Agent Provocative

Using agents for international recruiting is a well-established key for opening markets in several regions of the world—and many nations' universities use them. But it remains controversial in the United States despite some recent incremental shifts in attitudes.

BY DANA WILKIE

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The turning point for Linda McKinnish Bridges came the day she heard a northern Chinese high school principal effuse about the lengths he would go to get his students into reputable U.S. institutions like Wake Forest University, where Bridges is associate dean for international admissions.

The high school, the principal told the translator in the room, would do anything necessary—including changing students' transcripts—so that agents working for the students' families could present the best possible college application. The translator repeated the principal's comment in English, sanitizing the bit about transcript doctoring.

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But Bridges, who speaks fluent Mandarin, understood the principal perfectly.

“I heard this and said to myself, ‘Wake Forest will not be receiving any students from this school,’” Bridges recalls. “I’ve been around Chinese culture for several decades, and I know when I have an applicant for whom an agent has written an application. One tell-tale sign is essay sentences that start with participle phrases, a linguistic complexity that doesn’t exist in Chinese. It enrages me when I see so many applications that were obviously either written or polished by agents.”

Students and schools around the world—not just in China—have long relied on agents to either open U.S. university doors for applicants, or to recruit foreign students to a campus. Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Canada are among the countries that have adopted the sometimes controversial practice so they can thrive in the increasingly competitive market for overseas students. Education leaders in these nations acknowledge the downsides of using agents—dishonest applications, for instance, or students who are poor fits for schools—but they also say the practice, which some U.S. schools have adopted, can be improved with regulation and certification programs.

“In the UK, the use of agents is something not all are happy with, but they have to live with,” said Kevin van Cauter, higher education adviser for the British Council. “There are problems dealing with some agents…that’s quite clear. But in the end, if you want to penetrate some of these markets, using agents is sometimes the only way you can do it. It’s the most cost-effective way. It’s just not economically feasible to have a presence in all these countries to recruit huge numbers [of students].”

A May 2013 report from the United States’ National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), *Report of the Commission on International Recruitment,* reopened this debate domestically by recommended doing away with a prohibition against using agents at U.S. schools.[1] The reort said that commission-based recruitment should be permissible but equivocated with this language, “While a majority of members maintain concerns with commissioned-based recruitment, the commission reached consensus to recommend that the association revise its mandatory practices…to specify that, while not encouraged, the ban on commission-based recruitment will be considered as a ‘best practice’ in the area of international recruitment.”

The final report will be forwarded to the NACAC Board of Directors. If the Board adopts the recommendations, any changes made to the association’s Statement of Principles of Good Practice based on the commission’s recommendations must be approved by members via the NACAC Assembly at the NACAC National Conference in Toronto in September 2013. NACAC first convened the commission on International Student Recruitment in March 2011 to address “the long-running controversy over the use of commissioned agents to recruit international students.” The commission noted that while there are institutions and organizations that appear to use such agents responsibly and demonstrably for the good of the students they serve, many may not be fully aware of the potential legislative,

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accreditation-related, and potentially punitive risks they incur by too broadly and uncritically using incentive-based agency to recruit and enroll international students.

Mitch Leventhal, vice chancellor for global affairs at the State University of New York system (SUNY) and one of the founders and former board member of the American International Recruitment Council (AIRC), says that NACAC punted on the use of agents when it might have propelled U.S. institutions into a more competitive stance with overseas universities that have long embraced the practice. In a June 22, 2013, article in *University World News,* he wrote that the recommendations "are not sufficient—not for NACAC, and not for American higher education."[2]

"The commission managed to nod and shake its head simultaneously, perhaps hoping that dissenting parties would each read into it only what they want to see," Leventhal wrote. "American international education policy is profoundly broken, and…this is harming our global competitiveness—both in attracting global talent and in earning foreign exchange. Colleges and universities are deeply hampered by the contradictory policies among competing federal departments, and a generally non-consultative approach vis-à-vis the higher education industry."

