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Earning American College Credits in China: New Model of Transfer College Credit Programs

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Abstract

The concept of “Transfer College Credit Programs (TCCP)” has spread to the far corners of the Earth. There are two types of TCCPs: 1) high school students around the globe planning on attending American colleges or universities enroll in college-level courses while still in high school in their home country and earn American college credits which are later transferred to their American institutions, and 2) currently enrolled international undergraduate students taking courses offered during summer break in their home countries and transferring the credits back to their university. This study investigates the popularity of these programs in China, and illustrates a typology of TCCPs offered in China.

Keywords: Transfer College Credit Program, college admission, International students, transfer credits.

There are new programs for high school and college students from around the globe that are developing so quickly that American colleges and universities are being caught off-guard. Resembling the dual enrollment programs of the U.S., college credit-based preparation programs invites international high school students to enroll in courses in their

home countries and subsequently transfer earned credits to U.S. Colleges and universities. Another new program type, called international summer school, invites international college students on U.S. campuses to enroll in courses while in their home countries during college summer breaks. Advertising that credits earned can be transferred back to the American university, these programs appear attractive to

international students who may yearn to go home during the summer while also being able to accrue credits towards their degree.

We introduce the topic of Transfer College Credit Programs (TCCP) as a broad category of programs enabling students to transfer credits earned in alternative programs including international college credit-based preparation programs for high school students as well as international summer schools for college students.

TCCPs have grown so quickly faculty and administrators of American institutions have been caught off-guard and may not be prepared to judge the merit, appropriate content, or even the legitimacy of the array of programs. On face value, programs assisting students to prepare for their American experience and/or to provide credits toward the degree may appear to be beneficial for international students in completing the Baccalaureate Degree, but without appropriate scrutiny such may not be the reality. Not all of these programs have been built on theoretical structures, empirically evaluated, or exposed to academic scrutiny. In fact there is no national data available for aggregate analysis. Since it is almost certain that programs of this type will continue to grow, having a baseline understanding is crucial. Moreover, finding both the weak and strong points of these programs as well as identifying the areas requiring additional emphasis may be helpful to those who create and develop international transfer college credit programs.

The purpose of this study was to examine the development status, outreach and challenges of TCCPs offered in China to Chinese students. We provide policy implications and suggestions for academics and administrators working with international students utilizing TCCPs.

Literature Review

American Transition Programs for American Students

In the U.S. there has been an explosion in the number of students partaking in college preparation programs that provide college credit while students are still in high school. These high school programs, collectively known as Credit-Based Transition Programs (Karp & Hughes, 2008), allow high school students to take college courses and earn college credits in advance of college enrollment (Kleiner & Lewis, 2005; Waits, Setzer & Lewis, 2005; Lerner & Brand, 2006). The most popular program of this type is dual enrollment/dual credit, which is designed for American high school students planning attendance in American universities (Karp, Bailey, Hughes & Fermin, 2004). High school students can enroll in college courses on the premises of college campuses or at their high schools; and the credits they earn will be recognized as both high school and college credits (Karp, Bailey, Hughes & Fermin, 2004; Orr, 2002). Studies have shown that dual enrollment programs have spread and grown rapidly across the country over the last decade. (Andrews, 2001; Karp & Hughes, 2008; Kleiner & Lewis, 2005; Waits, Setzer & Lewis, 2005; Lerner & Brand, 2006). In 2001 Boswell reported that 38 states had instituted policies to develop dual credit or dual enrollment programs. Andrews (2001) reported that dual enrollment programs were launched either through state legislation or through state education offices among 44 states. The most recent statistics (Barnett & Stamm, 2010) indicate that 46 states in the US have policies governing dual enrollment programs, with 12 states making participation mandatory for public higher education institutions. These programs of providing college-level courses and college credits to be later applied are based on studies that indicate

college students with appropriate academic preparation are more likely to meet success in college (Adelman, 1998, 1999, 2002; Andrews, 2001; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Perna, 2002; Palmer, 2001; Richardson, 2007; National Center for Education Statistic [NCES], 2013).

