

By Jenny Rogers

Leading Into Africa

FOR THE 2010 ACADEMIC YEAR, Jonathan Burdick, dean of admissions and financial aid for the University of Rochester, pitched a radical idea to his provost: Recruit 10 students from Africa tuition-free in hopes that it would position Rochester as a home for a burgeoning African student population decades later. Last year, the university enrolled nearly four times that number, with about 700 applications coming from students across the continent.

His story has been eyed keenly by some in the international recruitment community, where admissions officers have warily watched the slowing of the growth of full-tuition-paying students coming to the United States from China. The number of Chinese students studying in the United States—by far still the largest cohort of international students—rose 8 percent in the 2015–16 academic year. But that rate has been steadily falling since the beginning of the decade, when the number increased nearly 30 percent over the previous year, according to statistics from the Institute of International Education's *Open Doors* report.

Africa isn't the only potential alternative source of international students, of course, but its quickly growing middle class represents a largely untapped market. To be sure, recruiting from the continent's 54 countries and more than 1 billion people requires a new playbook, creative partnerships, and a willingness for making a long-term investment, Burdick and other senior international officers said. But it's a gamble that SIOs are increasingly willing to take.

"China in 1975 was racked by famine and closed from the world," Burdick said. "We don't know for sure what's going to happen 20 years down the road in Africa, but when you look at its youth resources, its underconnectedness to the world—there's more opportunity here than anywhere else."

Do Your Homework

To start, international officers need high-level buy-in, said Marguerite Dennis, a consultant who has helped universities recruit internationally and who is writing a book on the topic. "This has to be a top-down agreement," she said. "Everybody—the board of trustees, the directors, the president—everybody has to agree to do this. It's got to be a long-term investment."

That also means doing significant research ahead of time, working with local governments, reaching out to local schools, and deciding what the university may best be able to offer. "What are you offering?" Dennis said. "It's not a question of where is the next hotspot. It is what your school has to offer." Rochester, for example, offers engineering and business—two degrees that are highly sought-after by international students. Other institutions, such as Michigan State University, have a robust African studies program.

Build on Partnerships

Building on and collaborating with programs that already exist can make the daunting prospect of recruiting on the second-largest continent a more focused job and a less financially risky one. "If you have a robust online program, if you have research capabilities for faculty exchange or student exchange, or study abroad, I think that's a way to begin," Dennis said.

At Bucknell University, Stephen Appiah-Padi, the director of international education, built on a study abroad program in Accra, Ghana, to strengthen partnerships with a Ghanaian university and make further inroads toward recruiting. "We're thinking about bringing [to Bucknell] some of the faculty who have probably just got out of graduate school and need some experience," Appiah-Padi said.

Universities can also work closely with groups on the ground who advise students, such as EducationUSA or institutions that have already enrolled high-achieving students, such as the United World Colleges system or schools on the continent such as the African Leadership Academy in Johannesburg. And they can capitalize on programs such as Yale University's Yale Young African Scholars (YYAS).



Yale's program helps prepare high school-level students for the SATs and advises them on the U.S. higher education system, even pairing them with an African student in the United States as a mentor. Held in three African cities, it's not an overt recruitment program for Yale itself but rather for universities in the United States in general, said Laura Kaub, who manages the program and formerly recruited students for Barnard University. This year the program will enroll 300 students from 34 countries.

"At Barnard, I would've loved the chance to come to YYAS so I can reach students all over the continent and elsewhere," Kaub said. Working with strong secondary schools and education NGOs, Kaub said, can help universities reach high-achieving students. "Get them to represent your institution well to help those students navigate the incredibly difficult and hurdle-filled application process," she said. "Those partnerships allow us to make sure these [students] are going right into the hands of perfect fits."

Consider Alternatives

Not all universities are looking to enroll students in traditional ways, though. Dennis, the consultant, believes the future of enrolling African students may come in ways that don't depend as much on brick and mortar. Arizona State University, for instance, made news in May when it announced it would create 25 "microcampuses" around the world to enroll 25,000 students. The plan involves teaching courses at partner universities in China, Cambodia, and elsewhere, with eventual plans to move into Africa.

"There are all different permutations, all different ways of doing this," Dennis said. In the 1990s, she was involved in establishing a two-year branch campus program in Dakar, Senegal, that taught students general education courses, and then, when financially feasible

for the students, sent them to a university in Boston to finish the four-year degree. It wasn't the standard process some universities look for, but it enrolled students from 39 countries in Africa.

Map Out Logistics

No matter how universities choose to enroll students, though, they must consider key logistics from the beginning. Michigan State University increased its African student enrollment 40 percent between 2012 and 2016 with help from a scholarship grant program that targeted high-achieving, low-income students. Patty Croom, who leads international admissions there, said that brought "fabulous students who make a difference," but also raised logistical challenges.

"Are you flexible at all on your SAT or ACT requirement?" she said. "They may only have one go at taking a standardized test, especially if you're looking at some of the high-achieving, low-income students." Other issues that can come up include students who are unable to pay application fees that require credit card payments or late-arriving test results. Deciding how to address those issues from the start can help, Croom said.

To help students have a stronger support system at Michigan State, Croom uses what she calls the "posse strategy" by enrolling multiple students from a region and connecting them on campus. Jon Burdick at Rochester employs the same strategy. The goal, after all, is not merely enrollment but successful alumni.

"Those students then turn around and reach out to the students they know," he said. "So now we're getting hundreds and hundreds of applications." ■

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