

By Dana Wilkie

From East to West: Trends in Chinese Student Recruiting

Chinese students are heading to Western universities, including the United States, in droves, which is a boon for international student recruiters. But are institutions relying on too many students from one nation? And how can campuses help better integrate the Chinese students they've recruited since there may be a significant Chinese population on campus?

FOR MANY YOUNG ADULTS IN CHINA, admission to top Chinese universities is intensely competitive—and many students look to universities abroad, including U.S. universities, for a brighter future to reach their educational and career goals.

Chinese students who have been seeking higher education opportunities abroad have been a dream opportunity for international admissions officers at U.S. colleges and universities, who have steadily lured China's growing middle class to their institutions.

Yet as the Chinese student population at U.S. schools has grown, so have admissions challenges.

For one thing, Chinese students' interest in U.S. schools is so robust that some admissions offices are ac-

tually scaling back their recruiting in China in hopes of better diversifying their campuses. And U.S. admissions officers sometimes find that today's crop of Chinese applicants may look great on paper, but once they enroll, a lack of English proficiency and soft skills can make the transition to U.S. campus life difficult. Finally, the stark differences between the U.S. and Chinese educational systems make it difficult to ascertain which Chinese applicants will be the most successful once abroad.

Best Practices to Recruit Chinese Students

- Translate material into the local language to help parents understand the value of your institution and promote sharing of your information broadly. "While your applicant must know English well enough to perform in your classrooms, focusing solely on that severely limits your marketing opportunities," he said.
- Recruit from second- and third-tier cities where the competition from other U.S. universities is not as fierce and where communities are eager to meet Americans who rarely travel to their region.
- Short video testimonials are very helpful for parents and students.

- Use Chinese social media channels such as WeChat and Weibo. "The WeChat social media platform has grown dramatically in the past two to three years," Waxman said. "WeChat has not yet figured out how to make it easy for organizations—as opposed to people—to engage on the platform, but changes to the platform will likely be made in the next few years to make this kind of promotion easier. As it stands now, we are all trying our best to build followers and engage Chinese students and parents on a public WeChat account."
- Partner with a small, focused and strong agent network. Studies suggest that 75

percent of undergraduate students in China are using agents to help them identify good university options and to complete their applications and visa paperwork correctly, Waxman said. "Since so many graduate and undergraduate Chinese students use agents, this is a recruiting channel that must be considered," he said. "U.S. universities need strong, reliable relationships with Chinese agents to be effective in this country. Using AIRC [American International Recruitment Council] or other sources to confirm the reliability of your agents is critical. And regular communication to manage that recruiting channel is a must if you want this option to be effective."

These tips were provided by **BENJAMIN WAXMAN**, CEO of INTEAD.

“Where U.S. institutions want to see individual essays about personal growth and curiosity, Chinese students typically focus on academics and testing and are not expected to think about personal narratives,” said Benjamin Waxman, CEO of Salem, Massachusetts-based INTEAD, which offers schools recruitment marketing tools. “Where U.S. institutions want teacher recommendations, Chinese students often sit in classrooms of 150 to 300 students with one teacher, [who] simply cannot and do not write recommendations. And when Chinese students find ‘alternative’ ways to complete the application requirements, we Westerners cry foul for ‘cheating’ or ‘fabricating’ documents.”

Saturation?

While U.S. institutions face increasing competition from other nations for Chinese students—notably from Australia, the UK, France, Canada, and Germany—the U.S. continues to be the destination of choice for the majority of Chinese students, Waxman said.

Between 2008 and 2015, the number of Chinese students in U.S. schools more than tripled to 304,040. Today, Chinese students comprise the largest group of international pupils in the United States: Almost one in every three international students at U.S. colleges and universities is from China, according to the November 2015 *Open Doors* report, published by the Institute of International Education, with support from a grant from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at the U.S. Department of State. For some students and even admissions experts, which translates into a lack of international diversity—especially at top-tier schools where Chinese students tend to gravitate.

“Many institutions are finding that they have too many Chinese students on campus compared to students from other countries,” Waxman said. “So, one of the latest trends in recruiting from China is to not recruit so much from China. U.S. institutions want more balance in the classroom.”

Jennifer Gruenewald is director of International Student and Scholar Services at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s Cen-



Tracy Ren

ter for International Education. Between 2010 and 2015, the Chinese student population at the school more than quadrupled from 49 to 202.

“We’ve heard from many students that they do not want to be at a school with too many Chinese students,” Gruenewald said. “We try to maintain a balance of recruiting where there is great demand—such as in China and India—and where there is less demand but opportunities for increased international diversity on our campus.”

High Expectations

Tracy Ren left Beijing in 1993 to study for her MBA at Southern Illinois University. Today, she is co-founder and CEO of Circle of Moms, an online publication aimed at Chinese families sending their children to U.S. schools.

One of the things Ren notices about her subscribers—there are 150,000 of them—is that parents often gravitate toward top-tier colleges without researching if the school is the best fit for their child. Hence, she said, a lot of very good schools are missing out on talented Chinese students.