Swirling Trends of American Students

We argue that the use of TCCPs by international students can be likened to the “swirling” enrollment of US students attending American community colleges. The term “swirl,” coined in 1990 by officials of the Maricopa County Community College system in Arizona, refers to the non-linear paths that many community college students take through multiple colleges and/or through patterns of stop-out and return. The “swirl” may include alternating between 2- and 4-year colleges or attending both types of colleges concurrently (Palmer, 2001).

Reasons Driving Swirling Enrollment Patterns

American swirling students may mix courses from multiple institutions to take advantage of unique courses, convenient timing, popular professors, or just partake of less expensive offerings. Cost may be a key factor as astute students and their families may note that community college tuition can cost half or even one-third of the cost of a large university. Lowered cost can be a powerful attraction for students on a tight budget or for non-traditional students with other financial obligations. A student with the knowledge of the transferability of specific courses can indeed save significant money by intermixing courses or by taking a summer load at a community college (Hagedorn & Castro, 2000).

Growing enrollments and shrinking budgets at universities have also introduced another reason for swirl; required courses at the home institution may be full or not offered during the semester when the student needs them (Barnes & Robinson, 1999). There is also evidence that university students may choose to take courses that they perceive as “difficult” at a college they perceive as less rigorous in an attempt to keep their GPAs high. Hagedorn and Castro (2000) found that university students were more likely to take a summer course at a community college if they perceived the content to be difficult.

Globalization and Internalization Trends in American Higher Education

A significant and increasing number of international students are seeking admission into the US for postsecondary education. According to the Open Doors report (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2011), during the academic year 2011-2012 the number of international students at colleges and universities increased by 6.5% compared to the previous academic year. This is the sixth consecutive year that Open Doors figures have shown growth in the total number of international students with a number of 228,467 newly-recruited international students during the 2011-2012 academic year (See Figure 1).

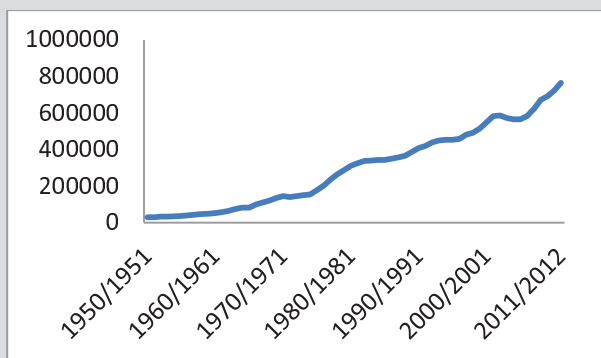


Figure 1: The Trend of International students coming into the U.S.

According to the data reported by Open Doors ([IIE], 2011), the proportion of Chinese students in American postsecondary institutions in the academic year 2011/12 was 25.4% with a total number of 194,029 and an increase of 23.1% compared to the academic year 2010/11 ([IIE], 2012). The number of

students from China, the leading country of origin for students coming to the United States (see Figure 2) has been increasing over the past decade (2002-2012).

