Chris Dickson:

Technically it is an exchange program, but not in that sense how we think of exchange. So they're actually coming here to study full time that leads to a degree or certificate. And this goes for you Tania, or anybody on the instruction side. If you have any ideas, we're always open. We're always looking for new ways to connect with our students, to help them either with the cultural exchange, academically. All of these things are helpful in trying to retain and graduate or get our students to fulfill their educational goals.

Christina Barsi:

Hi, I'm Christina Barsi.

Sun Ezzell:

And I'm Sun Ezzell, and you're listening to The Magic Mountie Podcast.

Christina Barsi:

Our mission is to find ways to keep your ear to the ground, so to speak, by bringing to you the activities and events, you may not have time to attend, the resources on campus you might want to know more about, the interesting things your colleagues are creating, and the many ways we can continue to better help and guide our students.

Sun Ezzell:

We bring to you the voices of Mt. SAC from the classroom to completion.

Speaker 4:

And I know I'm going to achieve my goals. And I know people here are going to help me to do it.

Speaker 5:

She is a sociology major, and she's transferring to [inaudible 00:01:04]. Psychology major, English major.

Sun Ezzell:

From transforming part-time into full-time.

Speaker 6:

I really like a time that we spend with Julie about how to write a CV and a cover letter.

Christina Barsi:

Or just finding time to soak in the campus.

Speaker 7:

We think of the natural environment around us as a library.

Christina Barsi:

We want to keep you informed and connected to all things Mt. SAC, but most importantly, we want to keep you connected with each other. I'm Christina Barsi Mt. Sac alumni and producer of this podcast.

Sun Ezzell:

And I'm Sun Ezzell learning assistance faculty and professional learning academy coordinator.

Christina Barsi:

And this is The Magic Mountie Podcast. While I was attending Mt. SAC. One of my few regrets was not taking advantage of the study abroad program, but there are many students who have not made that same mistake and have traveled from around the world to study at Mt. SAC and pursue their educational goals here in the states with us. Tanya Anders sits down with Chris Dickson, the director of international students as of summer 2021 to gain a better understanding of all this department does to facilitate these students and in turn create a richer experience for everyone at Mt. SAC. Here's Tanya.

Tania Anders:

Welcome. And thank you for joining us today for the Magic Mountie podcast. My name is Tania Anders and the host of today's episode. I'm visiting today with Chris Dickson who joined the Mt. SAC family this summer as the director of international students. Welcome Chris.

Chris Dickson:

Thank you. Thank you for having me, Tania.

Tania Anders:

Absolutely. We would like to give you an opportunity to introduce yourself to the Mt. SAC community. Can you please tell our listeners a little bit about yourself? What's your background and what gets you excited about working with international students?

Chris Dickson:

Absolutely, absolutely. So I am a Southern California local, so born in Inglewood, California, and raised in Pasadena, California. Where I graduated from John Muir High School, go Mustangs. And from there I had of a long college journey and it will tie in into why I love community college so much in our international program. But from there, I went to college at a small school in Southeast Virginia, Hampton University. And after a year came back and decided not to go back.

Chris Dickson:

So I then enrolled at Santa Monica college, a community college, of course. And from there eventually transferred to Cal State Dominguez Hills where I got a bachelor's in psychology, took a five year hiatus and then got my master's in higher education from Cal State Fullerton. And then they liked me so much. They didn't let me leave and said that you should start the doctoral program. So I earned a doctorate in community college leadership almost exactly a year ago. My degree was conferred in community college leadership.

Tania Anders:

Oh, congratulations.

Chris Dickson:

Thank you. Thank you. I'm still kind of shedding that life off of me, but I'm so very happy to be finished with that. And during that time I was working full-time, supporting myself while I was doing undergraduate and graduate studies, of course. And then once I was in my doctoral program, I moved to Texas back in the summer of 2019 and left Santa Monica college, which was my previous employer before going to Texas. And I spent just little over a year at the University of North Texas in Denton, Texas. And I worked in their student activities department specifically with off campus student services, which you can see the connection between community college and our off campus students.

Chris Dickson:

There was a lot of overlap, so that was a good fit for me and the skills that I brought for them. And I like working with international students because it allows me to be that Jack of all trades kind of person. We do some of everything. We have admissions, we have orientation, we have student programming, we have advising. There's a lot wrapped up into working with international students, not to mention the regulatory aspect of it and the technical aspect.

