But the truth is that winning a ticket to a top tier university in America is extremely hard for foreign students, while failure is frequent and devastating to a young person whose life is defined by society, school, and family that his university admission is his life!

Fortunately, American universities are taking action. It is clear that the exclusive focus on "applying for university freshmen" is not the only way to getting into top universities and it is urgently necessary for foreign applicants to realize this. In 2018, UC Berkeley and San Mateo Colleges of Silicon Valley founded the College University Partnership (CUP). CUP aims to provide full access to American higher education by putting University Freshmen Application (UFA) and Community College Freshmen Application (CCFA) on the same platform. To come to study in an American university is through both. Among other activities, CUP has rolled out Summer Academies with UC Berkeley and Stanford University that allows high achieving students to obtain classroom learning on either campus, to receive the university's transcripts, and to transfer credits among UC Berkeley, Stanford and San Mateo Colleges of Silicon Valley. Students much apply through UC Berkeley's transfer center and obtain the universities' I-20 for F-1 visas.

In the coming months, CUP member universities will travel with my colleges to promote UFA and CCFA, to fundamentally change the perception of community colleges by treating them as one of the same, as full access to American top universities. Students will be receiving free, unbiased, and official information on UFA and CCFA and they are encouraged to try both.

College University Partnership, CUP, is one more way to further the course of community colleges with hopes that a youngster's future is never decided via a lone attempt of applying directly for the university, but by doing what Americans do: where you attend college is not as important as where you get your degree.

Jing Luan, Ph.D. Provost, International Affairs - San Mateo Colleges of Silicon Valley (Cañada College, College of San Mateo, and Skyline College), is a published author and speaker on a variety of higher education topics. He has consulted for many government and education agencies and corporations internationally (Canada, Japan and China). San Mateo Colleges of Silicon Valley is known for elite transfer education and service. The three public colleges have the largest number of American universities providing legally binding guaranteed transfer admissions to their students.

The three colleges enjoy a 95% student satisfaction rating. In 2014, Moody and S&P provided AAA and AA+ rating to the colleges for managing, quality and financial stability.