Furthermore, "the one point upon which the majority of the commission apparently agreed was that member institutions engaged in commission-based recruitment should not be punished," wrote Leventhal in his *University World News* article. "This concession must have resulted from their growing awareness that hundreds of NACAC members of all stripes are engaged in this practice to some degree."

Longstanding Use of Agents in the UK

The use of agents in the United Kingdom dates back to the 1980s, when the nation began charging overseas students full fees. Today about 95 percent of British universities use agents, according to the British Council, the U.K.'s international organization for cultural relations and education. About 40 percent of prospective students considering studying in the UK use or plan to use an agent's services, the Council reports.

About a decade ago, the UK government decided the practice needed more oversight and designed a voluntary certification program that requires agents be trained on a uniform code of ethics and update their training every two years.

"There were problems with some agents acting in unethical ways, taking money from students and institutions and not being transparent about that," said van Cauter, who acknowledges that many British universities use agents who haven't gone through the Council's certification. "We felt we needed a national strategy to deal with that. The idea is to make the training the standard for British universities."

Vincenzo Raimo is international director at the University of Nottingham, where about one-third of students are international. Raimo sums up the school's 20-year practice of using agents in three words: "Competition, competition, competition."

"It's simple—we use agents to achieve objectives that we wouldn't be able to achieve on our own," Raimo said. "Agents have always helped us to do things we can't manage on our own—reaching wider audiences and having an in-country presence, perhaps in places we can't or haven't been able to visit. And also because in some countries, it's just normal for students to use agents—that's just part of the process."

The University of Nottingham pays its agents for each student enrollment and publishes its fees on the school's website—the only UK university to do so, Raimo says. Roughly 20 percent of the university's annual international income can be attributed to students who hired agents, he said. The school also doesn't require that agents be certified. "We undertake our own due diligence processes," Raimo said.

Raimo says universities considering the use of agents should keep in mind that "agents can never be as good as your own staff in representing your university."

"Your own staff live and breathe their university, whereas agents represent so many places, some of which they will hardly know," he said. But, he added, "agents are nothing to be afraid of, and in fact they play a very important role in delivering your strategies efficiently. Don't compromise on your ethical standards and [do] undertake proper due diligence before appointments are made. And be transparent. I'd argue that if your relationships and terms of engagement are secret, then you're probably ashamed of something you're doing. We're in the education business—not selling chocolate bars."

Some universities contacted for this story declined interviews because they said they didn't want to reveal information that could put them at a competitive disadvantage.

Benefits and Drawbacks

Educational leaders abroad agree there are several benefits to using agents. They can promote the university to foreign students, counsel students on programs and admissions criteria, help families navigate the application process and visa requirements, and assist with travel and accommodations. With full-time agents on the ground in a foreign country, a U.S. university can be assured that the agent speaks the local language and can do business in the local

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time zone, which can often be a full day's difference from the U.S. time zone.

"It is common practice in Australia to use education agents to remain competitive in the environment we operate in," said Darren Turner, director of marketing and recruitment at Australia's Carnegie Mellon University, which has relied on agents for a quarter century. "We have limited staff resources, so education agents have helped us to achieve a wider outreach for the promotion of our programs, particularly in markets that we don't travel to frequently. This helps us to maintain a year-round presence, increase the awareness of our university globally in a cost-effective manner, and provide on-the-ground services to our applicants."

Education leaders also agree on the drawbacks: An agency might represent too many similar institutions and not be able to deliver the quantity or quality of students an institution desires; agents, like institutions, have areas of expertise and sometimes the two simply don't match; and some agents behave unethically—writing essays for students, changing grades on transcripts, and even paying teachers or principals for good recommendations that might ensure a foreign student goes toward the top of a U.S. university admissions list.

"The main challenges I have experienced in working with education agents include selecting the right education agent to fit your institution's needs," said Turner, whose university relies on agents in 49 countries—mostly in China and India, but also in South East Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. One in four of this year's incoming students will have used an education agent at some stage of their application or visa process. "This is definitely the most difficult aspect to get right and takes time. It is by no means a one-size-fits-all model, but I have worked with a lot of trusted and experienced agents."

