Newcomb, New York is not what one would call a particularly unique town. Located in Adirondack State Park, a rural area, Newcomb is a classic example of a moribund mining town, suffering prolonged economic asphyxiation with the transformation of the region’s economy from resource extraction, to service industries.

However, a June 12 article in the New York Times has shattered that perception, and no doubt put Newcomb on the radarscreens of education reformers across the nation.

Witnessing this staggering demographic and economic decline, Newcomb’s superintendent, Skip Hults, realized the need for an innovative solution.

Hults decided to market Newcomb’s public schools as a unique destination for foreign students interested in attending high school in the United States. To make Newcomb’s public high school competitive with private boarding schools, Hults offered tuition at a mere $8,000, and instead of dormitories, arranged for these students to stay with local host families, creating a unique, immersive experience.

To date, Newcomb has attracted over 20 foreign students, and many students from the region are flocking to the school to experience a progressive, Twenty-first century high school education steeped in internationalism. This is astounding given Newcomb’s relatively small enrollment, around 50-60 K-12 students in total.

Last week I had the distinct pleasure of chatting with Skip Hults, in the process of conducting some summer research for Tufts University on rural vitality.

Skip and I, in addition to two of my research associates, Marlena Serviss and Carly Fuglei, talked at length about the future of public education in the United States in rural contexts. After addressing many of the obstacles that still exist for Skip’s educational model—notably, recent immigration legislation barring international students studying at public high schools from attaining J1 Visas for more than one year—we discussed how Skip’s model might be replicated in Montana.

Indeed, Montana and its vast rural districts are no stranger to the twin evils of declining school enrollments and collapsing economic models based on resource extraction, whether mining or the wood products industry.

Skip’s concept in relation to Montana is an exciting prospect to consider. Newcomb has received tremendous interest from international students, and has been able to attract some of the best and brightest foreign students. And in turn, these students have increased the performance of Newcomb’s local students. In fact, Newcomb recently registered some of the top test scores in New York. Luring these students with its unique educational paradigm, first class technological capabilities, and the natural grandeur of the Adirondacks, Newcomb has created a truly world-class, opportunity for its students, something many school districts in Montana are avowedly pursuing as well.

Skip has simultaneously launched another innovative, trail-blazing program. Newcomb has intimately integrated the region’s community college with its high school curriculum. Upon graduation, every high school senior earns an associate’s degree, with credit fully transferrable to other institutions.
Chase Maxwell  
Summer Program Associate

This combination of state-of-the-art technology, internationalism, and accelerated college preparation in partnership with local higher education assets is nothing less than a harbinger for what must come in the United States in this highly competitive era.

My work at The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center has given me a taste of this revolutionary process, and the myriad ways it can be achieved.

The Mansfield Center at The University of Montana continues what has always been its strong dual commitment of fostering a greater understanding of Asia and the international community, and promoting ethical public policy and leadership in government. And in pursuit of these broad aims, the Mansfield Center is also committed to enhancing the internationalism of Montana, both in our communities and schools in a number of ways.

The Confucius Institute of The University of Montana, hosted by the Mansfield Center and in partnership with the Montana Digital Academy, educates schoolchildren across the state, in both rural and urban settings, in Chinese language and culture. The Study of the U.S. Institute on Global Environmental Issues, a State Department-sponsored program implemented by the Mansfield Center, will bring 20 undergraduate students from Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Indonesia to Montana for the entire month of July as part of a three year program. This past year, the Center launched a successful study abroad program at Can Tho University in Vietnam on climate change studies, sending 9 UM students in Jan. 2011, and currently accepting applications for Jan. 2012.

We must diversify and internationalize our public school curriculum, while integrating the curriculum of our public high schools with some of our greatest local assets: our community colleges and universities. This is the future.

I am excited to see how this partnership with Skip Hultsevolves, and possibly what advice he may offer for Montana’s public school system. I encourage all Montanan educators, administrators, and citizens interested in this topic, or speaking with Skip, I can be reached via the Mansfield Center at 406-243-2988.

This is Chase Maxwell, the summer intern at The Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at The University of Montana, Missoula native, and student of international relations at Tufts University.