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INTERNATIONALIZED

Colby has gone global with help from Davis United World College program. But what comes next?

By Gerry Boyle '78

To get to Red Cross Nordic United World College from, well, anywhere, you fly to Bergen, on the west coast of Norway, and then take a three-hour boat trip 150 kilometers north. You then board a bus that winds through the countryside for another hour until it comes to the appropriately named town of Flekke (Norwegian for speck). Visitors can walk the last mile or call the school and ask for a ride.

"It's as isolated as it gets," said Colby Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid Parker Beverage.

A dozen years back, Beverage visited Red Cross Nordic

and its 200 students with Steve Thomas, then an admissions officer with College of the Atlantic, in Maine, and now Colby's director of admissions. They were the second and third American college representatives to visit.

Times have changed. "Three years ago, when you went to this school, you'd be going there at the same time as Amherst and Smith and Middlebury," Beverage said. "Just as you were leaving, Wesleyan was coming in, and Macalester. It was as if you were visiting schools in Manhattan."

The international school on the remote Norwegian coast wasn't the only place to which selective American liberal arts colleges wore a path. Ten years ago a grant from philanthropists Gale and Shelby M.C. Davis provid-

ed need-based aid for graduates of the then-10 United World College secondary schools, established to promote cross-cultural understanding. Davis UWC scholars were eligible to apply to what would become known as “the Davis Five” (Colby, Princeton, College of the Atlantic, Middlebury, and Wellesley, all schools with close connections to the Davis family). The Davis UWC Scholars program has two objectives: to educate potential future leaders from around the world and to make American students “more globally competent” by increasing international diversity. The prize for the Davis Five: motivated students, many from developing countries, who had already proven themselves top academic prospects. And, most importantly for the U.S. schools, the Davis grant provided substantial financial aid—up to \$40,000 per student per year.

Soon admissions officers were wearing out their passports, and students from around the world were getting world-class educations.

(Reduced funding from the Davis program will require colleges to contribute more for Davis UWC scholars in the future, prompting colleges to consider their options. Related story, P.23)

Outstanding international students—from the UWC system and beyond, often with compelling and even fascinating backgrounds—flocked to Mayflower Hill and soon emerged as cultural ambassadors and campus leaders, valedictorians and commencement speakers, and trustees.

Since most of Colby’s competitors lacked the Davis funding and couldn’t match the generous financial aid offers it made possible, Colby’s profile quickly ascended, not only in Africa, India, and Asia, but in the United States. “I think it’s been the most important thing that’s happened demographically to Colby in the last probably thirty years, alongside the changes that have come by diversifying the domestic populations,” said President William D. Adams.

It wasn’t always like this. Not even close. Beverage came to Colby 25 years ago. His international experience in admissions at his previous job, at Stanford University, consisted mostly of recruiting in western Canada. At Colby then-President William R. Cotter committed to enrolling one black student each year from South Africa, where apartheid had just been abolished. Two benefactors also gave money to Colby to fund scholarships for women from Andean countries. “Bill suggested maybe it was time for an international trip,” Beverage recalled. “I agreed to do it.”

With the establishment of the Oak Scholarships, which provide financial aid for students from Zimbabwe and Denmark, Colby’s international recruiting grew, with trips to not only South America, but Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. But numbers were limited. At that time few American colleges could afford to take on significant numbers of international students who, more often than not, needed substantial financial aid.

“In those days it was, ‘Harvard, Macalester, or home.’ That was the joke,” said Gregory Walsh ’84, a college counselor at United World College Costa Rica. “In terms of full scholarships, a cluster of schools could do it. Ivies, some liberal arts colleges, but on a very limited basis.”

With American colleges and universities prohibitively expensive to almost all international students, most, even the most academically qualified, aspired to attend the university closest to home. A full ride? To America? For students from developing countries, that is the educational equivalent of winning the lottery.



PHOTO BY JIM EVANS

Davis UWC Scholars Adelin Cai '05, left, and Andras Rozmer '05 chat with Shelby Davis in 2004. Cai, from Singapore, is now a policy specialist with Google in San Francisco. Rozmer, a Hungarian, is at Central European University in Budapest, where he is project coordinator at the Center for EU Enlargement Studies. At right is President William D. Adams.

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—President William D. Adams

As Walsh put it, quoting a saying in college-counselor circles: “You can say, ‘There’s a university in hell.’ And they’ll ask, ‘Does it offer full scholarships?’”

The Davis UWC Scholars program offered the scholarships, but the colleges and universities weren’t in hell. They were some of the most prestigious institutions in arguably the world’s most prestigious higher education system. Only now, UWC students could bring money to the gate. As more colleges qualified for the Davis funding, there were more rigorous colleges (92 at last counting) vying for the same limited number of qualified students. The strongest students suddenly were in the driver’s seat.