Another challenge, Turner said, is monitoring an agent's activities and ensuring compliance with Australia's National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students, a legislative instrument under the Education Services for Overseas Students Act of 2000. The code requires that universities only use agents who provide international students with accurate information about studying in Australia and who act honestly in their dealings with students. The code requires Australian institutions to publicize which agents they use and to keep a searchable list of agents on school websites.

"This can be time-consuming without the right processes in place," Turner said. "Many institutions are now using software packages to manage this process."

Australia also developed an online training course for education agents in collaboration with Australia Education International, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship and Australian international education bodies. The training provides agents with information about the Australian education system and Australia as a study destination, education quality assurance issues, and the Australian visa regulation system. It also keeps agents abreast of changes and developments in international education services.

U.S. Institutions Using Agents Must "Come Out of the Closet"

In 2009 SUNY developed a worldwide network of professional student recruiting agencies with which SUNY contracts upon successful enrollment of a student. Thirty-six of SUNY's 64 campuses participate in this recruitment initiative. The program is managed through the SUNY Office of International Recruitment (OIR), which has a coordinating International Recruitment Council (IRC) composed of campus representatives. Leventhal estimates that 400 to

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500 U.S. higher educational institutions are now contracting with agents, although many are still "in the closet." That, he said, is partly because of NACAC's aloof stance toward commercial recruitment.

"We know for a fact that several [Ivy League colleges] and other ultra-competitive institutions have used agents for some time, particularly for executive education, continuing education, and ESL programs," he said. "If NACAC gives the green light—as the commission report recommends—and if institutions follow its recommendation to transparently disclose agency relationships, then the floodgates will open and we will all see how extensive the activity already is."

Leventhal writes that the report fails to explore the fundamental dissension among U.S. institutions about the practice, including "disagreement among federal departments, with the Department of State deploring the practice of agency recruitment, the Department of Homeland Security participating in agency trade shows and sponsoring agency events, and the Department of Commerce actively brokering (for a fee) introductions between institutions and agents around the world."

PHOTO: SHUTTERSTOCK

Philip A. Ballinger, NACAC's International Recruitment Commission chairman, said the commission's report "accurately reflects the ideas, facts, and discussions of the International Recruitment Commission, the mission of which was to resolve questions about the applicability of NACAC's ban on incentive compensation to international recruitment."

He said the American International Recruitment Council—a registered standard-development organization founded in 2008 by U.S. accredited postsecondary institutions—provided substantial input for the commission's deliberations and had significant representation on the commission itself. Commission members, he said, "unanimously called for stringent, new standards for institutions using paid agents. If institutions use commissioned agents, then they must ensure transparency, responsibility, and accountability."

Bad Experiences in China

Longtime higher education marketing consultant Rick Hesel tends to side with those who look skeptically at the use of agents abroad.

Four years ago, Hesel helped create CNA-USA (China America University-School Alliance), a membership organization of 14 U.S. universities that aims to bypass agents by working directly with Chinese high schools and students.[3] Having traveled extensively in China, Hesel is acquainted with universities' use of agents in that country, and knows that it can be hard to land meetings with principals. Through the strength of its numbers, he says, CNA-USA has been able to open the doors of high schools that might not otherwise give individual institutions their time.

"The principals often appreciate the strategy of bypassing agents, because a lot of them recognize the problems of agents," says Hesel, who is also principal of the Art & Science Group in Baltimore, Maryland, a higher education consultant firm. "They have an understanding of the students, the quality of the school, and the legitimacy of the application materials."

During his first trip to China, Hesel says, he met a Chinese woman whose ninth-grade daughter was preparing for an interview with an agent who had promised to help her get into a U.S. university.

"[The agent] told this woman that if her daughter didn't work with him, she wouldn't have a chance to get into an American

college," Hesel recalls. "He wanted $10,000 upfront. I told her not to pay the guy a dime and finally talked her out of it."

