

Abstract

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Can international students benefit from any type of financial grants or scholarships at the KCKCC?

Financial Realities of African Students in USA

By: Robertson Tankam

Most African students' dream is to study in one of the prestigious universities in the world. To them, pursuing an educational career in the United States of America is a dream come true. After an endless search spending hours on the internet filing applications and waiting periods, the moment comes when other realities set in including the payment of the necessary pre-admission fees. Finally, the student receives the long awaited I-20 Admission form. The I-20 is a proof that the student has been offered admission in the institution. It is a great honor and privilege to receive the I-20 because US institutions only select the best prospective students from Africa.

Receiving the I-20 marks the beginning of family engagements to sponsor the student throughout his studies in the United States. Generally, it is the family that is solely responsible for the bills of the student throughout his studies. The sponsor needs to meet the financial requirements with respect to the school, and ensure the acquisition of an F-1 visa for the student to be able to travel to the United States. It is usually with much joy and celebration that most families welcome the news of the approval of the F-1 visa. After all the feasting, and celebrating, reality steps in again when the student is boarding an airplane to the USA. After sixteen hours of flight from Africa to America, upon touch down in one of the international airports in America, the student is usually received by family members or friends, who accompany the student to the new school. It is usually a pleasurable experience until the first day in school when the student begins experiencing the financial realities of an African international student in the United States of America.

First reality hits home to the student who comes from where daily upkeep such as food and drinks are estimated at approximately \$2 per day to where \$2 has no meaning; from where monthly rent and utility bills cost under \$100, to where it costs about \$700; from where you share your hunger, worries, happiness and sorrow with everyone, to where you rely solely on yourself; from a situation where mothers and sisters did grocery, washing and cooking, to where you've got to get everything done by yourself. The cultural shock is alarming to the new student.

Indeed, the realities of life as an international student is quite complex. The fact that they have to be their sole keepers with no parents to guide their steps or assist them or counsel them on

how to go about their day to day activities is sometimes daunting. Generally, considering their age and financial demands coupled with what the community expects of them, most of these intelligent students who migrated from Africa end up wasted in the streets of American major cities. Others might get involved in illegal activities or at times crime in order to survive. The question then is: what happened? Understanding what transforms these very intelligent brains into community misfits is what we seek to understand. Upon research, questions and interactions with both College authorities, International student dropouts, International students still at school, and an understanding of their origins led to quite an interesting discovery in our understanding of the condition of International students here in the United States of America.

Before the F-1 visa which is the students' visa is awarded, they must show proof of at least \$24,000 in their current account to see them through the first years of studies. Most of these students have their money upon arrival in the United States. The realities that set in include:

- Tuition: This is the back breaker for most International students, as they have to pay the complete unsubsidized tuition fees required by the institution.
- Housing: Most of these students rely on the boarding facilities that these Institutions promise upon admission. To get a place in the boarding house is never an easy task. These students, most times, find themselves renting expensive rooms around town for lack of accommodation in the college dormitories.
- Restaurant: The student restaurants are generally very expensive, especially for a foreigner who is not used to eating fast food.
- Didactics: Text books, laptops, books, and other didactic materials are really expensive in the United States as compared to African and Europe.
- Transportation: With the vast nature of the US communities, most often, students have to own their own cars, especially when they live off campus. The running cost of such car is sometimes very difficult for an international student who is usually not permitted to work in the USA.
- Insurance and medical bills.
- Dressing and personal upkeep: We expect a level of physical presentation from students. Due to constant weather changing conditions and wear and tear, clothes and shoes must be replaced on regular basis.

- Sports and entertainment.
- Other socio-cultural, personal and miscellaneous expenses.

On the average, an international full-time student needs annually approximately \$10,000 for tuition, \$6,000 for accommodation, \$3,000 for books and accessories, \$5,000 for other expenses. This is just a conservative estimated budget for an International F-1 visa holder in Kansas City Kansas Community College per year. The point is that more than 70% of the expenditures incurred by these students are completely independent of their families. If they really want to go to school and achieve the much truncated *American dream*, this is a rundown of what awaits them.

Basically, the International F-1 visa holders meet these conditions of financial capability before they are granted a visa. It happens most often than not that many undesirable situations occur while these students are in school. Taking into consideration the hostile African environment, some of these students lose their sponsors either to natural disasters or political injustice, and at times hardship due to difficult situations back home. What then becomes the fate of the student? How does the student carry on? Who can the student lean on? For how long will this last? What happens when the student cannot meet their financial obligations towards the institution?