Chris Dickson:

And on top of that, I just like working in the community college. I like the setting. It has a come as you are kind of ethos that I can identify with. And so no matter where you were, where you are, what matters is where you're going. So you come in, we'll do whatever it is we need to do to help you get to where you need to be. It'll be a lot of hard work for all of us involved, but we're willing to just roll up our sleeves and get people where they need to go. So, that's what really gets me excited about working with international students. And then on top of that, being in a community college setting, which is what I prefer.

Tania Anders:

Thank you so much for sharing that. As an international person myself, there really are a lot of people overseas that don't understand that part of the US system with what's the difference really between a community college or then there's colleges, private colleges, there's universities. I used to work for a four year school and we had an international students program. And when I came to Mt. SAC, I was so excited to actually see also a community college to have an international students program, because I really think that for a lot of countries, that's not necessarily on the radar.

Tania Anders:

So there might be, I guess, very different recruitment efforts going on also for getting students from internationally excited about coming to a community college rather than a university for their program. That leads me to my next question, what is the mission of our Mt. SAC International Student Program? What is our goal to get students and our goal for them to succeed here at Mt. SAC?

Chris Dickson:

Absolutely. The good thing about our program mission is that it's actually developed by our students and then maintained or enhanced or whatever we need to do. So every year we have a retreat with our student assistants. Most of which are international students themselves. With this current group, we have the exception of one person, otherwise 10 of them are international students. And so during this retreat, we get them together and they're able to form a mission. And of course, as staff, we take care of all the editorial things and make sure it's okay.

Chris Dickson:

And I have it written here. It says, "The Mt. SAC ISP, International Student Program is committed to providing a safe and welcoming environment for our students by establishing a home away from home where they can adjust to American culture. The program will carry out this commitment by forming and nurturing relationships between students and the campus community through programs that provide safe spaces and cross-cultural exchange opportunities. Additionally, the program is dedicated to providing engaging and valuable learning opportunities while embracing diversity, equity and inclusion and access." That's something that I would throw in there.

Chris Dickson:

But nonetheless, the key thing is that home away from home component. As you can relate to Tania, coming to the United States it could be overwhelming. This is a big country with a lot of people. But not quite at the level of China and India, but still over 300 million people in a different system. So it's very important for our program to have that home away from home aspect to tether them, but then to also help them launch into other aspects of the college.

Chris Dickson:

For instance, we have quite a few international students involved with associated students or AS. We could have students who are athletes. So they can get involved in every which way, but it's important to have that home base and then to also have that cultural exchange components, which is done through a lot of our programs and services.

Tania Anders:

So what then brings international students to Mt. SAC? Like I just mentioned, I think universities are usually on the radar for international students. So what makes them choose Mt. SAC? And where are most of those students coming from to us?

Chris Dickson:

Sure, sure. You're absolutely right. Community college is a unique thing in the world. There's different types of post-secondary education. That's not university that could be more technical, but community college is of no pun intended, a foreign concept. And we were done a lot of favors when a lot of colleges moved away from keeping community in it. And so it makes recruiting very interesting because it's like, "Oh college, but what do you mean? You don't have any bachelor's degrees?"

Chris Dickson:

But that is, I wouldn't say a challenge, but it is something that they need to communicate. And what I can say in listening to a lot of global stakeholders the last several months, the demand for community college continues to be there and continue to increase. So thankfully there's more and more awareness as time passes of what a community college is. And understanding some of the benefits to that. As far as Mt. SAC, where they fit in and based on the information that I received, Mt. SAC just has a good reputation for not just their institution, but for their international program, because there wasn't this strong push of international recruitment, like some of the big machines that have upwards of four, five digit international students.

Chris Dickson:

So it really has that word of mouth component to it where a lot of students have good experiences, they tell their friends and family or whomever and say, "Oh, Mt. SAC is great. Come here." And so they were able to build up this great population of students based on their reputation alone. So that's how Mt. SAC fared globally. And as of now, like most programs with substantial populations, they're going to come from east Asia primarily. For the most part I should say. So of course, China ... I wouldn't say India, but India is starting to wake up as a market. But between those two countries, that's over a third of the global population.

Chris Dickson:

So we're no different with the exception of India. So a lot of China, a lot of Taiwan, Hong Kong, some Indonesia, we have Myanmar and then also we do have students that come from central and south America, and a few from Canada, and a few from Europe as well, but primarily Southeast Asia.