"A lot of these agents are getting paid by American institutions —a commission for every student enrolled—and being paid by the Chinese student's family, so they're playing both ends against the middle," he said. "They're not interested in a match, in what real counseling should do, or to make the best fit for the student based on their academic abilities and interests. They're representing the interests of their clients in the U.S."

About 80 percent of Chinese applicants to U.S. universities allow agents to manipulate their applications, Hesel asserts, perhaps by allowing agents to write the student's essay or by doctoring high school transcripts.

"American institutions are coming to the realization that, basically, you can't trust an application from a Chinese student," Hesel said. "Agents will often try to disguise that they're working with students. The contracts we've seen with some of the biggest agencies actually specify that they own the copyright to the essays which they write for the students, while the kid scribbles some notes in Chinese and the agent sends notes to someone in America, who writes the essay and then the full essay is submitted. A lot of agents take a cut of any student financial aid award, even merit or need based. They'll take up to 10 percent of that, and if the student doesn't pay them, the agent also gets involved in the visa application and might withhold necessary approvals. It's fundamentally a dishonest business."

By no means are these practices restricted to China, Hesel says. One of his colleagues, who works with several Indian institutions, tells Hesel that agents pay Indian teachers to recommend their high school students to U.S. schools.

"It's very upsetting to hear these stories," Hesel says.

Money Is the Driving Force

It's no secret that money is the driving force behind the use of agents. Many education leaders interviewed for this story acknowledged that U.S. universities are under tremendous pressure in an increasingly global economy to register more foreign students.

"When our American students graduate from our schools, they walk out into a global market," Bridges said. "It hasn't always been that way. But now, with the presence of transnational companies and corporations that span the globe, our students are leaving our doors and competing in a global market for work. It's almost incumbent on universities to bring in a community that replicates one that U.S. students will be introduced to when they graduate."

Moreover, universities need more full-paying students, and in the current economic situation, that number is declining.

"The elephant in the room is that [use of agents translates] into a revenue stream for many schools because the international student often is the full paying student, and that full pay helps to pay for scholarships," says Bridges, whose university took in more than 1,000 foreign applications for the coming fall semester—650 of them from China.

Hesel said the growth in the Chinese economy has produced more wealthy families than ever, many of whom "don't want their kids to go to Chinese universities, so they're willing to pay anything to get their children into the U.S. The agents make them believe that without them, their chances of being admitted would be diminished."

"For a number of institutions, the interest in China really is an economic one," Hesel said. "The universities feeling financial difficulties are more likely to look at nations where families are able to pay full tuition. You won't find aggressive recruitment in Africa, for instance, because African students tend to need a lot of financial aid.

Many U.S. schools' admissions offices lack the travel budgets or counselors—or perhaps enough counselors

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acquainted with foreign nations—to send staffers overseas to investigate high schools and students for themselves.

"We are unable to employ a dozen road warriors to be everywhere all the time," Leventhal said. "By working with agents, we have hundreds of people in the field in dozens of countries, and we do not have to have a huge marketing budget since we pay on success. This is a proven methodology which has been used successfully for decades, even in the U.S."

In the SUNY system, the most popular financial arrangement is a 10-percent commission on the first year's tuition for a newly placed student. Intensive English programs and executive education programs sometimes pay from 15 to 20 percent per student. Some institutions pay a flat fee that can range from about $1,000 to $2,500 per student placement. Part of these fees goes toward scholarships for U.S. students to study abroad.

In China, independent agents typically charge foreign students as much as $10,000 to $12,000 for admissions assistance. Often, a portion of this money is returned to the high school from which the student came. "This works for everyone except the student," said Bridges, who acknowledges that Wake Forest is more fortunate than some U.S. universities in that it has a robust admissions staff and budget that allows overseas travel to recruit students. "In the end, the long-term effect is very detrimental, because the student is not necessarily getting into the school that's the best fit for him or her, but into the school where the agent has a good relationship with the institution."

The results, says Bridges, can be heartbreaking.

