

## Pathway Provider Partnerships in Higher Education: What Institutions Should Consider

**CHANCES ARE**, if you work in higher education leadership and especially in international education in the United States, that you have been approached by turn-key international recruiting companies regarding a partnership to develop an international enrollment program at your institution. These companies generally provide a variety of programs and recruit a wide range of students, including pathway, conditional admit, bridge program, and full admit students. In this article, I focus on companies that run pathway programs at U.S. institutions and I offer the institutional perspective as well as some general advice.

A relatively new type of partnership for U.S. campuses, pathway provider companies typically recruit international students with lower English proficiency than is required to be fully admitted to the institution. Pathway students are generally admitted on a conditional basis and spend their first year at the institution, the pathway year, in a special program to gain the required English proficiency for full admission, participate in classes designed to help them understand the expectations in U.S. higher education and culture, and complete some first-year academic coursework. Upon completing the pathway program successfully, students are fully admitted to the institution and generally enter their second year of attaining an undergraduate degree.

Often, the decision to outsource recruiting to a pathway company is made to rapidly increase international student enrollment for both financial reasons and to enhance diversity, global learning, and a global campus environment. There are many different reasons and circumstances that may lead institutional leadership to consider partnering with a pathway and recruiting company. In institutions where overall enrollment has been decreasing or stagnating, pathway programs are seen as a quick solution to address a loss in revenue, especially when international student recruiting through the regular admissions process is not generating the desired student numbers. Pathway providers can certainly cast a wider net by recruiting students with lower English proficiency than required for full degree admission. Leaders at institutions that do not have their own international student recruiting infrastructure

may find it more reassuring to partner with a company that can step in with experience, a wide recruiting network, infrastructure, a business plan, and a promise of quick results than to invest in a home-grown approach that may take several years to develop and does not guarantee success. Some leaders in higher education may view their current position at a particular institution as a stepping stone to a higher level position at another institution and need to demonstrate accomplishments in a short time frame. Some institutions may see it as simply an additional strategy to recruit international students and expand their reach.

Pathway programs typically become integrated with academic programs and student support services at an institution; therefore, they greatly impact teaching and learning as well as the resources in offices providing student support. This impact should be carefully considered and evaluated before engaging with pathway providers.

Most pathway programs operate on campus and closely collaborate with an academic department to provide English language instruction and introductory courses focused on succeeding in U.S. higher education. The company typically hires its own employees to run the pathway program and to collaborate with campus entities. The employees also develop marketing materials for recruiting students to the institution, host visits by recruiting agents, and participate in recruiting events, such as fairs, around the world. The pathway provider partners with recruiting agents around the world and has access to a wide network. Typically, the pathway and recruiting operations within the company are



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part of a larger parent company that may be engaged in a wide range of international education ventures; therefore, these companies provide the infrastructure, efficiency, and financing to not only offer quick results, but also to provide additional incentives to an institution. These may include assistance in building new residence halls and other facilities necessary to enroll an increasing number of international students. They may also include investment in additional admissions staff and resources, marketing and branding, and opportunities for other international initiatives.

### **What to Consider**

Pathway programs are complex operations that can greatly impact academics and student support services at an institution. It is therefore imperative that leaders in higher education are fully aware of the benefits and consequences of such partnerships and have the opportunity to fully evaluate the potential impact. Following are a few items to consider that are potential benefits, risks, and considerations for higher education institutions.

### **Benefits:**

- Low financial risk to the institution if the contract is developed with this in mind as well as a way to end the contract if specified deliverables are not met satisfactorily within a certain time frame.
- Immediate access to a wide network of recruiting agents and quick development of a recruiting infrastructure as opposed to developing an in-house infrastructure and strategy that may take many years to become fully established.
- A for-profit company can move fast and deliver results quickly compared with a higher education institution.
- Enhanced visibility, branding, and marketing.
- Access to a potentially motivated and academically strong student population that otherwise would not consider the institution due to low English proficiency, especially if the institution does not offer a noncredit intensive English language program.
- Financial resources for the academic department that provides the intensive English and academic enrichment classes as part of the pathway program.

■ Other incentives provided by the company to build infrastructure on campus and additional global initiatives.

■ Can elevate the visibility of international students and make them a priority for everyone at the institution much more quickly than internal staff members in an international student services and international admissions office may be able to accomplish.