Tania Anders:

Oh, that's interesting because that really is also reflective of the city of Walnut. My son went to the high school in Walnut and if I remember the numbers correctly, like they have over 80% Asian students in Walnut. And the community itself is. So maybe they're also doing part of the recruitment for us almost to tell family about the city of WAlnut and that we have this fantastic community college.

Tania Anders:

So I know that COVID has impacted everyone. So I'm wondering how many international students do we actually currently have and how have those numbers changed maybe because of COVID?

Chris Dickson:

Sure. Sure. As of now it's about 300, which pales in comparison to peak times when we were approaching a population of 700. Obviously or needless to say COVID had a devastating impact and it went both ways. So the students that stayed in United States, had to make tough decisions about whether or not they wanted to return home during the pandemic with the understanding that's going to be challenging for them to come back into the United States.

Chris Dickson:

Also, that harmed a lot of new students who were planning to come over the past year and a half. And the fortunate thing is that it's starting to loosen up a little bit, consulates around the world or embassies and consulates around the world have started to process visas. And then with the help of Biden's recent memorandum or order to then loosen up things, as long as students have the requisite vaccinations, they'll be able to come here and get started with their studies.

Chris Dickson:

So we're looking at an upward trend hopefully, to get back to where we were and then start to work from there. But a huge part of our mission is to restore what we've lost. Students that are out there and ether that weren't able to come back. We're trying to get them back. So special shout out to our admission side of the program, who does a lot that initial touchpoint to get their applications process. They're connecting with those students who were, I shouldn't say lost, but students who were not able to resume their studies because of the pandemic and are trying to get back. So we're working with them. So that's how it's been looking.

Tania Anders:

Yeah. It's been tough, very tough. So, when does students then do come to Mt. SAC, what is most surprising to the international students about Mt. SAC and Southern California? I know you haven't been here that long, but maybe you have some insights already.

Chris Dickson:

Yeah. An underrated aspect to my job that I just love is hearing students talk about American culture from the outside looking in. And you get to have a mirror held up and say, "Yeah, that is odd." I don't know why California is like that. I don't know why we say the 10 freeway or the 210. I didn't know we did that until we were called out on it. But nonetheless, I think first and foremost, it's the education system. It's different.

Chris Dickson:

There's a lot of resources and I've heard students express that it could be a little overwhelming with how much is available to them. But then there's also that individualistic aspect that's in our education system of, we have everything here for you, but you still have to actually take the initiative to use these resources and we can help you get there.

Chris Dickson:

But I think that individualism is something that I've heard, that's been consistent throughout my career. That's a little bit of a culture shock to a lot of people because in other places it's a little more sort of confined. There's not a lot of these programmings. What is the OPS or what is ACEs? What is rising scholar? What are all these different programs? Some of which may not pertain to them because they're not eligible, but nonetheless, that's one of the main things. And then there's just little things students said that they didn't realize Southern California was this hot.

Tania Anders:

Interesting.

Chris Dickson:

Or you hear about, as they say in college, the freshman 15. Referring to pounds. And they said the American 15, because portion sizes are out of control. So you hear some of the wild things from international students and it wakes you up to say, "Oh, that is true. I never finished my meal when I go to the restaurant. This is a bit much."

Tania Anders:

We've started sharing because we agree it's like really two for one there.

Chris Dickson:

Exactly.

Tania Anders:

So do you help the students with housing and stuff like that when they come or how organized is that?

Chris Dickson:

Absolutely. There's very few ... I know that there's at least one community college throughout the state that has on campus residences. Obviously we do not. Almost all community colleges here. So the thing that we do is a system with finding housing. So the options of course are single occupancy, or they can have, what's called homestay. I want to say room stay, but homestay. And the way homestay works is they can link with a company that has a database of family, people, or families that have a room available and they can rent with that family and they can provide meals and all sorts of other support.

Chris Dickson:

Also, there's local housing on the Pomona side, that's more based like a student living community. And those are great because they allow students a little more flexibility than traditional rentals to where you can have roommates, you can have your own personal lease and that you're not tied to anyone in case you need to leave early, or one of your roommates needs to leave. So we do help them. And one of my things that I have on my master plan is setting up and solidifying those housing resources and potentially working with people or vendors within the community to make sure that they have those things in place when they arrive.

Tania Anders:

Yeah. One of my questions that I have on my list for you is how we, the Mt. SAC community can get involved. Our faculty and staff and all of us on our campus, because there might be some people who are like, "Oh, that'd be kind of cool to have an international student for a year." So are there plans to get the Mt. SAC community more involved in those ways, but then also of course, in the classroom. Like what can we do to help support our international students? Often we don't know. It's not like they're earmarked, "Hey, you have an international student in your class."

