Due to the proliferation of provider organizations working in the broadly-defined ‘industry’ of U.S. education abroad, it has become incredibly challenging for even the most experienced education abroad professional to differentiate organizations and to determine with whom to partner. Long-standing affiliations and professional loyalties are being tested by the arrival of a new cadre of innovative and entrepreneurial organizations and without doubt competition for students and attention is intensifying. As a result, education abroad offices are being bombarded with email solicitations, campus visit requests, ever-expanding exhibition halls, and so on. What follows, in no particular order, are a few quick tips for education abroad professionals that are hopefully timely, reasonable and worthy of consideration.

1. **Re-think the term ‘third-party provider’**.

The term ‘third-party provider’ has been a long-standing term commonly used to refer to education abroad provider organizations, but the term is misleading. The term implies that all provider organizations act as third-party agents neatly positioned between sending and receiving institutions. While many provider organizations facilitate direct enrollment, others provide all of their academic programming and thus, do not serve in any third-party capacity. Choose a term that works consistently in your program portfolio and stick with it. Some institutions have recently chosen to use the term ‘partner’ to strategically convey to students and faculty members that their institutions are partnering with reputable organizations.

2. **Find a match between your goals and their capacity.**

When deciding whether to work with a particular provider organization, it is important to determine how this organization will help further your institution’s education abroad goals. Few provider organizations are able to commit the time and effort necessary to deeply understand the goals and strategic directions of all of their sending institutions and therefore align their services in support of those goals accordingly. Perhaps also, many colleges and universities fail to take the time to share their goals with providers! If a potential provider organization appears more focused on short-term recruitment and less on helping realize your goals, move on. Remember your job is not to send them students, but to facilitate and enhance education abroad programing at your institution. If the organization is ready to help you with that, press ahead. Ask questions about how their curricular offerings complement yours, the availability of scholarships targeting particular populations, how they will bolster your promotion and outreach efforts, their utilization of technology, strategies with enrollment management, how they will augment your curriculum integration efforts, etc.

3. **Shift focus from where students study to what they study.**

We know that education abroad is not merely about getting students on planes and that our jobs are not concerned with travel and tourism. As education abroad offices transition from location-based advising to discipline-specific advising, the identification of study abroad options has shifted to become more about complementing what students are studying on our campuses or supplementing students’ education with coursework and experiences not available to them at home. If the provider organization does not utilize language consistent with higher education and if their campus representatives cannot communicate effectively with your faculty, beware. If the organization still uses language of ‘trips’ and ‘travel’, it is probably not the best provider for advancing your curriculum integrations goals.

4. **Establish a vetting mechanism.**

When researching education abroad options, students quickly realize that not all provider organizations offer comparable programming. Some are inexpensive but offer only direct enrollment options with limited student support. Others are more expensive, but offer a wide range of services and activities. In much the same way, education abroad professionals understand that providers vary and so, a review mechanism or rubric is needed to vet them. Some have used the standard four-quadrant Johari window with ‘institutional alignment’ and ‘student interest’ serving as the X and Y axes, while others have assessed providers using a normative bell curve based on such dimensions as program value, health, safety and security protocols, faculty engagement and support, program quality, ease of credit transfer, and alignment with the Forum on Education Abroad’s Standards of Good Practice and Code of Ethics. Ask for references. Engage your faculty. Whatever approach taken, ensure that the approach is used consistently and is transparent, well-understood, and aligned with your institutional goals. Use it to create a strategically balanced portfolio and also guide you on when to stop working with particular providers.
In this current era of increasing standardization, accountability and demand for transparency, it has become even more important that international educators be able to produce empirical evidence, often on demand, that reinforces the value of international education and demonstrates how our efforts enhance and extend institutional missions, values, and priorities. Provider organizations must support our offices by moving away from making empty claims and false promises that their students realize gains in intercultural competency and language proficiency, for example, without providing evidence to support these claims. While most providers can readily provide student satisfaction surveys, fewer offer assessment reports on student learning. Ask provider organizations to present evidence that their programs are in fact delivering on stated promises. Similarly, do not hesitate to request other reports, including information on scholarship funding, enrollment of underrepresented students, etc. The information provided will most certainly help you with fulfilling your reporting responsibilities to senior leadership and accrediting bodies, not to mention helping to ensure that your students are learning.

6. ASK ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION’S MISSION, VALUES AND PRIORITIES.

Be sure you know why you want to work with this particular organization and be prepared to succinctly describe the organization to your faculty and senior administration. This isn’t always easy to do. When asked to describe themselves or what makes them unique, most provider organizations reply in terms of their historical significance, their portfolio of program offerings, their advising services and scholarship amounts, or their excellent on-site staff. In other words, what makes one organization different from another? If the organization does not concisely convey what its mission is or successfully differentiate itself from others, how will you be able to do so?

