

# Alternative Solutions

Some U.S. institutions are looking to recruit without using overseas agents. Several strategies are growing in popularity.



**DEVELOPING A WORKABLE INTERNATIONAL RECRUITMENT STRATEGY** for a college or university can be expensive and difficult. But, international study is booming—perhaps more than ever before. According to the Institute of International Education 2013 *Open Doors* report, 819,644 international students studied at U.S. colleges and universities in the 2012–13 academic year, marking a 7 percent increase over the prior year, which is a record high, and noting that 40 percent more international students study at U.S. campuses than a decade ago.

The survey reported that the top reason for the increase in U.S.-bound students was active recruitment efforts and greater visibility of U.S. campuses abroad, which raises the question: how are universities achieving those milestones?


Increasingly, U.S. schools are finding new ways to recruit international students. Many institutions are diversifying international enrollment strategies with a more personal touch than in the past—and many are doing this without using agents, which may be a popular choice among many institutions but not necessarily so among others. Whether adding the more personal touch to recruiting means opening a permanent office abroad (sometimes partnering with other universities), using more social media, touring more frequently, or recruiting current international students to speak on their behalf, admissions officers say new ideas and techniques are working, helping them attract more of that growing number of international students who hope to study in the United States.

## Increasing a Presence

Born and raised in India, Girish Ballolla knows firsthand the value of study in the United States: he did it himself, receiving undergraduate and graduate degrees in biology and higher education administration from the University of Kansas. After working in human resources and sales/marketing in the United States, he decided to change course. He founded Gen Next Education, Inc. four years ago to help U.S. universities internationalize their recruiting efforts.

Gen Next offers an International Knowledge Center in Bangalore, India, which works with partner universities to help recruit Indian students through formal informational sessions, in-person visits, social networking and events, and drop-in resources for students and families.

“It’s expensive and tough to navigate business practices in India,” Ballolla says. “Our knowledge center functions as a base of operations in India. We offer the facility and staff, and we provide our members with a broad range of services.”



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“You still need to travel to India to engage students, but it can only be once or twice a year” he says, noting that Indian students don’t like talking on the phone and don’t always reply to e-mail messages. “We continue the engagement on the ground, helping students understand partner institutions, encouraging them to apply and work with admissions, and keeping them engaged so they can make a decision on our partner schools.” Currently, the company has 12 partner institutions and plans to max out at about 20.

“We do not consider ourselves as recruiters for our universities,” Ballolla explains. “Our focus is more on supporting our partners with brand building, marketing/outreach efforts, and pre-admissions support. As such, we work with our partners and help them understand India, the student decision factors, etc. and help them develop and execute on their recruiting strategies

accordingly. Once students are in the application process, we help our universities personalize their relationship with the student/parents by being a constant source of engagement between each other—this usually leads to a higher conversion rate.”

Gen Next counsels Indian students and helps them identify their program interests and other factors that go into deciding where they should apply. “If our partner universities meet those needs, we help the students with their application process to those institutions and if not, we still help the students with the process, at the university of their choice—all at no cost to the student or the family,” Ballolla says.

There is no financial incentive for Gen Next to steer a student toward any particular university, so they don’t. Instead, they act almost like a guidance counselor to students, which is an area of need for Indian students.

“One of the main differences between us and an agency is that we don’t ‘push’ a student to any particular institution since we are not compensated on a per-student basis,” explains Ballolla. “Since we do not charge the students any money and since we do not have a financial incentive from the universities, high schools in India are eager to work with us to help them provide much-needed guidance counseling to their students. Outside of international schools that provide the IGCSE or IB curriculums, most Indian curriculum schools do not offer guidance counseling to students interested in studying abroad. We serve as a *de facto* guidance counselor at many of these high schools by conducting workshops, providing resource material to students, etc.”

A similar effort exists in Vietnam, where Mark Ashwill is the managing director of Capstone Vietnam in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. “Vietnam has become a very competitive market in recent years, and the reality is institutions that wish to recruit here have to do much more than simply sign agent agreements,” he says. “They have to develop a recruitment strategy that includes armchair, helicopter marketing, and other marketing and promotion activities.”

Launched in 2009 with two partners (a university and an education company), Capstone Vietnam has a full-time staff of 15 and also has student interns. “We (now) have more than 100 partners, including intensive English programs, community colleges, and four-year colleges and universities mainly in the U.S. but also in some other countries, including Canada and the UK,” says Ashwill.

Like Gen Next, Capstone established its International Academic Centers (IACs) to provide a physical location for students and their families to visit. “They serve as a home base and an incubator from which an institution or organization can promote its programs and services in Vietnam and even regionally,” he says. Each partner university is provided with a local staff member who’s exclusive to that school, and works with students and their families to individualize the study abroad experience and make a match between student goals and university potential.

“The IACs are shared facilities from which members can promote their programs and services in Vietnam and even regionally,” Ashwill explains. “For example, one university has a Hanoi-based country coordinator who represents that university exclusively and recruits throughout Vietnam. Another institution has a Ho Chi Minh City-based regional outreach coordinator who recruits in Vietnam and elsewhere in East and Southeast Asia. Both are employed by Capstone Vietnam but report to the respective international directors at their institutions. They also report to Capstone’s managing director and deputy director. Their services are provided free of charge to students and parents as they take no commissions from schools. They are full-time representatives rather than agents.”