Tania Anders:

So since you're new, I know then there's always new ideas. And so what are maybe some of your ideas that you have of how faculty for example, can support international students?

Chris Dickson:

Absolutely. So as of now, some of our current programming does involve the faculty side or more broadly the instruction side. For instance, we're currently working with our writing center to have some joint programming. And I was alerted that ... I don't know what it's called, but in terms of mathematics, having two tutors to come here and provide some math tutoring or supportive services right here in our center, which is located in 9F by the way.

Chris Dickson:

So those things are already in place. And in fact, during international education week, which is about every third week in November, and one of our events is Friendsgiving, a play obviously on Thanksgiving. A week before Thanksgiving, and we actually honor some faculty members there. And these are student nominated faculty that I get to come, they get nominated, we give them a goodie bag. They have dinner with us. They learn that cultural exchange aspect of our mission for our program.

Chris Dickson:

So there are ways that faculty have been involved. I know in the past, and they've already primed me. But from the American language and the world languages departments in rekindling some of the programs we have, I believe we used to have conversation circles and some other things that got disrupted for obvious reasons due to COVID. So these are some things that are starting to come back and reformulize. And this goes for you Tanya or anybody on the instruction side.

Chris Dickson:

If you have any ideas, we're always open. We're always looking for new ways to connect with our students, to help them either with the cultural exchange, academically, all of these things are helpful in trying to retain and graduate, or get our students to fulfill their educational goals.

Tania Anders:

So when the students come to us, I'm assuming they all have had to take the tough test or similar tests to show that their English skills are high enough. Because I'm asking again, in terms of when we have these students in our classroom, how much of a language barrier maybe we have to expect or not expect, right?

Chris Dickson:

Yes. So yes, no. TOEFL is one of the most popular ones, but there's lots of English proficiency exams out there. And we accept quite a few. I believe GTEC is one of them, Duolingo, there's IELTS. So there's various ways of getting their English proficiency verified. And then there's another thing too. And it really depends because some students actually grow up pretty English proficient, and they have English courses or whether, IB or international Baccalaureate it, or whatever the case may be, or gymnasium English. If you start getting into to Europe where their English is better than mine, in some cases like I'd speak too much slang.

Chris Dickson:

But nonetheless, it really depends. And so, one of the key things that I learned early on in working at international programs is that when speaking try to refrain from those colloquialisms or the figurative language, or a lot of the slang, and just be mindful of who the audience is. Because they may not get some of those references. A mentee that I have is Chinese, and I would just casually say a lot of expressions and she has to say, "What do you mean by that?"

Chris Dickson:

"What do you mean when you say, take charge?" It doesn't resonate. Right? Because they could have come up with English, but they learned the way Australians speak English or the way they speak it in the United Kingdom. So those language barriers are going to be there. Even myself, if I go to some parts of United States like Louisiana, its like, "What did you say?' So it applies to them as well, just being mindful of those language barriers. But once they're here, they've been deeming as proficient by our standards.

Tania Anders:

Okay. So how do you and your team help integrate these students into our campus community then? Like I mentioned earlier, it's not like they're and they shouldn't be necessarily, ear marked on our class rosters. I'm international myself. I absolutely love the aspect of having a global community in my classroom and sometimes it would be actually really nice to use that more in the classroom. I teach oceanography. So I've had students who were from Guam. I'm like, "Oh my God, you're like so close to the Mariana's trench."

Tania Anders:

And they get proud then too. I'm like, "Man, next time you go home, bring some beach sediments so we can look at them under the microscope of the class." So, what are some things that your team does to help integrate them?

Chris Dickson:

A lot. And what I mean by a lot is a lot. Again, so special shouts to Patty Montoya and her admissions team, Martin Lorena, and Connie, they're very important because again, they're that first touch point and those interactions are very important. So the involvement or however you want to say engagement really starts before they even arrive. Because when they interact or they have a commissions questions, the way those interactions go are very important and could determine whether or not they can come here and then want to come here.

Chris Dickson:

So they do great work over there. And then of course, once they're in, that's when they come on our side, which is more of the programming side. So it starts with orientation. We have to inform them a lot on just being an international student and maintaining your F1 student status because there's some requirements that come with that. And then we eventually make our way into the more fun type of engagement things that happen throughout the year. So there's those academic engagements that I mentioned, where we collaborate with, whether it's AMLA, whether it's world languages, whether it's the writing center, whether we invite colleges into our center, for instance, UC Riverside just came to our center to interact with students to talk about transfer.