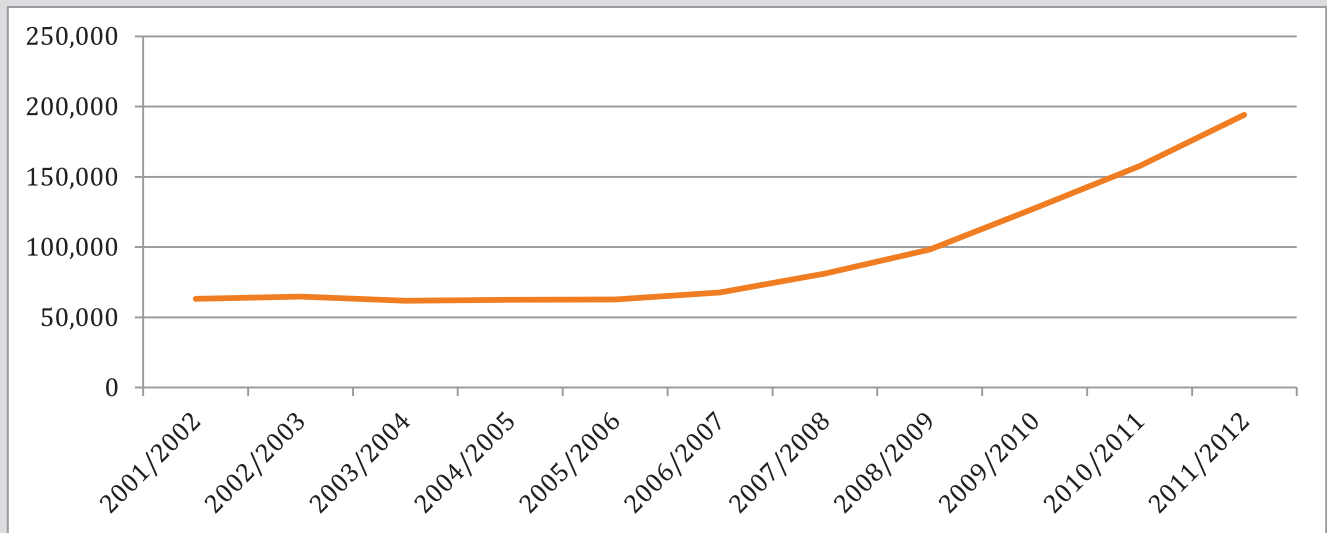


Figure 2: Trend of Chinese International Students to US in the Past Decade

The rate of increase has been especially high among undergraduates ([IIE], 2012) (See Figure 3).

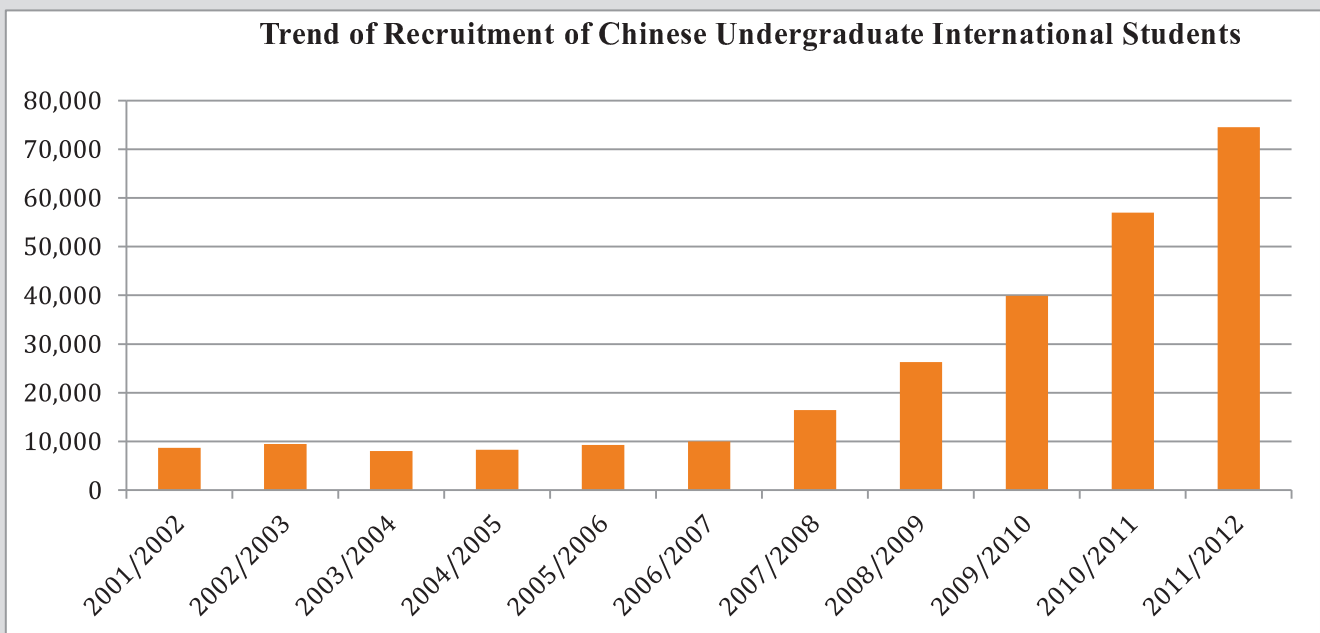


Figure 3: The Trend of Recruitment of Chinese Undergraduate International Students (IIE, 2002-2012)