7. ASSESS YOUR INSTITUTION’S COMFORT LEVEL WITH VARIOUS TYPES OF PROVIDER ORGANIZATIONS.

International educational mobility has a long history in U.S. higher education, but it was not until shortly after WWII that inter-institutional consortia began to emerge. In recent decades, there has been a proliferation of for-profit and non-profit provider organizations that offer education abroad program services to U.S. students. Some of the most affordable providers are for-profit and some of the most expensive are non-profit, and vice versa. Be sure to know where your institution stands with regard to working with providers across the various sectors.

8. INVESTIGATE WHERE THE PROVIDER HAS BEEN AND CONSIDER WHERE THEY ARE GOING.

In addition to assessing a provider’s history, reputation and credibility, it is similarly important to understand where it is currently and where it is headed as an organization. If the most rapidly growing mode of mobility on your campus is faculty-directed programming, for example, then it would be wise to assess how the provider’s programs will complement your overall portfolio and how the provider might even bolster faculty-directed program development on your campus. This could be done through customized programming, integrated teaching models and other pedagogical and structural innovations. Is the provider headed in a direction that promises new innovation that you can leverage and harness? Can it help advance curriculum integration efforts and faculty engagement at your institution? Keep in mind that education abroad professionals have long turned to provider organizations for creativity, innovation and originality and provider organizations have looked to universities and colleges for guidance, direction, and leadership.

9. INSIST THEY RESPECT YOUR SYSTEMS, STRUCTURES AND PROTOCOLS.

It is important to carefully orient provider organizations to your institution and its goals and strategic directions for internationalization. Be specific and clear about what you expect from them and what boundaries exist. For example, when meeting with potential students, many providers prefer to direct applicants to their organization’s website rather than to yours. This might present complications for your tracking, monitoring and follow-up. Is it permissible to contact faculty members directly? Can campus visits be arranged independently? How do you want to be informed of health and safety emergencies? If the provider organization has committed to working with you, then it has an obligation to understand and align its activities with your systems, structures, and protocols. Expect nothing less.

10. DISCUSS HOW THEY WILL ADVANCE YOUR PROMOTION AND OUTREACH EFFORTS.

Most provider organizations have a team of campus representatives who are assigned geographic territories for recruitment and marketing purposes. These representatives typically make periodic visits to institutions in their recruiting areas when their travel schedules permit. Many education abroad offices have felt obliged to welcome these campus visits even when the purposes or goals are unstated, rather than to insist that such visits be scheduled at a time when the visits reinforce the office’s promotion and outreach efforts. At the same time, campus visits can be quite expensive for the provider. Work together to schedule visits when they make the most sense. For many campus representatives, recruiting students is the primary objective. This means they may look to recruit where it has historically made most sense, namely among students studying the humanities and social sciences. Determine if the provider is genuinely committed to sustained outreach initiatives targeting all students, not just those already well-represented in education abroad.

For additional reading on provider organizations, please see Heyl’s 2011 AIEA Occasional Paper, Third-Party Program Providers and Education Abroad: Partner or Competitor [http://www.aieaworld.org/occasional-papers]

Anthony C. Ogden, PhD | Executive Director of Education Abroad and Exchanges | University of Kentucky | a.ogden@uky.edu
Introduction
Following recent conversations in the field about how education abroad providers and university education abroad offices can improve relations, we have created this list written by providers, for providers*. The most successful partnerships are built on a strong foundation that prioritizes open and respectful communication, shared goals, and short-term and long-term strategy discussion. We want to move beyond a relationship based on recruiting students for the short-term to a sustainable partnership that ensures mutual success and development.

1. *Let’s call ourselves education abroad organizations, not simply providers.*
The term "third-party provider" has been a long-standing term commonly used to refer to education abroad provider organizations. The term implies a transactional relationship, with all goods and services flowing in one direction. We know that’s not true. Our institutional partners inform what we do and how we do it, and vice versa. It’s about reciprocity. When something goes wrong, we can more easily help and get to the root of the issue because it is built on trust and mutual respect. When the partnership is going well, the sum is greater than its parts.

2. Align your strengths as an organization with the goals of your partner institutions.
Take the time to learn about each of your partner institutions and how best to help them meet their goals. Communicate your own organization’s mission, values and priorities. Be ready to answer their questions: How will your curricular offerings complement our existing portfolio? Do you offer scholarships matched to our needs? They should be ready to answer yours: What are your goals and how will you achieve them? What’s your process for helping students choose programs? Spend time developing your relationship with honesty and transparency.