Chris Dickson:

We have workshops, we just had a stress workshop, but we've had things regarding maintaining your F1 status, how to transfer. I mean, there are more fun things. We have one program that's called global pals, and that's a cultural exchange program. In which we have international students and a group of non international students. And they form partnerships throughout the semester and they go on trips together at our expense. Of course, we take them on certain trips and then there's activities involved and they get to know each other.

Chris Dickson:

And it's not just our students learning about American culture, but it's, I'd like to say non international instead ... I just can't assume that they're American. That's why I'm skating around that. But students who may not be international, they can learn. And it really gives our students that sense of belonging and purpose when they're able to express their culture to people.

Chris Dickson:

And another event that's tied into that is our global cafe. So that's another way our faculty or instruction side can get involved is our cafes that are happening. So we usually have a few per semester, but you can feel free to stop by. You can learn some culture, get some culture specific food or snacks. So we do a lot. We take them on field trips. We do the cultural exchange programming. We help them with academic support, transfer support. And then we also work with other departments such as, AS, a lot of different clubs to get students involved. So a lot of clubs do get involved in our international education week fair, and that's another way for students to get integrated and to get involved.

Tania Anders:

So do most of the students stay? That's really fantastic. So do most of our students stay for a year? Is that usually the exchange program duration or do they stayed for the full two years or more to get a transfer degree and that's the goal for most of them to transfer then?

Chris Dickson:

Yes. Yes. And before I do, I just wanted to shout out our program specialist, Stephanie Lopez, and our admin specialist, Raelyn Alvarez. They do a lot of the leg work in getting that programming established. And technically we give them what's called a form I20, and it states that they're coming here to study, to lead to a degree. And for us of course, it's an associate's degree, but they're also more than welcome to get certificates, ADTs, whatever their goal is. So it is part of the student exchange visitor program when you have the F visa, the M visa, or the J. Our students are going to be F1 that are in our program. So they're going to be required to be full time at all times with some exceptions leading to a degree or certificate of some sort. So there's supposed to be something at the end.

Chris Dickson:

So they're not necessarily coming here say for a semester for study abroad. So technically it is an exchange program, but not in that sense how we think of exchange. So they're actually coming here to study full time that leads to a degree or certificate. And then once they're here, do they all get an associate's degree and transfer? Of course not, even though a transfer is not necessarily required. Some students may come in for a semester and it's like, "Ah, it's not my cup of tea." And then they may go elsewhere or go back to their home country. So there's all sorts of different ways. So once they're ways to educate themselves. So once they're here, they're just like any other student here with which they could study.

Tania Anders:

That's amazing. So I want to be mindful of our time here. So, we've talked about a lot of amazing things and must be such a unique experience for the students that come here. I certainly appreciate how much you do for those students and how much you integrate them here in our campus. And I would certainly want to shut out to faculty to try to get involved. And when you send out your announcements for the global cafe to just show up and I know with COVID it's just been harder to get people together in person. I remember before COVID, we would have fantastic international student events where everyone could come. So is there anything else that you would like to share with our listeners before we close out our conversation?

Chris Dickson:

Right. I'm just very thankful to the Mt. SAC community for being very welcoming. It's really great to be back. Once this position became available, I had my eyes set on it. So I'm just very thankful to be here. Everybody has been so welcoming and just helping me along to get acclimated, and meeting a lot of people, which has been a challenge when they're not wearing their masks, which is ironic. So once the mask comes off, it's kind of hard to recognize people, but it's been great.

Chris Dickson:

And for those of you listening, if you ever want to get involved with our program, we're open, you can always shoot me an email. My name is cdixon2@mtsac.edu. So whatever you have. [inaudible 00:29:56]. Tanya, if you have something cool about geology, that you just want to hang out with our students to give some program awareness to that, or for any instruction program or support program, we're open.

Tania Anders:

So thank you again so much. We feel so lucky to have you have joined our campus community and I will make sure to add to the podcast as a resource your email, et cetera, so that folks can reach out to you. So thank you again.

Chris Dickson:

Yeah. Thank you for having me. This was fun.

Christina Barsi:

Thank you for listening to The Magic Mountie Podcast, and don't forget to share your favorite episodes.