In search for the answers to these questions and for a better understanding of the situation, I spoke with Maureen Coulter, the Director of Admissions for International students at KCKCC. She told me that every international student needs proof of at least \$24,000 in liquid assets before they are granted the opportunity to study in KCKCC, as this covers all first year expenses. To this, the student needs personal insurance at about \$1,200 annually. She also informed me that international students are only allowed to work a maximum of 20 hours a week, and must be on campus, which is usually almost impossible for them as the competition with local citizens is very high. The international student needs a special permit from the labor bureau to be able to work off campus, and this is almost impossible to get, said Coulter, as the school must provide tangible reasons before this can be accorded.

Furthermore, I spoke to Mary Dorh, the director of Students Financial Aid department as to whether international students could benefit from any type of financial grants or scholarships from the College or the state. She responded that holders of F-1 visas are expected to pay all

their financial bills, as there is no type of financial assistance allocated by the Federal Government nor the school for them. She was clear on the fact that to be an International student you must be capable of handling all your financial obligations.

Looking at an estimate of what international students require to study at Kansas City Kansas Community College, most of the costs revolve around tuition, books and lodging.

American universities accept only the best students from overseas to study in America. When these students get to the states, so many things could go wrong that might make them lose sponsorship. Maturity demands that an adult fend for himself to provide his or her basic needs of life. To the student, education is a basic need. The system should put in place mechanisms to assist these very intelligent brains develop their skills and be more productive to the society. Considering the fact that they are performing well academically, they ought to be assisted financially to be able to achieve education and be more resourceful. The US system permits these students to work only on campus for a maximum of 20 hours a week. This is not enough.

Let's take the case of a student who has to work twenty hours a week at \$7.50 an hour. This means a maximum weekly rate of \$150 before taxes. This earns the student a maximum of \$600 a month. If their expenses could be subsidized by the state or the institution, these international students would find life much better. We all know the difficulties Africa is facing in recent times, and the quest for their expansion. The United States of America giving African International students a helping hand to study, return home, and better their communities would be a good investment in achieving global peace and security in an age of terrorism and violence. In my opinion, the situation from the academic stand point, more often than not these international African students perform better than expected. They score excellent results making the institution proud for as long as they are part of it. These Institutions should look for means to select the best and provide a better setting for these International students to bring out the potential in them.

Education should be one of the major commodities that America should export to Africa. Since it is difficult to transport education, American universities should encourage Africans who are willing to come to America to study. Investing in training ambassadors of education who should

carry the solutions of the African problems back home, and eventually change the phase of Africa, making it a better place that could be self-supporting.

Talking to most of these students, their dreams and goals have always been to study, acquire more knowledge and return back to Africa and impact their local communities. Unfortunately, 90% of these students see their dreams come to a premature end because of the bitter financial realities they end up faced with. Today, Africa no longer exports the Intelligent, strong willed mind changing patriots to America for studies because it has become a finance based gesture. Rather those who can afford to meet the financial demands are those we find in the Institutions for as long as they intend to, not because they are capable, but because they can meet the financial demands.

Let's take a look at the other side of the globe - the European system, especially, the German Educational system. In Germany, education is free for everybody, international as well as national students.

The DAAD (German educational exchange program) is a joint organization of Germany's higher education institutions responsible for promoting international education primarily through the exchange of students, academics and researchers. The DAAD scholarship database contains scholarship and funding opportunities for foreign students, graduate students and scientists who are seeking financial support for their studies, research work or teaching assignments in Germany. The database not only lists all the scholarships offered by the DAAD, but also compiles diverse programs offered by a wide variety of institutions.

The most popular DAAD scholarship program for developing country students is the DAAD Scholarships for Postgraduate Courses with Special Relevance to Developing Countries. Another popular example is the DAAD Scholarships in Public Policy and Good Governance.

Apart from providing free Education, the Germans provide wide range of scholarships to assist everybody willing to study. Germans really assist Africans in this light. They provide a wide range of scholarships to International students. The German Foundation Scholarship Program provides a wide range of scholarships ranging from:

1. A number of political and religious foundations in Germany offers scholarships to international students from various backgrounds, interests, and qualifications. Studentwerk-berlin.de outlines them in this list.
2. Heinrich Boll Foundation Scholarships is an example of a scholarship offered by a German political foundation while the KAAD (Catholic education exchange program) Scholarships is an example of a scholarship offered by a religious foundation in Germany.
3. German Universities participate in quite a number of study programs which are funded by Erasmus Mundus Scholarships. The scholarships can finance international students to pursue a participating Erasmus Mundus study program in Germany.

