

The path from immigrant to college president  
By Garry Boulard, Published June 23, 2010

At [Mesa Community College](#) (MCC) in Arizona, some 140 miles north of the U.S. and Mexico border, Shouan Pan is hearing stories of fear.

It is coming from legal immigrants, as well as undocumented students, says Pan, who is president of the college.

“Their concerns and fears are real,” he says. “They ask if it is safe to go to college in Arizona, whether or not their documents will be checked, will they get into any trouble for being here.”

Such questions are in response to legislation passed in Arizona in April making it a crime for “illegal immigrants” not to have proof of registration. The new law further requires law enforcement officials to question people about their immigration status if they have been stopped, detained or arrested for a crime or suspicion of a crime.

The legislation has prompted a firestorm of controversy, with demonstrations staged across the state as well as the country. Activists critical of the legislation have organized to boycott traveling to Arizona and buying goods from the state, while supporters have responded with “buycotts,” organizing stepped-up purchases of those same items and arranging special visits to the state.

The legislation also may affect immigrant students in Arizona.

“There is no law in Arizona that precludes any student from enrolling in a community college,” Pan says. “Even so, student immigrants, and in particular Latino immigrants, are worried.”

And those worries add to what Pan describes as the typically bewildering and disorienting experience of being an immigrant student in the U.S. Even without the Arizona legislation, it is difficult for anybody who leaves their home country, familiar background and language to suddenly be in a new place, while also taking a full load of classes, Pan says.

If Pan, who serves on the board of directors of the [American Association of Community Colleges](#) (AACC), seems to have a particularly intuitive feel for the immigrant side of the student experience, it’s because he has gone through the same process. Pan, born and raised in eastern China, came to the U.S. as an exchange student in 1985. He eventually earned a master’s degree in education at Colorado State University and a doctorate of philosophy in higher education administration from Iowa State University.

In 2003, Pan was named provost of the [Broward College’s](#) South Campus (Florida) before becoming MCC president in 2008. Along the way, he became a U.S. citizen, a decision he says that was greatly shaped by his admiration for the U.S. higher education tradition.

Pan says that the U.S. was attractive to him—and remains so to immigrant students today—because “it is founded on the principles of democracy and freedom and the opportunity to pursue quality education and quality of life.”

“American higher education is the envy of the world because of its size, complexity and quality,” he adds.

Many immigrant students attend community colleges mainly because they offer well-regarded English-as-a-second-language classes, says Jill Casner-Lotto, director of the [Community College Consortium for Immigrant Education](#) at [Westchester Community College](#) (New York).

“But the whole community college environment is also seen as a welcoming one for students coming from other countries,” Casner-Lotto says. “These colleges have diverse student populations, which means that there is a lot of opportunity of support from their peers, like peer-to-peer mentoring, clubs and student organizations for them to join.”

### **Education is the equalizer**

At [Queensborough Community College](#) (QCC) in New York, students born in other countries comprise about 46 percent of its 15,000 students, reflecting the diverse immigrant population of Queens. QCC President Eduardo Marti, who also serves on the AACC board of directors, says that it is not just the reputation of the college that draws such a diverse immigrant base, but U.S. higher education, in general.

“We have students who come here with the expressed purpose of getting a degree and then leaving,” Marti says. “But the great majority of our students are students who are either children of individuals who have migrated or have migrated themselves.”

“Education is the great equalizer,” continues Marti, who himself immigrated from Cuba just months after the 1959 revolution that brought Fidel Castro to power.

Marti tells immigrant students at his college that they should worry less about how Americans may receive them and more about sticking to their studies and “getting the most education that they can in this country.”

Marti, who received a master’s degree and doctorate in biology from New York University, served for six years as the president of [Corning Community College](#) (New York) before heading QCC in 2000. Marti’s experience of coming from another country has given him an insight into the challenges confronting immigrant students at QCC.

“The reason I decided to come to this school was because I wanted to help the new Americans, the people who immigrate to our country and want to live here,” Marti says. “I know how difficult it is to be in a different land with a different language and different customs, trying to make your way through our society.”

Because of his own experiences and the many examples he has witnessed among immigrant QCC students who became successful U.S. citizens, Marti says he is bewildered by anti-immigrant movements, in particular, efforts to prevent undocumented students from registering to attend a community college.

“The amount of money that society spends on providing public education for two years for these students, at least in New York, might be \$10,000,” Marti says. “And yet, if that person becomes, let’s say, a nurse, within a year or two they are paying back in taxes what the government has provided them.”

“The idea of creating some sort of permanent second class and denying these students access to the American equalizer, meaning education, is both short-sighted and fiscally unsound,” he adds.

### **Packing knowledge, skills**

Even though Mary Spilde, president of [Lane Community College](#) (LCC) in Oregon and chair of the board of directors of AACC, spoke English and already had an education when she immigrated to the U.S., she still had to overcome some of the cultural issues.

“There was a kind of culture shock for me when it came to understanding how things work in the United States,” says Spilde, who was born and raised in Scotland. “I can only imagine what it must be like for an

individual who does not have English as a first language or does not speak English at all, coming and dealing with the different culture, different country, and different ways of doing things.”

After receiving her law degree from the University of Edinburgh, Spilde considered practicing in the U.S., but discovered that “being a female Scottish lawyer in small-town Oregon wasn’t working for me.”

Instead, she returned to college and received a master’s degree in adult education and a doctorate in postsecondary education at Oregon State University. She served as director of business, health and training at [Linn-Benton Community College](#) (Oregon) before becoming vice president for instructional services at LCC in 1995 and president of the college six years later.

Spilde says many immigrants already have professional credentials from their home countries, but they often don’t know English well enough to attain certification in the U.S. to work in their field, Spilde says.

“They may have degrees from other countries, but they don’t speak the language. That is such a leveler for everyone. It immediately takes you back to learning the basics,” she says.

Having become a U.S. citizen herself, Spilde says she knows that the process is different for everyone, depending on where a person comes from, their educational background and whether they have a job.

Community colleges provide a service to the country by giving such immigrants “an opportunity to have an education and be a part of the economic mainstream here,” Spilde says.

“Community colleges tend to take people where they are and create pathways for them to achieve their dreams and reach their goals,” she says.

That is particularly true of immigrant students because they may not have the typical means of support, such as their family, she adds.

Despite the recent debates over immigration, Spilde encourages community college to keep to their missions.

“Immigrant students who decide to stay here and become citizens often become a successful and a valuable part of the community,” she says. “That’s why it is so important for our community colleges to create a welcoming environment for them. You are not only helping the student in question, you are helping the larger community by doing so.”