**Risks:**

■ Lack of control over recruiting practices, the manner in which the institution is represented at recruiting events, and the financial arrangements between recruiting agents and the families as well as the agents and the company.

■ The pathway employees on campus implementing and managing the program are accountable to the company, not the institution. Therefore, the institution has no control over employee actions and behavior.

■ Pathway employees work directly with entities across the campus on behalf of the pathway students; not all international students on campus. This can skew the perceptions by faculty and staff regarding international student needs on campus. It can

also create tension between the staff members who are responsible for international student services on campus addressing the wide range of needs of all international students.

■ A pathway program may compete directly with a noncredit intensive English language program on campus, diverting revenue from an institutional program and limiting the program's opportunity to offer conditional admission to students.

■ Admissions staff may be required to give priority processing to pathway student applications, thereby delaying processing for more qualified students who could be full admits, running the risk of losing those applicants to other institutions.

■ Offering less qualified students admission may impact the institution's reputation with students who can directly enroll at the institution and their parents and agents. It may create the perception that the institution is not competitive, especially in Asia.

■ Pathway programs may create two separate international student "communities" on campus that may experience conflict. The full admit students may feel that the pathway students tarnish their reputation and cause faculty and fellow students to have the mis-

conception that all international students have low English proficiency and need additional support.

■ Pathway students tend to have a greater need for student support programs, which can easily overwhelm those programs' resources, and they may need more support than a faculty member can provide in a class with a large enrollment of pathway students.

**Laying Groundwork**

There are several other considerations that each institution should take into account when deciding whether or not to establish a pathway program:

■ Evaluate the following: if the institution were to invest the same amount of resources to establish the infrastructure in-house versus outsourcing it, would it be better for the institution in the long run to control its own recruiting strategy and increased support structures for all international students? Conduct a cost-benefit analysis with specific enrollment goals. Generally, the pathway provider earns all tuition revenue during the pathway year and the institution earns the nonresident tuition revenue from the subsequent years of study. Financial arrangements can vary greatly, though, and are generally proprietary information.

■ Conduct research regarding the reputation of the pathway provider and the experience of other institutions partnering with the company in the United States or abroad. Institutions in the United Kingdom and Australia have had pathway programs for a long time and a few U.S. institutions also have experience now.

■ Become a member of the American International Recruitment Council (AIRC), which provides peer-reviewed independent certification for recruiting agencies to ensure ethical practices and transparency and educates institutions of higher education regarding partnering with these entities. AIRC also offers membership to pathway programs.

■ Determine how a pathway program vets its agencies. If your institution has chosen, for example, to utilize AIRC-certified agencies, does the pathway program require the same level of review?

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- Determine how the pathway provider will ensure recruitment of a diverse international student population and not only recruit students from China who are relatively easy to recruit compared with other nationalities (due to the sheer number of Chinese students looking to earn their undergraduate degrees abroad).
- Outline how student progress will be monitored in the pathway program and once students are fully admitted to the institution.
- Determine how the pathway provider will collaborate with the institution to ensure student retention to graduation.
- Determine to what degree the pathway program will be involved in the curriculum of the pathway courses or whether instruction and learning outcomes are solely at the discretion of the academic department.
- Determine the support structures the pathway provider will put in place for students who do not successfully complete the program and cannot enroll at the institution. This often has a

negative effect on international students, who may not want to return to their home countries having failed, and can lead to depression and despair or possibly other harmful results, including suicide. Ensure that a strong support and advising system is in place.

- Outline the expectations for the pathway program and course of action if fraudulent documents are submitted for full admission to the institution.
- Outline the expectations of pathway program employees in actively supporting campus offices to provide the specialized support to pathway students with limited English skills. For example, will pathways staff provide an interpreter during a student emergency (if necessary), communicate with family members, provide increased support to a student who is experiencing an emergency, etc.

#### And finally...

Before contract negotiations begin, the decision to partner with a pathway provider

company should be fully researched and vetted—not only with entities and key stakeholders across the institution, but also with institutions that have experience working with the particular company and through the AIRC network. Institutions should ensure that the pathway program staff will meet certain expectations as outlined above and that there is a representative of the institution who serves as a “supervisor” of sorts for the program staff. The long-term impact of enrolling pathway students should be considered as well as retention of the students to graduation. The desire for a quick fix in terms of enrollment and tuition revenue should not keep institutions from doing due diligence and moving forward without consulting with the various stakeholders on campus and other institutions with this type of partnership experience. **IE**

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