At the United World College of the American West in New Mexico, where Walsh worked before Costa Rica, representatives of 50 colleges visited in 2004. The next year, with the expanded Davis program, the number jumped to 70, then to 100. In Costa Rica the number of college visitors peaked at 50, then declined to 36 with the downturn in the economy. “Almost all schools that visit here are in the [Davis] program,” Walsh said. “I would discourage someone from visiting here if they didn’t offer significant international student scholarships.”

Almost all of the UWC of Costa Rica’s graduating students (45 of 53 from all over the world) will go to the United States for college. Almost all will need substantial financial aid, Walsh said.



Rodwell Mabaera '02, an Oak Scholar from Chinboyi, Zimbabwe, graduates from Dartmouth Medical School this June with an M.D./Ph.D. He concentrated on hematology in medical school and will fulfill his residency at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center.

That geographic and economic diversity that international students provide is sought after by U.S. colleges, and for good reason, Colby officials say. International students' contributions to the intellectual climate has been well documented. Some are among Colby's top science, mathematics, and international studies students. In the last five years, four valedictorians and two class speakers have been international students. Two of the last three Colby students to receive Watson Fellowships have been UWC international students.

In a response echoed across the campus, History Professor James Webb said the most important contribution of international students has been to broaden the range of human cultural experience in the classroom. "The results," Webb said, "have been refreshing and unpredictable," with contributions that have "cast different patterns of light and shadow across virtually all issues broached in seminar." Colby's "traditional" students, he said, "have often been astonished by what the international students were willing to explore and willing to ignore."

Sui Kim Cheah '99, a former international student from Malaysia and now a Colby admissions officer, said international students bring even more than global perspectives. "I think their biggest contribution to our campus is a reminder [to other students] of the fact that it's a privilege to be here," Cheah said. "It's not an entitlement."

These students then take that privilege out into the world: Jayadev Vadakkanmarveetil '07 now works for Google, building the Web in Indian languages; Emma James '04 is an attorney in New York and an alumna trustee; Rodwell Mabaera '02 is finishing an M.D./Ph.D. program at Dartmouth this spring. Dean Beverage came up with this list off the top of his head, and on it went as he recounted international students' accomplishments at Colby, in professional and graduate schools, in careers in medicine and law and finance. "We give [international students] a lot, but they have an incredible amount to give to us," he said.

Extending the privilege to the top UWC scholars was easier when Colby was one of five, or as Beverage puts it, "the only game in town." The second phase of the Davis grant included more colleges, and Colby had to gear up its recruiting efforts or be left behind.

Colby admissions officers—for the most part Beverage, Director of Admissions Thomas, Cheah, Dory Streett, and Nancy Morriane '65—visit UWC campuses from New Mexico to Swaziland. In 2009 the department spent about \$35,000 on international travel, less than the four-year grant for a single UWC student.

"While you're developing relations with the United World Colleges, you're also developing relations with other international schools and the people who work there—face to face," Thomas said. "That makes a very big difference in the international community."

Conversations with current and prospective students bear that out. Svein Magnason '13, from the Faroe Islands, interviewed with Streett at Red Cross Nordic and applied regular decision. "They're all very nice when they come," Magnason said, referring to visiting admissions officers. After his acceptance, Streett kept up a steady stream of correspondence, which led him to choose Colby out of the five colleges where he was accepted. "It was the personal attention," he said. "We really know they read our applications."

Khoa Thanh Nguyen '11, from Vietnam, first learned of Colby from his chemistry teacher, Tim Newhouse '05, at United World College of the Adriatic in Trieste, Italy. Nguyen, an economics and mathematics major, said visits from Beverage and Streett convinced him that Colby "was the place I would grow academically and personally."

"Colby stood out because Dory was so friendly," Nguyen said. "And Parker the year before. And Tim Newhouse. I decided that if people are that nice, the College must be a great place to be."

He hasn't been disappointed. "I love every day," he said. But if he didn't, word would get out.

Facebook and e-mail have helped create an instant network of UWC alumni, most of whom are scattered among prestigious American colleges and universities. Experiences are conveyed back to younger students, who keep them in mind as they watch the procession of college recruiters. "Some say basic things," said Allen Martinez, a Costa Rican student at the Costa Rica UWC. "You don't see that much more from the college than you can get from the Internet."

Martinez gave Streett high marks, though, saying she seemed

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if we don't cut back on our commitment.
Not cutting back on it is going to
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—Steve Thomas, director of admissions

It's been a heck of a ride. But now what?

An impending reduction in financial aid support from the Davis UWC Scholars program as a result of the economic downturn poses a challenge as Colby tries to sustain its international profile.

"The ambition is to stay among the most well represented in that group of schools that's being supported," President William D. Adams said, describing the intersection of the Davis Foundation changes and economic pressures as "an interesting confluence."

