

International Student Advising: A Primer For Undergraduate Admission Consultants

by Theresa Leary M.Ed., IECA Associate Member (MA)

With a renewed growth of international students enrolling in U.S. institutions, educational consultants are seeing more opportunities to serve this client base. According to the Institute of International Education's latest Open Doors report, enrollments of new international students were up 10% in 2006-2007. This represents the first increase since the academic year 2001-2002.¹ As consultants advising international families, we not only need to know the specific policies of admission offices but also be sensitive to cultural factors.

CULTURE AND LANGUAGE

The American educational system is far more decentralized than other national systems. With over 4,000 institutions of higher education in this country, there are in all practicality 4,000 different admission policies. Even if the client is fluent in English, definitions of terms cannot be overlooked. Terms such as college vs. university, public vs. private, as well as "liberal arts" and "general education requirements" must be clarified to better inform them of their options.

We struggle with "the rankings" sometimes more so with this population as foreign nationals' knowledge of the vastness of our system is incomplete. In some cultures it is very hard to fight the desire to apply to the "top ten." The prestige factor can be very strong, so we have to deal with it even more aggressively than we do in our domestic work. Notwithstanding, community colleges have seen significant growth in international students and can provide a great entry into college life in the USA. A client of mine from Germany enrolled at Cape Cod Community College because, although her spoken English was fluent, her reading and writing skills were weak. After three semesters of improving her academic English and adapting to the campus culture, she was admitted to Colgate University and is happily enrolled there now.

WHAT SHOULD INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS LOOK FOR?

Research shows that the opportunity to find other students from their own country positively affects the self-esteem and adjustment of international students once they arrive at college.¹ The admission office can provide these statistics as well as the percentage of international students on campus. The higher this percentage, the more likely it is that a full range of international student services exist. The international student office is the focus of social and academic support and should be visited by prospective students if they have a chance to get to campus. The international admission

representative should also be sought out as they are often the only person in the office who can answer questions of concern specific to international applicants.

WHAT ARE COLLEGES LOOKING FOR IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS?

An international student is defined by citizenship. Applicants with non-U.S. passports are counted as international students. If a student holds dual citizenship, it is in their interest for financial aid purposes to apply as a U.S. citizen. Most institutions have separate application forms and/or supplements for international students and the requirements for admission can be found by following the links on the admission Web pages. Application deadlines may differ and internationals should apply well in advance to allow for time to make sure all pieces of the application are acceptable. Early decision rules may be quite different or not even allowed.

- Just as with domestic applicants, schools look at academic performance in secondary school as the best indicator of success in college. Transcripts in most cases must be translated into English and accompanied by the original language document. In some cases, transcripts must be evaluated by a professional credential evaluation service.
- English language competency can be a "deal-breaker." Writing skills in particular must be strong. The TOEFL test is required of non-native English speakers with a range of score cut-offs among institutions. Grinnell College, for example, requires a score of 83 (Internet-based) or 550 (paper-based). Sometimes colleges will accept other tests such as the British Council's IELTS.
- SAT scores are often required and in most cases are not substitutes for the TOEFL. Admission officers understand that scores may be lower than U.S. students due to language. However, in many cases, international students perform exceptionally well on these tests in the math as well as the verbal sections and are well prepared for them.
- International students may need more coaching on their essays as again, culture could hold some applicants back from what they feel as "bragging." Recently I was challenged by a client from Brussels who was reluctant to reveal his character, accomplishments, and goals in his essay. It wasn't part of his value system!

- In the same way, letters of recommendations from foreign teachers and schools may not contain the information admission counselors expect in a letter from American teachers and counselors. Good coaching from the consultant is worthwhile here.

- One last item that is required is a statement of finances or a financial aid application form. The College Board has an International Student Application for Financial Aid as well as an International Student Certification of Finances form that many colleges require of ALL international applicants whether they are applying for financial aid or not. But of course we need to check with each admission office.

So, yes, there is financial aid for international students, especially from those institutions whose mission it is to internationalize their campuses and especially from the private liberal arts colleges. Some will give full tuition and room and board! For example, Amherst College announced in April that it is now need-blind for international applicants. Exceptional academic records and high test scores are essential to receiving financial aid in the very competitive pool of international students. Look on the Web for lists of colleges offering financial aid at www.edupass.org/finaid/undergraduate.phtml.

The number of international students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States increased to a total of 582,984 in the 2006-2007 academic year.³ While most of my clients live in Europe, the top five sending countries are India, China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, followed by our neighbors Canada and Mexico. International students also are in your cities and towns at boarding schools, as expatriate professionals or as immigrants. The consultant who keeps abreast of international admissions policies and who can communicate across cultures will be a successful advisor to international students.

¹ Institute of International Education Web site:
<http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/>

² International Undergraduate Student Experiences: A Multi-National View. A paper presented at the 31st Annual NEAIR Conference. November 15, 2004. Jane Etish-Andrews, Tufts University, et.al.

³ Institute of International Education Web site:
<http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/>

Theresa specializes in international student placement and study abroad. She worked as an international admission recruiter for 15 years, lived in Brussels for over a decade, and has traveled to over 45 countries. s