America is a better-structured economy which can provide a better learning environment to international students than the German economy.

The cardinal question is, why study in the United States instead of Germany? The answer is *language barrier*. To most Africans, English is their official and first language. Finally they get to study in English all their life, with English being the International language for the Sciences and communication in general, most Africans who are from the English speaking nations will prefer to study in America instead of going back to start learning a new foreign language, since most often, time is no longer on their side. Those from French speaking countries always consider France and Canada to be their destinations of choice.

Apart from the high tuition fees and high cost of living in America, international students are permitted to work maximum of twenty hours a week and strictly on campus jobs, which is most times impossible to get, because of competition with local nationals. For a student to work off campus, the student must obtain an Authorization from Department of Labor before he/she could be permitted to work those twenty hours/week off campus. Compared to the German system, as a student in Germany you may as a rule work for a maximum of three months and, depending on where you study, only during recess periods (e.g. semester holidays).

In the quest for a solution to the cries of these African International Students in KCKCC in particular and the United States of America as a whole, I went further to talk with an African Professor of political science at the KCKCC, Ewa Unoke, who is also the editor of the KCKCC Electronic Journal, to share his experiences about the plight of the African International Student at KCKCC, and to seek his opinion on how the situation could be remedied. I asked him about the major problems African International Students face in KCKCC and the United States of America as a whole? According to Unoke, “The major problem is ignorance of the IRS rules. For example, the Admission Officers have a duty to implement the laws pertaining to the international students. As a result, there is no room for sympathy towards the African student who is assumed to have made an adult choice to leave home and study abroad. On the contrary, it is difficult to convince the African student to understand the challenges and financial huddles to be overcome while studying in the US. The US has no interest or obligation to grant free education to any international student. Maybe, in future when American leaders realize that global education is a strong weapon against terrorism, things would change. There is hope, but for now, such is the time: No loan, no grant and no scholarship for the African student in the United States” says Unoke.

Unoke, however, makes suggestions that could improve the condition of the African international student at the KCKCC in particular and the USA as a whole:

1. Naturalized Africans and Africans with green cards have no visibility in local, state and national politics of the United States. They vote during elections and pay taxes but hardly run for positions on local, state and national levels. If they begin to participate more in government, they will be in a better position to change the plight of the African student such as extension of scholarships, loans and grants to the African student in the USA.

2. With a collective African voice, they can lobby and influence change on policies more favorable to the African students. But for now the unfortunate policy is “taxation without representation.”

3. Africans should stop looking at the United States like the only place with 21st century educational assistance. The Congress can help Africa establish Satellite Millennial Universities in Africa to reduce the flow of African youths into the United States.

4. College Administrators and Professors at the KCKCC should re-examine college policies in order to create a more favorable learning environment for the international students who have continued to contribute immensely in the economic and health sectors of the United States society.

Unoke's impression of the performance of African students at the KCKCC is obvious that African students excel within the American Educational system. In most cases they perform better academically than the American students. Yet, they have so much to learn about the American system. "Unoke suggests that the Intercultural Center should be expanded to handle the issues of foreign students, including immigration, admissions and welfare of students."

Education is a fundamental right that shouldn't be refused to anybody who has the brain and is willing to study. That is why the American federal government makes available financial aid packages for those willing to study, and equally why the Europeans or more precisely the Germans decide to make Education free for all. The question I still ask is, why must African international students go through all that stress to acquire the same knowledge that the western world is begging their own citizens to take. It is hard for me to understand why the United States of America could supply foreign aid to Africa in terms of military, warfare, food, and healthcare, but not education. There is an African proverb that states, "Do not give me fish, rather, teach me how to fish, so I can fend for myself."

An effort to remedy the condition of African student in the United States of America will have a domino effect in alleviating poverty and famine in Africa. One of the major solutions to global security and continental peace lies in education and not food aid. Every successful African student in the USA is an asset to the African and global society. The Kansas City Kansas Community College can become a pace-setter in the integration of international students, especially, the African student.

Biography

Robertson Tankam, is an African student from Cameroon, West Africa, who is currently pursuing an Associate Degree in Biology at the KCKCC.

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