Here are the numbers:

The original Davis Five pilot program expanded to other colleges and universities and now includes 92 partner schools. Non-charter participants received a maximum of \$10,000 per student, while the original five continued to receive up to \$40,000. But in 2010, with the economic downturn affecting the program's endowment, funding was reduced to a maximum of \$10,000 per year per student. Another \$10,000 per student is awarded to the program's high-performing schools (13 at last count including Colby) with 40 or more Davis UWC Scholars enrolled. "All of our partner schools are expected to 'have skin in the game,'" the program's executive director, Philip Geier, wrote in an e-mail.

The Davis Five each were awarded an additional multiyear \$200,000 grant to help ease the transition to the new funding cap. But over the long run, enrolling international UWC students, most of whom require significant financial aid, now could carry a price tag for Colby of more than \$30,000 per year for each UWC student. Despite that new financial reality, at Colby and elsewhere, Geier said he's seen "no sign of partner schools weakening in their commitment to the program."

A decade in, the program has supported nearly 3,000 scholars, and all indications (from site visits, anecdotal feedback, and reports from students and school administrators) are that the goals are being achieved, Geier said. "All indications are positive," he said, including scholars voicing their intention to give back in the model of their benefactor, philanthropist Shelby Davis.

Geier lauded Colby for its consistent, high UWC enrollments and international emphasis. "Colby has been a leader in embracing a global philosophy for its future," he said.

But still, at Colby it's been time to take stock and to decide how and to what extent the College will be

able to step up.

The College is moving forward with enrollment of 15 UWC students for the Class of 2014 (down from a peak of 29 for the Class of 2006), affirming the intention to maintain the international makeup of Colby's student body. Colby admissions officers say it's a distinction that could become more pronounced in future years if some schools shy away from the additional cost. But they also say that investing in international students now could pay off as the College tries to enroll increasing numbers of full-pay, academically qualified students from countries like China and India.

Said Steve Thomas, Colby's admissions director since 1998, "We can be in a very strong position."

In the meantime, Colby has to consider other goals, including enrollment of students from underrepresented groups, students from Maine, and students who make up the College's traditional base. This has to be done as the endowment recovers, but the effects of the economic downturn remain.

Said Adams: "It really is a question of how you balance priorities in a setting of seriously constrained resources."

genuinely interested in the students and actually asked them questions. He had questions, he said, but many were answered by his roommate from last year, Jean-Jacques Ndayisenga, now a Colby first-year. "He seems really, really happy and amazed by the students he's met at Colby," Martinez said.

Colby was one of eight U.S. schools to which Martinez applied, he said, and he knows the competition will be tough because several of his classmates also applied. Assuming he's accepted at more than one, his decision will be based on academic programs and "life preparation." And, of course, financial aid. "That will be everything," Martinez said.

He won't be the only one mulling the financial aid numbers.

There are hints that other colleges and universities with a strong international profile may be backing away from their international commitment, based on scuttlebutt in admissions circles, Thomas said. In this year's early-decision round, he said, highly competitive colleges reportedly denied admission to strong UWC candidates they would have snapped up in years past. But where some may see a financial liability, Thomas sees an opportunity. "We can be in a very strong position if we don't cut back on our commitment," he said. "Not cutting back on it is going to create even more distance between us and our peers."

Students and prospectives agree that Colby's reputation is strong in the international community, based largely on the educational opportunities and financial aid available—and positive feedback from international students already on Mayflower Hill.

"It's right up there with the Ivy Leagues in terms of level of preparation," Martinez said in Costa Rica. "With all of the [UWC scholars] there, we get a chance to know the place from the inside."

But admissions officers at Colby and other American colleges and universities also are looking at an "internationalized" student body

as a possible financial asset in the future. An international atmosphere may be attractive to yet another wave of international students who won't need financial aid at all.

Asked to identify the emerging trends (plural) in college admissions, Streett said, "China. China is the trend."

The booming economies in China and India are resulting in increasing numbers of well-to-do families able to pay the full cost of an American education. With the number of high-school-age students in the United States declining, colleges are positioning themselves to take advantage of this new market, Streett said.

Last year she traveled to China twice (once on Colby business, once with a sponsored group trip for American college admissions officers) and was astounded at the "staggering" number of highly qualified students. Colby already is seeing more applications from China, including about 100 in this year's applicant pool, more than triple the number just three years ago.

Still, admissions officers often are reminded of the countless students around the world who don't even dare to dream of an education like that offered at Colby. Last year Streett traveled to Waterford Kamhlaba United World College of Southern Africa in Swaziland, which has sent 11 students to Colby since 2003. On the same trip she went to South Africa to speak to students at the African Leadership Academy, a new school in Johannesburg, and at the LEAP Science and Maths School in Langa Township, in Cape Town. Streett calls such visits her "savings bank," an investment that may pay off someday for a student who comes away inspired.

There had been no procession of American college recruiters in Langa Township, she said. "I told them there are colleges in America interested in you," Streett said, of her address at school assembly. "They were stunned that someone had come all that way to talk to them."

"You could have heard a pin drop." 