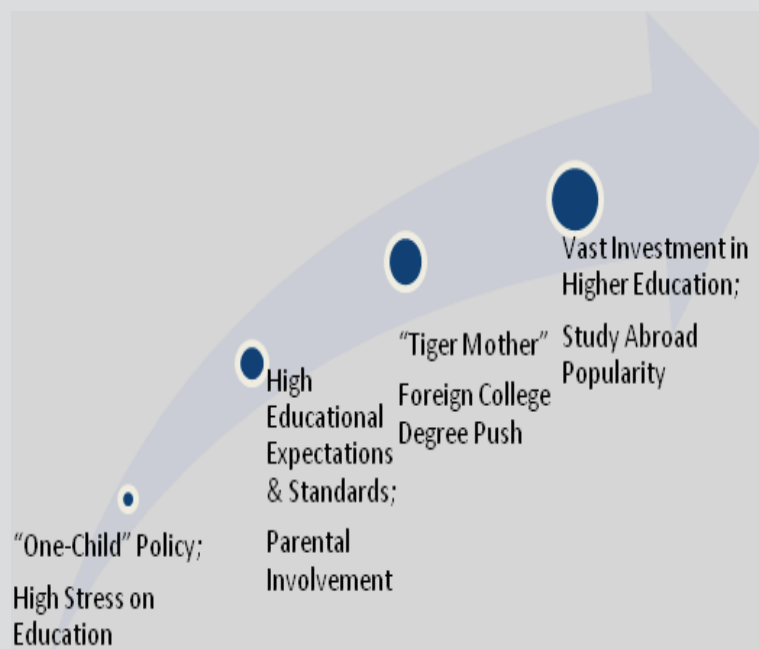


Figure 4: Social Context of Chinese Students Pursuing Their Baccalaureate Degree in the U.S.

The Influence of China's "One-Child" Policy

Historically, China's "One Child Policy" and the cultural emphasis on education have produced a generation of parents with extremely high expectations for their only child (Stevenson & Lee 1990; Stevenson, 1992; Qian, 2009) (See Figure 4). Other contributing factors are cultural traditions which place a high value on education for self-improvement, self-esteem, and family honor, and; the determination to overcome discrimination by investing in education (Schneider & Lee, 1990; Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski & Apostoleris, 1997). Culturally, most students feel compelled to meet their parents' demands and academic expectations (Chang, 1973; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Stevenson & Lee, 1990; Qian, 2009; Eccles & Harold, 1996). In addition, obeying authorities and keeping parents' sacrifices in mind have long been considered proper behaviors among Chinese students (Chang,

1973; Therese, Li & Zhu, 2005). It is commonly believed in Chinese culture that admission to a top university and receiving a "western" education will guarantee a bright future. Among all countries around the world, the U.S. is the most favored destination ([IIE], 2012). As indicated by China's Hurun Report, 85% of wealthy Chinese parents planned to send their child to study abroad as an educational investment.

Therefore, studying abroad, especially in the U.S. is highly encouraged by Chinese parents. Aiming at standing out among an enlarging group of Chinese applicants for American universities, Chinese high school students and their parents are pursuing ways to create an advantage in the intense competition, such as getting early college credits and hiring agents to assist in the college application process.

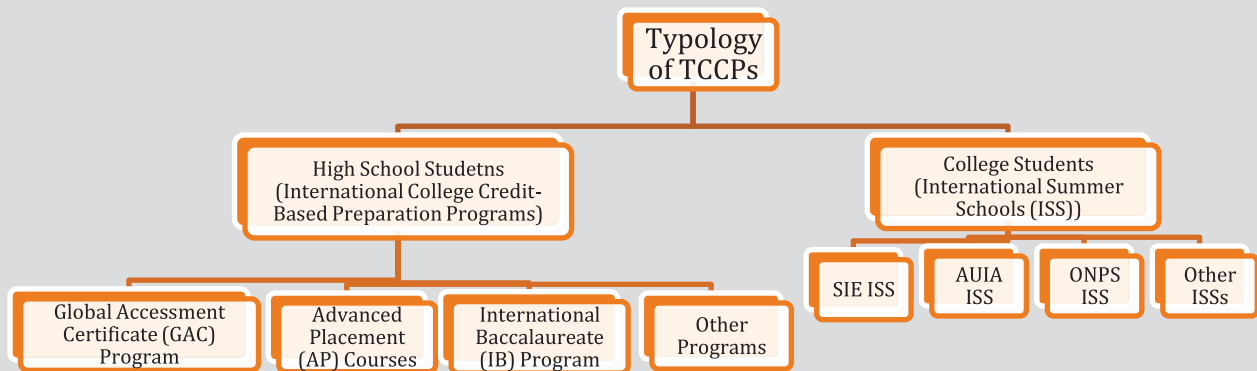


Figure 5: Typology of Transfer College Credit Program

Scope of the Typology of Transfer College Credit Programs in China

Figure 5 provides a typology of Transfer College Credit Programs (TCCP) operating in China. The framework is divided by the educational level of students receiving the instruction, i.e. high school students and current college students

