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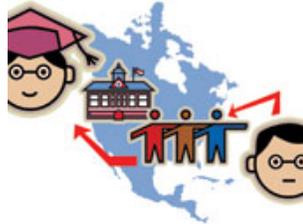


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Shortcut to Ivy League

OVERSEAS STUDY

Don't have the grades or finance for a top US university? Take a littleknown route, via community colleges, suggests **Prasun Chaudhuri**



Guess what's common to George Lucas (creator of Star Wars), J. Craig Venter (pioneer of genome mapping), Clint Eastwood (actordirector), Leland Hartwell (Nobel prize winner in medicine) and Amy Tan (bestselling novelist)? All of them are alumni of twoyear degree institutions in the US, better known as community colleges (CCs). Across the country, 1,195 such colleges — also known as technical or junior colleges — educate nearly

50 per cent of postsecondary level students, in addition to thousands from other countries.

"Although thousands of students from southeast Asian countries use these colleges as a stepping stone to betterknown (read Ivy League) ones, most Indians are either unaware of community colleges or have gross misconceptions about them," says Shevanti Narayan, country coordinator, Educational Advising Services, United States India Educational Foundation (USIEF), a body affiliated to the US Department of State. "One of the little known facts is that many of these colleges have transfer arrangements with renowned universities to which students can shift to complete a fouryear degree," she adds.

Getting into a good university or an Ivy League institution in the US is an uphill task for international students. First, the cost of tuition and living expenses are too high (**see box**). Although many universities offer scholarships, one has to be among the top students in his or her home country to avail of them. The aspiring student should also score well in tests such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) for undergraduate studies and Test of English as a Foreign Language (Toefl), or have a great track record in areas such as leadership, sports and community service. Less than 1,000 international students can meet the tall order.

On the other hand, "most community colleges offer flexible access, enabling both US and international students to benefit from the highquality and lowcost courses they offer," says Judith Irwin, director of international programmes of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), a national

organisation representing the colleges. "Many colleges accept lower Toefl scores, some even waive such requirements and prefer training students in English language skills (**see box**)."

Why do the majority of Indian students overlook these colleges despite the advantages? "Traditionally, Indian students join US universities for PhD programmes in science and engineering after completing their graduate studies in India. So, community colleges — that offer transfer courses to the first two years of undergraduate studies — are less known in India," says Nandini Banerjee, physics teacher at Fergus Falls Community College, Minnesota. Says Arindam Roy, education advisor at Edxcare International, a Calcutta-based education consultancy firm, few students show interest in

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these colleges for primarily two reasons: they are perceived to be for those with low academic grades or are poor. "We do not encourage them to join these colleges because foreign students don't get any financial aid there. And, transfer to a better college is not guaranteed unless students earn a good grade point average (GPA) in the course of their two-year programme (see box)."

"The whole point of a CC is that it's not meant for the affluent or students with top marks," counters Sudarshan Saha, education adviser at USIEF, Calcutta.

"And while students don't get scholarships, they can work part-time to foot the bill," he adds.

"They can work on campus for 20 hours a week, and also get a study loan if they know a US citizen who can co-sign for it," said Maria Dell'Arciprete, coordinator international student services, Rockland Community College, New York, one of those rare colleges that have students from India.

Oregon's Portland Community College too has some Indian students who are quite good. "A few that I know are very advanced in their English skills and very driven," says Tracy Hai, the college's international admissions specialist. However, Indian students with mediocre academic records score over their international counterparts because of superior maths skills. Says Banerjee, "American students may not be good in maths, but they have a more hands-on approach towards learning." A combination of both these skills is necessary.

Many colleges are ready to welcome even mediocre Indian students for their mathematical prowess. "We offer remedial instruction programmes for students who enter with mediocre academic skills. We help them catch up with the best," says Maria Dell'Arciprete.

What's **HOT**

- Lower tuition costs
- Lower English proficiency requirements
- Small class sizes, more one-on-one attention from teachers (even after classes)
- Optional practical training after course, use of the latest technology
- Robust industry-academia interface, hundreds of programmes on offer
- Opportunity to acclimatise to the US
- Opportunity to transfer to Ivy League colleges

What's **NOT**

- Two-year degree
- Transfer to big university is subject to grades
- No financial aid available
- High competition for part-time jobs
- Little flexibility in interdisciplinary courses (you can't study chemistry alongside music)
- Some Indian banks are averse to granting loans for studying in lesser-known colleges
- Some students misuse the flexible norms, tend to bunk classes

RIGHT CHOICE

Since the number of colleges is huge and there are a number of courses to choose from, students should do some research to track down the right college. Regional education advisors at the USIEF and intensive websurfing (www.aaccinternational.org/eguide) may help. Some issues to explore:

KNOW THE TARGET: Find out the target four-year colleges and call them/send emails asking which community colleges they accept the most students from. Categorically ask for how many students transfer each year to these four-year universities and ascertain the requirements for transfer

GO FOR HONOURS: Look for honours or other rigorous courses in a community college. A proper honours will groom students to handle difficult assignments in a four-year college

CHECK FOR EXAMS: Some colleges require applicants to take specific English and mathematics placement tests. Although the maths test may appear a cakewalk for Indians, the English test could stump you. Check these out in advance and study hard

ENSURE PART-TIME JOBS: Because there are too few on-campus jobs (immigration laws don't allow foreign students to work out of campus),



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competition for such jobs is tough. Some colleges do not guarantee jobs. Check this out before you take the plunge

THE BILL

Estimated cost per academic year for foreign students

(In US dollars; for academic session 2009-10)

Ivy League college (University of California, Los Angeles)

University fees	9,547
Tuition	22,021
Books and supplies	885
Room and board	13,314
Transportation	909
Personal	1,551
Total budget	49,826

Top-notch community college (Santa Monica College, California)

Tuition	5,304
Room / meals	12,310
Books and supplies	600
Health insurance	780
Other expenses	4,300
Total budget	18,994



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