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### St. Francis College Welcomes the World

September 27, 2022

By Paula Katinas ([https://thetablet.org/author/p\\_katinas/](https://thetablet.org/author/p_katinas/))



*At the time when St. Francis College is increasing the number of international students, the college moved into a new campus on Livingston Street in downtown Brooklyn and held a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Sept. 21. (Photo: Courtesy of St. Francis College)*

#### Number of international students doubled in 5 years, almost triple the national average

DOWNTOWN BROOKLYN — When Mustafa Mohammadi first arrived at St. Francis College from his native Afghanistan in 2018, he was afraid to speak up in class for fear his classmates would make fun of him because he spoke broken English.

"I didn't want to embarrass myself," he recalled. "But after one of my classes in public speaking, my professor asked me to come on the stage, and I spoke. Everybody was so supportive of me. All the American kids, they've always been great to me."

Mohammadi, a 24-year-old senior majoring in accounting, is part of a growing trend at St. Francis College — students from foreign countries attending the Downtown Brooklyn school.

According to St. Francis College President Miguel Martinez-Saenz, 14% of the school's 2,600 students are international scholars. The Pew Research Center reported that in the 2020-2021 school year, 4.6% of students at U.S. colleges and universities were foreigners.

For a relatively small school, St. Francis is making a big splash in international education. It has doubled the number of international students in just five years — and not by accident — Martinez-Saenz said.

"We established an office called SFC International. We began forging partnerships and recruiting. I've done trips to Trinidad and Tobago, Brazil, and the Dominican Republic. We started building the infrastructure to do this," he explained.

"But a lot of them are coming by word of mouth," the president added.

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In addition to Afghanistan, the students hail from approximately 30 countries, including Serbia, Romania, Hungary, Greece, Spain, Germany, Brazil, Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica.

Mohammadi dreamed of coming to America to go to school ever since he was a boy. He even taught himself English so that he would be ready when the time came.

Through a friend online, he found an organization that helps place foreign students in U.S. colleges. The organization agreed to help him and promised to connect him to St. Francis College, but not before requiring him to pass two separate English proficiency exams to ensure he had what it took to make it. "So I had to study 18 hours a day for about 25 days. My days were just studying and sleeping," he said.

After passing both exams, he was able to enroll. "St. Francis College accepted [me] for admission. And they did it in a very generous way. They actually gave me a full scholarship for my tuition," he said.

"I am grateful for this opportunity that I have been given," said Mohammadi, who is also planning to pursue a Master's degree in accounting at St. Francis College.

Martinez-Saenz said many international students come to St. Francis College to participate in sports. St. Francis College plays in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Division I — its top tier — in several sports.

That was true of Tadeu Rodrigues, a 25-year-old graduate student who played water polo at St. Francis College as an undergrad. He hails from Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Coming to the U.S. to study "is something I've always thought myself doing," he said.

Like Mohammadi, he received help from an organization that helps international students enroll in American schools — in his case, it was a group specializing in student-athletes.

Rodrigues had originally hoped to go to the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) "because of the weather." But the tuition was too high. When St. Francis College offered him a scholarship, he jumped at the chance.

He arrived in 2016, graduated in 2020 with a Bachelor of Science in Marketing, and is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Marketing at St. Francis College. He worked over the summer at Madison Square Garden Entertainment in the Marketing Partnerships Department.

Rodrigues loves living here.

"New York is probably the best place to be in the US. There are so many opportunities because all companies have an office in New York," he explained. "For an international student who wants to kind of go to the US to get experience, it's ideal."

International students bring a lot to a college campus, Martinez-Saenz said: "Their presence is important."

"What happens is that when those students come, domestic students get to bump up against the world — to have somebody from Serbia, Albania, Cyprus, Greece, or Germany as classmates," he explained. "It just changes the fabric."

"I like to say we're trying to enact a diverse learning environment that's reflective of the globe," Martinez-Saenz added.

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