Transfer College Credit Programs for the Chinese High School Students

International College Credit-based Preparation Programs target Chinese high school students. The market for these programs in China has been growing rapidly and vigorously. Shanghai (China) Education Statistics (from the Shanghai Education Yearbook) indicates that in 2010 there were 51 top public high schools with 24 international college credit-based preparation programs. Another example of the growth of TCCPs can be seen from the central Chinese city of Zhengzhou, Henan Province. According to Educational Statistics Report (2011), published by Ministry of Education of The

People's Republic of China, in 2003 there were only two high schools operating international college preparation classes in the city. But by the end of 2010, nine high schools in this province had 16 international college preparation classes which grew the following year as 13 high schools launched 24 international college preparation classes.

Across China, students who participate in international college credit-based preparation classes have accounted for more than 10% of the student population, indicated by the Ministry of Education of The People's Republic of China in Educational Statistics Report (2011).

Global Access Certificate (GAC) Program.

A typical example of a College Credit-based Preparation Program is the Global Access Certificate (GAC), a product of ACT Education Solutions, Limited (a wholly-owned subsidiary of ACT Inc), offered mainly in China to high school students planning to attend an American college or university. The GAC is reported to be a university preparation

program providing students with the academic knowledge, independent learning skills, English language skills and confidence to enter and successfully complete a bachelor's degree at a foreign university. The GAC program offers a series of courses held during the regular school day providing international college credits that can be applied after high school graduation to a foreign university. International students who complete the GAC certificate by taking three levels of courses could accrue 31 transfer credits accepted at 24 American colleges or universities. The transferred credits are verified by the American Council on Education's College Credit Recommendation Service. Since in China increasing numbers of students seek to attend colleges in English-speaking countries, China has been offering the GAC program since 2000. In 2008, approximate 30 GAC approved Teaching Centers were serving students (ACT Activity Publication, 2008). According to report of China Center for International Exchange (CCIEE, 2013), there are 24 GAC centers offered in China in 2013 with a steep growth curve.

Advanced Placement (AP) Courses.

Advanced Placement (AP) courses, administered by the College Board, were first developed in 1955. At the end of the course, students' proficiencies are tested through standardized tests that are scored on a 5-point scale. Students scoring 4 or 5 points out of the possible 5 may earn credits for introductory college courses. According to the latest 2012 AP Data, during academic year 2011-2012, approximately 3.7 million (7% increase compared with 2010-2011 year) exams were taken by 2.1 million (6% increase by previous academic year) students (College Board, 2013).

Beginning in 2010, the U.S. College Board in collaboration with the Ministry of

Education of the People's Republic of China introduced AP courses to Chinese high schools (Educational Statistic Report, 2010). By 2011 approximately 180 Chinese high schools had registered for AP courses and 13,000 AP exams had been taken by Chinese students. In 2011 more than 18,000 students in China took at least one AP exam, a threefold increase over 2010 (Ministry of Education in China, Educational Statistics Report, 2011).

International Baccalaureate (IB) Program.

International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IB) offers college-level courses to a large number of international students around the world. Established in 1968, the IB program offers a more comprehensive curriculum that integrates the concept of internationalization and globalization (Peterson, 2003). IB provides an academically-challenging curriculum to high school students who take exams in specific subject areas and earn college credits that are to assist them in successful transition from high school to college (International Baccalaureate Organization [IBO], 2013).

