

By Angela Yang-Handy

# Best Practices for Secondary School Recruitment

### Considerations for Secondary Schools Looking to Diversify Their Student Populations

**I**n recent years, an increasing number of secondary schools in the United States have turned to international student recruitment to meet enrollment targets, boost bottom lines, attain student diversity goals, and advance global education initiatives. Between 2004 and 2016, the number of international students studying at U.S. secondary schools more than tripled, reaching nearly 82,000, according to the Institute of International Education.

While the rate of growth of international students coming to the United States has slowed down since, it remains a dynamic and active market for many secondary schools. International educators at higher education institutions should take note: “The number one reason international students come to our schools is to access higher education opportunities afterward,” says Michael Shaver, director of international market growth at The Association of Boarding Schools (TABS).

#### Context and Market Drivers

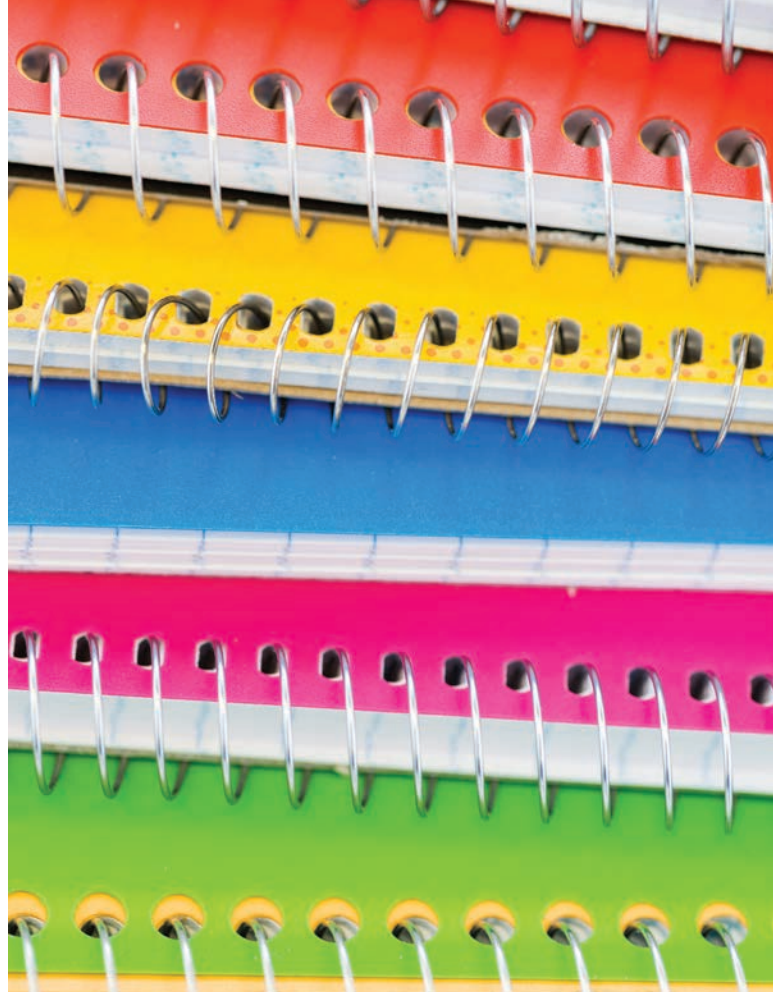
The drive for international student secondary school enrollment has begun to grow at a time when both secondary and postsecondary schools

are forced to prepare for a shrinking domestic student pool. Nathan Grawe, author of the 2018 book *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*, projects an impending decline in college enrollment of up to 15 percent beginning in 2026.

Grawe attributes this downturn to a number of correlating factors, including a declining population. U.S. Census Bureau data report a 0.7 percent decline in the school-aged population between 2010 and 2018. Elementary schools across the country are experiencing a decrease in student enrollment, and secondary schools will soon face similar challenges stemming from this demographic shift.