“Chinese parents to the *U.S. News & World Report* college rankings and tend to aim at the top ones,” Ren said. “Oftentimes they will be disappointed because those top schools are so difficult to get into and [if a student enrolls] that school may not be the most suitable for their children. Columbia University may not have the best engineering program and another [top school] may not have the best psychology program.”

Ren said the vast majority of Chinese students would do very well—and be quite happy—at lower-tier schools, even if those schools aren’t Ivy League institutions. She said admissions officers need to do a better job of describing their schools’ missions and strengths, and how both can meet a child’s need. They need to define what differentiates their campus from others, she said, and provide parents with detailed information on each school’s majors and fields of study.

“Chinese parents are getting so much information every day from agents and brokers, but the difficulty for these families is how to identify—through all of this overload of information—the right school. If a college’s strategy is to recruit more and better qualified students, they really need to present their uniqueness and how their school is different from the others.”

Follow Up on Leads Quickly

That starts with follow-up, said Waxman, who noted that a surprising number of admissions officers fail to properly circle back with Chinese parents after meeting them at a college fair or on campus.

“Set up a system to capture leads and follow up with them quickly,” he said. “We are always surprised by the number of institutions traveling and recruiting in China without the ability to capture or follow up with the leads. It’s almost as if some of the travelers are just taking the trip because they want to see China and have forgotten how recruiting actually works.”

Samuel Vetrak is CEO of student marketing at Bridge Education Group, which contracts with U.S. universities to recruit Chinese students. Vetrak, who is based in Vienna, Austria, and also has an office in Tianjin, China. He said the advice to keep your agent network “small, focused and strong” is critical in a country where there are now 26 percent more licensed education agents than there were in 2012.

“This creates an unclear, hard-to-orient situation for U.S. recruiters as to who to work with in order to maintain quality agent and sending partners in China,” he said. “There are over 1,000 education agents

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in the country and they vary in quality, reliability, credentials, licensing, size, marketing reach and English speaking ability.”

As a result, he said, it’s critical that admissions officers be on the ground in China, frequently.

“China is rooted in and works through relations,” he said. “As such, in-person contact is irreplaceable. Marketing visits do more than remote meetings and calls do more than emails.”

The Third-Party Interview

In addition to using agents to prepare for the SAT and the Test of English as a Foreign Language, a growing number of Chinese parents are hiring people to conduct videotaped interviews of their children that are then sent to a school’s admissions office. These so-called “third-party interviews” serve several purposes. For one, they help admissions officers—who don’t have the time to honor interview requests from all China’s applicants—to see the student in “action.” The officer can assess whether students who scored high on entrance exams can also speak English proficiently and can participate in class discussions.

Moreover, if the interviewee’s application essay was flawless, but her spoken English



Chinese students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

isn’t up to par, it can raise the question whether the student’s essay was ghostwritten by hired agents.

According to a January 2016 article in the *New York Times*, the chief executive of an interviewing company called InitialView, said that in 2013, more than 6,000 applications from China included an InitialView interview and that by 2014, the number topped 17,000. According to Chinese admissions agents, the Times wrote, more than a third of the 100 top-rated U.S. colleges and universities recommend third-party interviews.

Admissions officers are also increasingly conducting Skype interviews with college admissions officers.

“Language proficiency scores [from Chi-

nese students] continue to decline,” said Tim Urbonya, executive director of international education at the University of Wisconsin Colleges, where the Chinese population has grown from a handful of students five or six years ago to more than 120 this fall. “We just enrolled a student who scored 5.5 on the IELTS but when tested with the iTEP test upon arrival, his level was just above that of a beginner. We are putting more stock in Skype interviews to help verify the student’s language levels.”

Other Trends

The decline in English proficiency isn’t the only troubling trend admissions officers see as Chinese students apply to, and enroll in, their colleges and universities. They note that there’s often a disconnect between how Chinese students are trained to study, take tests and participate in classes, and how their U.S. instructors want them to study, take tests, and participate.

For one thing, test-taking in the Chinese education system tends to focus on rote memorization rather than analytical or communication skills. To be admitted to a Chinese university, students sit for the intensely competitive college admissions test, known as the “gaokao,” which often requires years of study and requires memorization of arcane things such as seventh century poetry.

In addition, educational choice is somewhat lacking in China. Students are assigned to universities based on their gaokao scores, which in part determine what they’re allowed to study. Campus life can consist of strict curfews, mandatory classes on Marxist and

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military theory, and a dearth of educational creativity that leaves students ill-prepared for entry into U.S. schools that demand critical thinking, independent thought and creativity.

And once Chinese students are on campus, Urbonya said, they seem increasingly eager to socialize exclusively with others from China.

“As at other institutions, we are seeing a declining interest on the part of Chinese students to mix and mingle with other students—above and beyond the natural language and cultural barriers,” he said. “They simply prefer to stick to themselves.”

