

Inside the International IEC Practice

by Rebecca Grappo, M.Ed., CEP, IECA (CO)

Media and professional journal reporting confirm that there has been a surge of interest lately in the area of international consulting. This includes all facets of independent educational consulting, including boarding schools, therapeutic placements, college advising, and graduate school advising. Although much of the focus has been on students coming from China, India, and Saudi Arabia, there are many other students around the world whose dream is to study in the United States. In my view, most students would benefit from the guidance of a true professional, i.e. an IECA independent educational consultant (IEC).

That said, there are three essential questions that we, the professional IECs, need to ask ourselves in order to best serve students' needs as well as maintain the highest level of professionalism and professional ethics.

These questions are:

1. What are the challenges that we will face as professionals and are we prepared?
2. Who else is out there working as an educational advisor?
3. Are the challenges worth the rewards?

1. Challenges

Working internationally might seem glamorous, but there are definitely unique trials to working with this population. The first is **understanding the student and family from a cultural perspective**. What do families and students already know about education in the United States? What has been their previous educational experience either in the U.S. or elsewhere? What are their expectations of the educational experience, and what are their expectations of us, the IECs? When we say something, does the family understand what we really mean? When they say something to us, do we understand what they really mean beyond just the words they use? Understanding the culture from which they come is indispensable to understanding them, their needs, and expectations.

Managing expectations can also be quite challenging. If the IEC is working on a therapeutic placement, does the family understand the therapeutic process, and do the therapists understand the cultural background of the family? If the IEC is working on a boarding school placement, does the family understand the nuances of a school's culture and how that might impact the student? What are the parents'/guardians' goals for the student, and will they be met? When it comes to college, do students and families understand admissions requirements, the full range of majors, programs, internships, study abroad, and research opportunities, the concept of "fit and match,"

the variety of colleges the U.S. has to offer, the academic demands that will be placed on student, campus culture, etc? Or, are they just going to pay for a "good college" (read prestige) and reject your advice and suggestions? These are challenges we face when working with any family, but they are magnified when the family does not share the same baseline of knowledge or culture.

Logistics are often hurdles that must be overcome. In the class I teach through UC Irvine on "American College Consulting for the International Student," I devote a week to discussing "Hidden Landmines." Can you get the documentation you need such as transcripts, teacher letters of recommendation, and financial statements, and will the student qualify for a visa if accepted? When dealing with therapeutic placements, visas are especially tricky since a rebellious teen might not cooperate with a visa interview.

I also keep *timeanddate.com* open on my desktop as I use it repeatedly throughout the day to schedule appointments across time zones. I rarely rely on my memory to do the math to determine a meeting time—all it takes is missing an appointment or double-booking to realize the importance of getting it right. This also means that in order to serve that client in East Asia, the IEC in North America may have to get up at the crack of dawn or stay up very late at night. Getting to really know the family takes more intuitive and perceptive skills, too, as face-to-face meetings might be rare. Yet that relationship with the student and family will make the consulting experience either wonderful or continuously problematic.

2. Who else is out there providing educational advising services?

Let me be very honest here. IECA consultants face a huge uphill battle when it comes to informing international families, as well as Americans living overseas, who and what we are. Most families have never heard of IECA, and don't really know how to select the right advisor for their family. Those who want to work internationally need to know the landscape. Granted we have some unethical and unqualified people practicing here in the U.S., but overseas it can be the "wild, wild west."

Here are some of the scenarios we have to deal with:

- Agents who call themselves independent educational consultants, yet take fees on the front end and commissions on the back end of the process, i.e. from both schools and families. Whether you agree or disagree with the practice, families will often not know the difference between those types of IECs and an IECA consultant who is ethically bound not to take any payment from a school or a program. I write this in my contract, and have it prominently visible

on my Web site so that families know that my advice is in the best interest of the student and not personally motivated.

- Independent educational consultants who have no training or relevant professional memberships, don't attend conferences, don't get back for campus visits, etc., will also be vying for your clients. Their claim to fame may be that they attended a selective university and, therefore, they're "in the know." Perhaps they use scare tactics to convince the student that they will never get into a highly selective school (boarding or college) unless the student uses them.
- Families making their own placements via the Internet. Another challenge when working with international families is that they may be ready to go to school in the U.S. and then lose their nerve once they speak to the extended family that vetoes a plan. Expect more decisions to be made by many players, not just the parents.
- Falsification of documents. I was shocked the first time the family business manager of a client demanded I write a letter of recommendation for the student as if I were the teacher. When I refused, he did it and asked me to proofread it for him! Other ethical violations that I am aware of or have experienced myself: hiring ghost writers to write the essays for the student, falsifying transcripts, using fake IDs to take standardized tests, employing consultants to complete the application for the student, or who make false claims about their influence with admissions committees.
- Respecting intellectual property rights. Unfortunately, I have had others use my copyrighted materials without permission and distribute them in public forums. To be sure, plagiarism among so-called professionals also happens in the U.S., but it is much more prevalent overseas.

These types of practices are popping up all over the world. Many of them are watching and attempting to emulate us and engage the family's trust. In spite of this unethical behavior, *they are the competition when working internationally*. Families will often not understand what makes the IECA consultant different.

Therefore, in my opinion, our challenge is to steadily, consistently, determinedly educate the public about who we are, what we do, and how we know what we know. The public—especially those outside

the United States—need to hear about our professional organization, high ethical standards, rigorous membership requirements, ongoing professional development, campus visits, and professional preparation. And if they know who we are and don't want us to work with their student, then maybe they weren't the right client for us anyway.

3. The Rewards

So the third essential question is, if this is so complicated, why bother working internationally when there are so many students at home we could hope to work with as clients?

Working with students internationally makes us ambassadors for American education. Despite its well-documented drawbacks, American education—at the therapeutic, boarding, and university levels—is the highest quality in the world and the highest in demand. Additionally, foreign students in our universities, colleges, schools, and programs contribute billions of dollars to the American economy. Even more importantly, when students complete their studies in the U.S., they invariably return home with cherished memories of their experience in America and many of our best values, which they reflect in their lives in their own countries. Study in America is not just an education; it's an experience that no other country offers.

As for my own motivation, every time I work with a family or a student from another country and culture, I feel honored to hear their very personal stories. These students have experienced life in ways we cannot begin to imagine. When we are the trusted advisor, we get to enter their world and to make a positive difference that might change the course of their lives forever. When it comes to job satisfaction, it just doesn't get any better than that.

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