3. Know the Forum Standards of Good Practice and use the language of higher education.
You can build and sustain credibility through developing your own set of core values and business ethics, as well as grounding your work in the Standards of Good Practice and their associated Code of Ethics. These standards apply to universities, established providers, and new providers. Ask the universities the hard questions: What is their pre-screening process before sending students abroad? How robust is their pre-departure programming and where can you complement it? Do they have a Code of Conduct that reinforces expectations abroad?

4. Remember that you and all your staff are first and foremost international educators.
The importance of participating in and contributing to the practice and research in the field of international education is paramount. Our field has a growing number of membership-based organizations and consortiums that provide excellent opportunities for both new and senior education abroad professionals. Your staff ARE your organization and must be trained to represent you well. Take care in who you choose to meet with faculty. Volunteer to work alongside your partners. Discover what your area of expertise or skill is. Share generously.

5. Be honest in your marketing and recruitment efforts.
One definition of marketing is “honestly and consistently communicating your value to those who could gain from it.” This statement can serve as a guide to our communication and marketing efforts. For instance, don’t say “1 million dollars of scholarships awarded annually” if it’s actually “up to $1 million dollars awarded annually”, and you don’t ever award that much. Don’t send non-targeted mass emails. When you visit a campus for the first time, you may not know university protocols and procedures, so do your homework. Once you know their procedures and protocols, respect them.
Ten Quick Tips for Working with Higher Education Institutions
Rich Kurtzman, MA, Barcelona Study Abroad Experience (SAE)
Kris Holloway, MPH, CISabroad

6. Think beyond the education abroad fair.
Presence at “the fair” may not be the best way to reach your target student population. Other ways to reach out to students that further your partnership could be: a webinar, classroom visits, campus-wide talk on a specific topic (translating study abroad to your resume) or your own story of successfully funding your own abroad experience. With your shared goals in mind between you and the education abroad office, reach out to other offices on campus, student groups and faculty. Get some basic permission from them before blanketing the campus with marketing materials.

7. Negotiate - don’t dictate - how and when campus visits happen.
Set goals for your visits and keep in mind that each visit should build on previous visits. Specifically:
  o **Remind your university partners that it’s okay to say “no.”** If they don’t have time to help you organize a productive visit, ask them when a better time might be or what could be accomplished remotely.
  o **Create realistic expectations about visits.** Help the universities appreciate the fact that your CEO will not be the one to make every visit, and that you are sending someone newer to the field. Train them well.
  o **Don’t take a lukewarm response or awkward meeting personally.** You don’t know what your colleague’s day was like before you got there.
  o **Run the visit effectively.** Keep to your stated goals and time. Build on work that has gone before.

8. Most universities have a vetting mechanism and an approved list. Ask how they determine their portfolio and learn how to maximize your presence if you are on it.
If you aren’t on the approved list, ask to understand what the university values in a partnership. If you are on the list, remember that more programs approved does not always mean more students. Do you see signs that the university is open to new ideas or are they set in the “way it’s always been?” What is your strategic position within the portfolio? Not only might this confirm what you are doing well and in what direction you could grow your partnership, but it can also serve to re-align your organization with a long-standing university partner.

9. Expect from your university partners what they expect from you, especially when it comes to faculty-directed programs.
Universities decide on program partners based on our ability to answer tough questions about how staff are trained, how prepared we are for emergencies and how flexible we are. We can and should ask the same of them. Ask about the university’s emergency response plan and risk management protocol. If your location-specific standards are more robust, figure out how to incorporate them. Ask how proposed programs are vetted to ensure they further students’ academic and cultural objectives. Ask how the university prepares its faculty. This can help you know how to support them through attempted suicide, culture shock, illnesses, bus accidents, and all the other incidents that can and will occur. Lastly, if a university puts out an RFP, and you run the current program, you may feel betrayed. Know that universities have to re-assess, and balance inclusions with the bottom line just like we do.

10. Prepare timely, measured responses in times of challenge. Even if you lose money. Even if it isn’t fair. Even if it isn’t your fault.
Serious incidents and mistakes happen; the ultimate measure of your organization will be in how you respond during times of challenge. It’s during tough times when any partnership is put to the test: the quality of your programming, the training of your on-site staff, the robustness of your risk management plan, and the agility of your response. Part of being a good partner means staying calm and focused during emergencies and perceived emergencies. When dealing with upset university stakeholders (especially parents and students), make sure your frontline staff has the interpersonal skills and the student services training to handle it.

*See Anthony Ogden’s (University of Kentucky) "Ten Quick Tips for Working with Education Abroad Provider Institutions."