According to their official website, the International Baccalaureate Foundation coordinates with 3,500 schools in 143 countries to offer four IB programs to students aged 3 to 19 years from a wide range of cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds (International Baccalaureate, 2013). First offered in 1997 for students aged 3 to 12 years, the IB Primary Years Programme (PYP) focuses on the development of the child as an inquirer, both in the classroom and in the world. The IB Middle Years Program, in operation since 1994, is designed for students aged 11 to 16. The program is designed to provide academic challenges and encouragement such that students become critical and reflective thinkers. Dating back to 1968, the IB Diploma

Program for students aged 16 to 19, is designed to deliver an academically challenging and balanced program of education with final examinations that prepare students for success at the postsecondary level and beyond. The newest offering, the IB Career-related Certificate (IBCC) is also for students aged 16 to 19. The IBCC was specifically designed for students who wish to engage in career-related learning.

The first IB authorized school was established in China in 1991 (IBO-Country Information for China, 2013). The latest statistics (IBO-Country Information for China, 2013; IB World School Statistics, 2013) indicate there are 75 IB World Schools in China offering one or more of the three IB programs; 29 schools offer the Primary Years Programs; 23 schools offer the Middle Years Program and 63 schools offer the Diploma Program.

Challenges of College Preparation Programs for High School Students

Participating in an international college credit-based preparation program and then applying to study abroad is considered an investment by many Chinese students and their parents. According to a survey conducted by the Shanghai Education Department (2012), the average student annual expense for a college preparation program is nearly 90,000 RMB (equal to \$14,516) in a country where wages are much, much lower than in the US.

Once the decision to study abroad has been made, students must forego taking the Chinese College Entrance Exam due to the impossibility of preparing for both the ACT (or SAT) and the Chinese exam. However, they must pass the tests of several main subjects such as Chinese and obtain a Chinese high school diploma (Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China, China

Educational Yearbook, 2000). And if the family plans change or for whatever reason the student decides that study abroad is not feasible, the student is barred from admission to a Chinese university.

Transfer College Credit Programs for College Students

A different genre of TCCP is a collection of programs specifically designed for international students who have already enrolled in college. These programs target college students with the lure of additional credits to be added and transferred into their current university program. A popular program of this type is International Summer School (ISS), which allows students to take courses offered during summer break in their home countries. Once earned, the credits from those programs can be transferred back to the foreign institutions.

SIE International Summer School.

Sinoway International Education Group (SIE) could be termed a "big player" in the TCCP for college students. Founded in 2009, SIE's stated mission is to be the pioneer and leader in establishing international summer school (ISS) programs in China, eligible for U.S. university-level academic credit transfer. SIE recruits college students who are enrolled and studying in U.S. SIE has partnered with some of China's leading universities such as (1) *East China Normal University* (Shanghai), (2) *University of International Business and Economics* (Beijing), (3) *Nanjing University* (Nanjing), and (4) *Sun Yat-Sen University* (Guangzhou) (SIE International Summer School, 2012). SIE International Summer School has enrolled over 1,200 undergraduate students over the past two summers and according to their advertisements, has helped students save millions of dollars of college tuition while

receiving a U.S.-standard university-level education. According to their website, over 200 universities in North America accept course credits transferred from SIE International Summer School (SIE International Summer School—Undergraduates, 2013).

American Universities in Asia (AUIA) International Summer School.

AUIA purports to provide a means for Chinese students to return to their home country during the summer break without losing course-taking momentum. The center in Beijing is based at the elite Tsinghua University, while that in Taipei at another elite institution, National Taipei University of Technology (AUIA International Summer School, 2012).

ONPS International Summer School.

ONPS International Education Consulting Co., Ltd (ONPS) was founded in 2009. With the mission of establishing prestigious international summer school programs in China. ONPS provides U.S. college-level courses in China that can provide transfer credits to U.S. institutions. According to their online advertisement, ONPS purports to be the largest and most trustworthy U.S. university standard accredited international summer school program provider in China (ONPS International Summer School, 2012). ONPS has partnered with leading universities such as Qingdao University (Qingdao, Shandong Province), Jinan University (Guangzhou) and Southwest Jiaotong University (Chengdu).

Challenges of International Summer School Programs

Although participating in an international summer school may be

considered an effective way of utilizing summer time and savings with respect to tuition costs, the effectiveness of courses offered in China has not been tested. Moreover, there is no guarantee that any specific American college or university will accept the credits. Furthermore, since the credit transfer system has not been standardized, some American institutions -- Michigan State and Indiana University at Bloomington among them -- now refuse to accept credits from programs like the Chinese international summer school, (McMurhrie & Farrar, 2013).

