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## **A community college reaches from Peoria to Beijing**

*By Richard C. Longworth*

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It's early morning, and a vanload of students from Peoria, Ill., is on the expressway, en route to a Caterpillar factory. This is not surprising, considering that Caterpillar is headquartered in Peoria. Except that this Cat factory is in Tianjin, a Chinese city near Beijing, and these are community-college students, most of whom have seldom been out of Illinois, let alone the United States.

Too many community colleges, especially in old industrial areas like Peoria, are content to train their students for specific jobs. But what these Peoria students are getting is an education in the global economy, which is where they'll spend their lives. Most will stay close to home after graduation, so what they learn in Tianjin benefits Peoria and its economy, too.

It's not exactly a new idea: Most major universities and business schools stress globalization and train their elite students to command that future.

But this is different. The community college, Illinois Central College, is in East Peoria, above the Illinois River. Most ICC students come from the Peoria area and intend to stay there. Some will go on for a bachelor's or master's degree, at Bradley University or the University of Illinois. Others, through choice or force of finances, will take their two-year associate degree and go to work for a local company.

That is, these are non-elite students at a non-elite college from a Midwestern city whose name is nearly a synonym for ordinariness, an old industrial town that, like so many others, is struggling to survive in the global era.

If Peoria is going to make it in this new economy, it needs leadership both from high-powered M.B.A.'s and from people like these ICC students, local kids who are getting on-the-ground education in globalization and will use that education at all levels in the companies that hire them.

I was invited to see this program in action; what I actually saw were lives changing. On our first night in Beijing, I walked with two students to the Forbidden City. As we strolled along the walls beneath the swirling towers, one student, from a town about 500,000 times smaller than Beijing, said in awe, "I never dreamed I'd ever be here."

That young man's life will never be the same, and Peoria knows the value of this. To cope globally, the town is focusing on high-level manufacturing, exporting, and logistics. It knows it needs all the assets it can get, and sees the community college as one of them.

Three years ago, when I was writing a book on globalization and the Midwest, I went to Peoria and was urged to go to Illinois Central College. I visited the president, John S. Erwin, and found him jet-lagged after a trip to China.

What was a Peoria community-college president doing in China? Mr. Erwin explained that Caterpillar had contracted with the college to set up training courses for the company's dealers and distributors, first in the United States and then overseas. That led to a permanent relationship with two Chinese colleges, in Shenzhen and Xiamen, that use the ICC course to train Chinese distributors.

This led in turn to an exchange program, now in its fifth year, in which ICC students, enrolled in the

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college's international-business program, spend three months in China, mostly at Shenzhen Polytechnic, a large three-year school in Shenzhen, a boomtown next door to Hong Kong.

About five to 10 ICC students are chosen competitively for the program: Our group had seven students—four men and three women. The students live in college dorms and study in classes, taught in both English and Chinese, with students from other countries, including Russia—another personal window onto the wider world.

After a quick orientation in Shenzhen, the students spent a fast week traveling to cities like Beijing, Tianjin, and Fuzhou. Some of this, including a visit to the Great Wall, was tourism. But most was business-related.

We visited the Caterpillar Electric Power Division plant in the free-trade zone at Tianjin and spent another day in the textile center of Changle at Fujian Jinjiang Technology Company, a highly automated mill spinning polymer pellets into different grades of nylon thread, mostly for sportswear. The company calls itself "young but full of ambition"—a good description of post-Mao China itself. Its workers, mostly peasants who've migrated to Changle solely to earn money, work seven-day weeks, live in housing on the factory grounds, and send most of their earnings to families back home.

In the evening, Wu Daobin, its chief executive, hosted a Chinese feast with dozens of dishes and endless rounds of *baijiu*, the potent Chinese liquor—hard on the liver but, for the students, another lesson in how modern China mixes business with pleasure.

The students were grabbing the Chinese experience with both hands. On the bus, instead of playing computer games on iPhones, they whipped out pens and notebooks and practiced their Chinese calligraphy or quizzed each other on vocabulary. Then it was back to Shenzhen for three months of study and interning, most recently in a local office of Bosch, the German conglomerate, which had bought a sprinkler company owned by a former mayor of Peoria.

The leader of the students was Matt Fuller, a young Peoria man who was in the first ICC class to go to Shenzhen. He now is fluent in Mandarin, is about to get his master's degree, and talks about working full time in China.

Most of these young people are the first in their families to go to college, and few have had the chance to travel. Now Illinois Central College has thrown them into the eye of the global economy, teaching them that they have to be smart and worldly and multilingual. This is my idea of a global education—for the students and for Peoria. Not all cities will know how to gain access to that global economy, but a good start would be to ensure that their community colleges, like Illinois Central, are preparing students to compete in it.

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