Gen Next’s Ballolla says that personalized touch is critical. “Our staff is engaged with our high schools,” he says. “They keep the conversation [between university staff visits to India] alive. We also use our center for hosting receptions for alumni and friends, which gives us another layer of relationship building. We know what each university expects, and we can articulate that to each student. We act as a conduit for questions and answers.”

Ballolla’s staff includes one American and three Indian professionals. He says his members pay an annual fee of \$20,000, which is likely cheaper than the cost of several tours through the country in a year (members do pay for their own travel costs when they visit).

A higher level of membership, the strategic partner membership, provides Gen Next’s partners support to execute on their broader internationalization agendas as it related to India, which can include alumni engagement, helping develop study abroad programs for their students and faculty, support to engage governmental, nongovernmental, or corporate constituents, etc., costs \$30,000 per year. “We’ve helped our partners develop and execute customized study abroad programs, we’ve connected our partners with corporations in India who are looking for executive or technical education programs, and we’ve helped facilitate faculty collaboration with Indian counterparts,” says Ballolla.

And the numbers, he says, speak for themselves. “One recruitment officer can’t possibly talk to as many students as they should,” he says. “And culturally, parents here are very involved with their 16- and 17-year-old children. For study abroad especially, you have to engage them, and the only way to do that is to be on the ground.”

Ashwill agrees. “In what’s become a highly competitive market, it’s vital that schools follow up with prospective students with someone on the ground who speaks their language.”

## Unique Challenges

Paul McVeigh, associate vice president of Northern Virginia Community College (NVCC), says engagement is really the key when it comes to recruiting international students without using an agent, but he faces a unique challenge.

“The concept of a U.S. community college is not well-known throughout the world,” he says. “People in Vietnam know about it thanks to decades of immigration and the word spreading there. But other countries don’t translate the words ‘community college’ favorably.”

Still, 2,000 of the school’s more than 70,000 are from overseas, so something’s working.

“One of the well-known work-arounds for the use of agents is simply to have a contract with a marketing representative,” he says, explaining that he’s not permitted to work with agents who charge commission. “That in-country branding gets the name out there and is more sustained than showing up for a recruitment fair, where you’re there for a few days and then disappear.” In Turkey and Vietnam, he’s contracted with firms that meet with and counsel students and help spread the word about the college through local media.

“That’s helped,” he says. “It’s not one thing you’re doing such as a recruitment tour, but it’s an additional kind of approach that puts the identity of the institution out there in the public.”

He’s also had luck explaining his transfer agreements with four-year universities to overseas students, many of whom see the value in starting at NVCC and graduating from George Mason University or the University of Virginia, for example. Their parents certainly understand, says McVeigh.

“The value proposition is apparent,” he explains. “We may not be able to offer a scholarship to a student, but reduced tuition to the tune of one-third of that of another university is significant.”

Working with those partner institutions has helped spread the word; instead of NVCC telling students about guaranteed transfer or dual-admission programs, the four-year university partners do it, lending credibility in regions that don’t understand the concept of a community college. “We try to attract students by associating our name with institutions who work with us,” he says. “If we can market together with a four-year institution





in the region, we try to do that. The university is saying, 'Here's another pathway to us.'"

He's also found progress advertising in U.S.-distributed publications that target overseas citizens living in the States. "We put ads in their newspapers here," he says. "In the case of Vietnam, we'll do that before we go to a fair there. Relatives living here then take action on that with their families at home. It's a way to create a buzz about our presence where it might be most useful. Families already here tend to support students who come over to study. Relatives house students and that sort of thing." So their influence overseas is great.

### In-Person From Afar

Other schools are using technology to visit with students even when they can't physically go to another country. Wesley Roy, director of international relations at Johnson & Wales University in Bristol, Rhode Island, says on-screen information sessions conducted via Skype or Adobe Connect have proven very popular and effective.

"We conduct about 20 of those sessions per year," he says. "The audience can be as large as 70 people or as small as one. They have their camera and I have mine, so they can see me present my university, and I can see them asking questions."

It works, he says, for one simple reason. "There is a lot of literature out there," he explains. "There are a lot of websites and

there's a lot of admission marketing material. Students want to see a face."

He has the most success when he is able to include a current student in the online presentation, and it's something students are more than willing to do. "Prospective students can ask that student questions in their own language and connect that way," he says. "They can e-mail the student or follow up with me, and we can send literature afterwards. I'm a real person. It's important when someone does travel to make connections that way, and then we follow up with the Skype conversations."

Setting up the online presentations is simple, he says, and it normally takes no more than two or three weeks from proposition to event, even in countries where the technology isn't as up-to-date as in the United States. "We set up the technology piece with the host institution, test it, and then do the presentation," he says.

"Even in the sense of providing a service to our overseas constituents, it's a nice thing to do," he explains. "It's effective. I'd tell anyone looking for ways to stretch their recruitment dollars to use technology."

IE

**KIM FERNANDEZ** is a freelance writer in Bethesda, Maryland. Her last article for *IE* was "New Tools of the Trade" in the intensive language supplement that accompanied the March/April 2013 issue. She also wrote "All Smiles" in the current July/August 2014 issue that accompanies this supplement.



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