Conclusion & Recommendation

Alternative ways of earning American college credits have become very popular among Chinese students. Many parents are willing to invest a large sum of money to give their child a competitive advantage in obtaining a quality education. Hu and Hagedorn (in press) conducted focus group interviews with Chinese parents of a TCCP and learned that the majority of parents assumed that enrolling their child in an expensive program would lead to enrollment in Harvard or similar ivy league institutions. Parents believe that participation in the TCCP is a useful and effective way to both make their child to stand out in the application for American institutions as well as smooth their transition to American academic life. But they seemed unaware that programs come without guarantees. Most of the parents have no experience with study abroad and hence are not experienced consumers in this marketplace. Without accurate and systematic knowledge of TCCPs, many parents are making decisions requiring huge financial sacrifices uninformed; swayed by advertisements.

At the time of this writing, many universities are questioning the validity of

credits from international summer schools. Learning that the actual courses may be administrated by proprietary rather than by well-respected Chinese universities, American universities have expressed feeling of being “duped” and thus not obligated to accept the credits. Hence, “buyer beware” should be a key phrase in the alternate credit business.

From the perspective of American universities, international summer schools may result in a significant loss of tuition from international students. American institutions may thus face unexpected shortfalls in tuition revenue as students transfer credits from China. Also, the issues of course-equivalency and articulation of credits is a current “unknown”. It becomes the duty of academic advisors to provide academic plans to fit those international students enrolled with transfer credits. However, in the perspective of cultural and social transition to American life, student affair practitioners should also be aware that students with TCCP credits still require equivalent time and energy to adjust to American college life even though they may enter the college/university with a significant number of college credits.

As indicated earlier, programs of alternate college credit are likely to grow and develop rapidly. The ubiquity of these programs may have other unintended consequences. The increasing number of international students has created more competition for the decreasing number of student slots at ivy-leagues and others. The rapidly growing number of apparently well-prepared international students casts serious implications for admission decisions in the proportion of American versus international students. How will this affect the college population of the future? The truth is that we are just not sure. The growth of these programs has not allowed sufficient research to assess their merits and implications.

Policy Implications

Several important and thought-provoking policy implications emerge from the current state of affairs with respect to TCCPs. First, and perhaps the most important, the idea of credit transfer and articulation agreements, frequently studied from the perspective of two-year to four-year institutions in the U.S., needs to be explored to include articulation policies relative to TCCPs. In 1971 Florida became the first state to legislatively mandate a statewide articulation policy from two-year to four-year transfer (Anderson, Sun & Alfonso, 2006). States with compulsory articulation agreements have been found to have better outcomes relative to states without such agreements (Banks, 1992; 1994; Ignash, 1992). State-mandated articulation policies are beneficial in eliminating misalignment, confusion and uncertainty regards transfer. (Bender, 1990; Wright et al., 1996; Wellman, 2002; Welsh, 2002; Welsh & Kjorlien, 2001). Transfer of credits earned internationally may require similar policies and agreements.

Another possible implication has to do with transfer course equivalency. The TCCPs “currency” is the credit hour operating within a universal postsecondary market. Articulation agreements and policies will answer the most essential question of course equivalency. As TCCPs exist today, important questions about their coherence and sequence go largely unasked and questioned. Transfer policies need re-examination and regulations, especially with respect to international students earning American transfer credits in their home countries. Transfer policies have been designed to assist students to be successful by providing flexibilities. But if students are using the opportunities of earning transfer credits to bypass/escape rigorous courses (for instance, intensive English writing or reading courses) that may be helpful and

necessary for their development, the policy may not be contributing to their success and future development.

Finally and most notably, Chinese parents and students are not clearly aware of the transfer procedures and regulations to American institutions. For instance, according to Hu and Hagedorn's (in press) interviews with parents of college preparation program students, an extremely surprising finding was that parents did not value the program's feature of providing early college credits but rather only desired the program's promises of acceptance by Ivy League institutions. As stated earlier, TCCPs, viewed in a new era, need strict and systematic transfer articulation policies. Beware, we cannot ignore these new industries as increasing numbers of students seek education in the U.S.

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