"It can very tragic if the student's level of English is not at the level represented by the application," she said. "If a foreign student is admitted into a school that doesn't have an ESL program or remediation programs that can help, then even if the student is tremendously competent in their own country, if they come to a university on the false premise that he or she can write well and master English, that student will have much struggle—and so will the institution. This is why, as this [use of agents] moves along, these students can't make a successful career, and instead they go home in dishonor and disgrace."

As a result, Wake Forest's policy forbids the use of agents, although Bridges acknowledges that "I'm not so naïve to think all students' applications have not enlisted the use of agents. I know many times that's the case, but in terms of our university allowing outside intermediaries to recruit students, we do not."

Several education leaders in China did not reply to *IE's* requests for interviews.

To combat the temptation to use agents, Wake Forest has created a program called the "Wake Forest Advantage Program," which sends university staff to Chinese high schools to prep students on U.S. application procedures. The goal is to ensure the students are proficient in English and U.S. pedagogy so they can submit legitimate applications on their own.

"We want to get the brightest and best, and not just because parents can pay agents to doctor an application or pay the school to doctor a transcript," Bridges said. "This will help us not only with one-on-one recruitment, so as to bypass the need for agents, but also so we can say that when a student has gone through our program, he or she has the skills to be comfortable and successful in the Wake Forest community."

Hesel believes that increased use of the Internet to access information about U.S. colleges and universities could "over time, undermine agents' influence in this business."

Better Experiences in China

Joe DeCrosta is director of the Office of International Programs at Pittsburgh's Duquesne University, which pays agents an average of $2,500 for placements, including students from China. He acknowledges the downsides to using agents—including working with foreign operations that aren't officially a part of an institution—but he also says that "reputable, ethical agents can create great value to a recruitment program."

"Because there is still a stigma attached with working with agents in the U.S., it can sometimes lead to unnecessary anxiety when universities work with even legitimate agents," said DeCrosta, whose university works with agents who have created "very fruitful articulation agreements with solid academic institutions in China." "We believe that it's always advisable to proceed with reasonable caution while trusting one's instincts given your needs and goals."

DeCrosta said U.S. institutions are starting to understand the value of working with reputable, ethical agents. "We now need the support of professional organizations and other important players in educational recruitment to help

elevate the practice and ensure that agents are living up to our expectations. Such support would help institutions throughout the U.S. by acting as watchdogs to hold both institutions and agents accountable for their recruitment, placement, and admission practices."

He said organizations such as the American International Recruitment Council (AIRC) have "blazed new trails for U.S. institutions and have certainly helped institutions become as informed and knowledgeable as possible when approaching agents." DeCrosta was on the board of directors of the AIRC in 2009 and 2010.

The AIRC—only five years old and with 200 U.S. accredited institutional members—has developed the first enforceable standards and certification process for international recruitment agencies. The AIRC's modeled its process on the standards and best practices already in place in Australia, the UK, and other parts of the world.

"We have a lot to learn from countries like Australia and Great Britain in particular," Leventhal said. "Not only have these countries approached the use of placement agents from a national level, which helps to standardize and coordinate efforts to ensure that everyone is held accountable, but they have created very detailed processes that streamline agent management systems."

DANA WILKIE is a freelance writer in Alexandria, Virginia. Her last article for *IE* was "Seamless" about academic research collaborations between U.S. and Canadian scholars in the July/August 2013 issue.

Endnotes

[1] Report of the Commission on International Student Recruitment to the National Association for College Admission Counseling, May 2013. http://www.nacacnet.org/media-center/Documents/ICR.pdf.

[2] Mitch Leventhal, "Fixing the Broken International Policy," *University World News*, June 22, 2013; online at http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20130622014243361.

[3] These universities include Baldwin Wallace University, Birmingham Southern College, Colorado College, Creighton University, Hobart William Smith College, Medaille College, Middle Tennessee State University, Portland State University, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the University of Maryland Baltimore County, the University of Maryland College Park, the University of Nevada Reno, and Wake Forest University.