

Critical issues in International Student Placement

by David Allen, IECA (UK)

International students are big business, there is no getting around it. According to reports in 2011-12, they were worth approximately \$22 billion to the U.S. economy, and a little over £14 billion pounds to the U.K. economy. All indications are that these numbers are going to continue to grow in the coming years. Little wonder then that international students and their recruitment has been at the forefront of many institutions' strategic enrollment planning for a number of years now.

With the stakes to individual institutions getting ever higher, international students might even represent a budget that is balanced to some institutions, so it is incumbent on them to offer international students every service that they offer to domestic students. While it would be hard to argue that this is not the case once the students are on campus, does it hold during their recruitment? Recently there has been an increased risk of international students being seen more as a commodity and less as young people, which is turning into one of the most critical issues these days in international student placement.

International students are by their nature a very different type of student when it comes to their recruitment and placement. They tend to rely more heavily on what they can find on the internet and in brochures and fliers. Some will have access to college fairs being run by various agencies such as Education USA, and many will have access to good quality counseling in their schools—at least those attending international schools and a few state schools. Those who seem to be most at risk by some questionable practices are those students without access to any of these sources of information. It is these students who are easy prey to the bad actors. Often these take the form of recruitment agents or agencies acting on behalf of institutions; they are paid either a retainer, or more often a commission, on every student that they recruit.

I am not against recruitment agents per se, there are good ones just as there are poor counselors, independent or otherwise, but there needs to be a much greater control of who is or can be an agent and much greater institutional responsibility in the use of them. NACAC's recent commission to investigate the practice of incentive based recruitment by agents and colleges will be offering recommendations, as the whole international recruitment field is a much greater issue than just the use of incentive compensation.

I think the simplest way of breaking down the whole issue is simply to say that there is an urgent and compelling need for transparency on all sides.

Colleges need to make sure that any agents that they use are clear in what they communicate to students. If a college is going to use an agent, then they must ensure the same level of professionalism that they would expect from a member of their own recruitment staff. For those with multiple campuses, they must make sure that

the agents know the differences and the relative distances between them—an international student in central Africa is unlikely to know the difference between the University of Wisconsin-Superior and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Additionally, colleges need to look carefully at the success rates of students being recruited by their various agencies—how well are they being prepared to undertake their studies and assimilate into the culture of their host institution and country?

Recruitment agencies must let students know which institutions they represent and what their financial interest is in recruiting each student. It is imperative that potential clients know that agents can receive remuneration from either or both sides of the relationship. Agents that represent multiple institutions should have this clearly marked on all of their literature and in any contract they sign with the student. And, they must let the application remain the property and responsibility of the student. I have heard tales of college representatives calling students and discovering that the student was unaware that they had applied to their college; at the same time I have heard of students who are charged an additional fee to receive their admit letter from a college! If we can imagine an unethical practice, then I am sure it exists somewhere.

Students also have obligations in their own recruitment. They must take ownership of their applications and an interest in researching their 'list.' It is simply not good enough to sign it all over to an agency, much as it might simplify a sometimes overwhelmingly complex process. Additionally, they must make sure that they, or their agent, are being honest at every stage of the process. Agents can, and do, 'edit' transcripts, and test scores, and it is imperative that students maintain the integrity of their documents and the process.

Independent Educational Consultants (IECs) working with international students face a number of challenges to their practice. Working with students in multiple educational systems makes it difficult to maintain knowledge of each examination and high school system. Additionally, they can be working with students who apply to colleges and universities in multiple countries, so not only do they need to maintain knowledge of high school systems but also higher education systems. This is a big challenge to the IEC working with international students. Attendance at conferences and workshops around the world can help develop expertise, but at considerable expense.

One further key issue in the recruitment of international students is a lack of knowledge of IECs among international students. If they never had a counselor in their school, they can simply be unaware of the profession as a whole. They won't know that Independent Educational Consultants are duty bound to act in the best interests of their students. There is a danger of students assuming that agents and IECs are one and the same thing. To counter this we

need to educate students, their families, and schools about our profession. IECA can help, as can NACAC and other professional organizations, local international schools, and their counselors. However, it is often the colleges and universities that are traveling in areas where these students live; certainly it is the colleges and university reps who are eventually receiving the students. We must see more from them in educating the students and families they meet on the road, and if they do use agents, they must accept the responsibilities that come from such a practice.

Editor's Note: IECA received this article prior to the release of the NACAC Commission's draft report on the use of agents. The views expressed here are the author's and not those of NACAC or NACAC's Board of Directors.