All these things—the lack of integration with non-Chinese students, the rote approach to test-taking, and an educational history that discourages critical thought or problem-solving—have created what Urbonya calls a “growing number of Chinese students who do not seem to have any direc-

Tips for Integrating Chinese Students on Your Campus

- Food counts for a lot. Provide them a welcoming environment at your campus eateries with food Chinese people often find at home.
- During new student orientation, be sure a Chinese speaker is present to help them feel at home from the start and ensure your new arrivals understand all of the services and processes around campus that will help them get involved. There is a lot to get used to when they first arrive and if your student groups, sports, community service activities or cultural events are a mystery due to language barriers, they will likely remain a mystery for a long time.
- Hold a special orientation explaining American classroom expectations around participation and the Socratic method of teaching. Culturally, Chinese students are not trained to express their ideas and participate in class the way Americans do.
- Provide writing support to help them with their academic assignments. If possible, have a Chinese speaker available to help.
- Provide each Chinese student with a peer conversation partner who can help them improve their English. Give them a Starbucks gift card to get the pair started and encourage them to meet regularly. Check in to see that this is actually happening.
- Host a special evening for them with the university’s president at a campus cultural event. They will feel welcomed and honored.
- Create a system to help Chinese students spend American holidays with American families or church groups.

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Using Social Media to Recruit Chinese Students

By Charlotte West

Since 2009 the Chinese government has blocked access to many foreign websites and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Google as part of its Internet censorship policies. In response, students have flocked to local providers. Recruiters and marketing experts say that it's necessary for institutions wanting to reach Chinese students to have a presence on local networks such as messaging app WeChat, microblogging site Weibo, and video site Youku.

"Social media is not the only channel that the Chinese students and families are using to choose foreign institutions, but it is very important at the initial decisionmaking stage to learn about what's out there. With the numbers of (high-school age) students declining in China, social media adds to the points of contact for overseas schools to connect with the students," says Angela Zhao, senior project manager at Arizona State University. "In China social media must be used in combination with other recruiting methods, such as in-country visits and long-term relationship development."

Many Chinese social media sites are similar to their foreign counterparts, but managing Chinese platforms requires local expertise. "Within China a different platform is required to reach and attract your target audience, swapping out YouTube for Youku, etc., but then there are platforms like WeChat that offer a unique set of functionality and a subsequent challenge in terms of resource, content, and the ability to react in real time with local language-speaking staff," says Anthony Lee, digital marketing director of the UK-based Study Group.

"As the two main established social media platforms in China, Weibo and WeChat offer great potential opportunities for Chinese student recruitment. WeChat has more than 650 million monthly active

users, whereas Weibo has 468 million," adds Jemma Davies, international education marketing manager at SMRS Ltd in Manchester, United Kingdom.

She says that WeChat is considered to be the most sought after social media platform for Chinese students on a day-to-day basis because it allows them to remain in contact with their parents: "As a result the parents who in some capacity will financially support the students use the platform."

She adds that being active on WeChat and other platforms can help foreign institutions build a reputation within China. "Creating an official presence on WeChat enables a university to build its brand awareness among the family members of the prospective students. This is especially useful because, except for the very top universities, the brand awareness many universities enjoy in the West does not exist in the Far East," Davies says.

The University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, Canada, has created a Weibo channel where students can ask questions about UBC and join a community of their peers. They are also active on Youku, where students can view their videos. Jessica Allen, social media coordinator in the UBC Office of Recruitment Marketing and Prospective Student Engagement, advises engaging current students in social media efforts.

"The channels are run by a student employee who can read and write in simplified Chinese characters, who works with our advisers to translate their answers to complex admissions questions," she says.

In addition to social media platforms, Quick Response (QR) codes, which can be scanned by a smartphone, are still popular in China. According to Zhao, institutions can use them to collect student data. They also allow students to easily capture an institution's webpage.

tion about what they want to do in life and who seem to lack any intrinsic motivation."

"It is no longer possible to assume the old stereotypes about Chinese students—that they're strong in math and science, overall they do well academically, they're highly motivated, with good reading skills," Urbonya said. "You can't assume any of this anymore and that makes our work more challenging. Having lived and worked in China from 1987 through 2001, I find the attitudes of many of these students perplexing."

Ren said she is trying to impress on her Chinese subscribers the importance that U.S. colleges and universities place on "soft skills."

"People are talking about soft skills a lot lately in China—teamwork, leadership skills, communication skills, presentation skills, problem-solving skills," she said. "But that can't be measured or quantified and that makes parents and students quite confused at some points, and worried most of the time. People don't know how to prepare for that. We advise parents to look at soft skills early on, not just before applying to college."

Integrating Chinese Students on Campus

With the large number of incoming Chinese students on U.S. campuses, many institutions are grappling with ways to better integrate them to U.S. campus culture.

"Many U.S. institutions rely on just a few countries as sources for their international students. It is common, when a large contingent of students comes from a single region or country that the students will congregate together, reducing the amount of time they spend integrating into the campus community," Waxman said. "Though they are motivated to improve their English and you really want their international experiences to be part of the educational experience of everyone on campus, human tendencies to gravitate toward the easy and familiar undermine our best efforts." **IE**

DANA WILKIE is a freelance writer in in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. Her last article for *International Educator* was "Assessment 101: Measuring the Success International Student Integration," which was published in the September/October 2016 issue.

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