For tuition-charging independent secondary schools, the domestic enrollment landscape is of particular concern, as the costs of education increase while the number of capable fee-paying families drops. With public and charter schools providing competitive programs, as well as expanding innovations in education overall, families have more options for their children’s education—and independent schools feel the impact.

The numbers reflect this expansion in choice: U.S. Census Bureau data from 2017 confirm that K–12 private school enrollment dropped by 14



percent from 2006 to 2016. Additionally, the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) reports that 45 percent of independent schools lost enrollment between 2013 to 2017. The competition for domestic full-pay students is expected to become even fiercer in coming years.

Under such conditions, the expansive international student market offers promising prospects for schools to recoup enrollment losses—and for a growing number of secondary schools, the decision to recruit international students has become a matter of survival. Secondary school associations across the United States have led the way in providing guidelines on market trends and professionalizing practices related to international student recruitment. Here are three of the top secondary school international recruitment best practices:

### **1. Use recruitment agents and educational consultants to attract and recruit students.**

While higher education remains largely cautious about using agents, a majority of secondary schools work in some capacity with recruitment agents and educational consultants. The National Association of College Admissions Counselors reports that 71.4 percent of the schools surveyed indicated that they work with private recruitment agencies and that working with agents is the most commonly used recruitment method.

“Working with agents is a big part of our model because there is no other way to physically visit and engage with so many students around the world,” says Colleen Bertiglia, assistant director of international

**“The number one reason international students come to our schools is to access higher education opportunities afterward.” —MICHAEL SHAVER**

admissions at San Domenico School in San Anselmo, California. “You have to use a third party to intervene for you.”

Many schools have limited funding allocated to international recruitment, leading to a reliance on partnerships with agents and educational consultants.

### **2. Participate in overseas recruitment travel.**

The secondary schools with the most success at recruiting international students tend to send personnel overseas to participate in admissions tours and recruitment fairs, get to know and train agents and educational consultants, and meet with prospective students and their families.

“You cannot underestimate the importance of having people on the ground to meet the families face-to-face,” says Ioana Wheeler, director of global initiatives at NAIS. “Otherwise, it will be harder to build trust and convince parents that your school is safe and welcoming, a place where their child will learn, and that they will be well taken care of.”

The reality for some schools is that they have limited, if any, budget for travel. For this reason, Michael Shaver at TABS says the organization is planning to offer virtual fairs “to help schools with limited budgets connect with students in hard-to-reach countries where schools can’t travel but there is still student interest.”

While not the perfect solution, technological advances expand access for both students and schools.

### **3. Harness recruitment opportunities through existing networks.**

Alumni and the families of current students help generate a continuing pool of applicants for schools, and partnering with the alumni or advancement office on campus can facilitate these connections.

“In certain countries, word of mouth can be very influential,” says Christopher Sheahan, admission associate for international recruitment at Cheshire Academy in Connecticut. “It is important to build satisfaction with families and alumni so that they would be happy to refer prospective students to the school.”

Other networks that serve as sources for new international students include school and community partnerships overseas.

### **Opportunities for Collaboration**

The time is ripe for innovative collaboration between higher education and secondary schools—especially given that many of the recruitment best practices emerging from secondary school associations echo those utilized by higher education institutions.

However, there is still a lack of comprehensive research and only a few organizations available to support admissions professionals at the secondary school level. This gap represents “an incredible opportunity for both secondary and higher education to really start to work together to build synergy in a cooperative recruiting process,” says Bertiglia. ■

**ANGELA YANG-HANDY, EDD**, is dean of global, experiential, and community engagement at Northfield Mount Hermon.

## **Resources**

IIE 2017 report, *Globally Mobile Youth: Trends in International Secondary Students in the United States, 2013-2016*: [bit.ly/2QbLkxp](http://bit.ly/2QbLkxp)

National Association of Independent Schools: [nais.org](http://nais.org)

The Association of Boarding Schools: [boardingschools.com](http://boardingschools.com)

NAFSA resources for secondary schools: [bit.ly/2VO410o](http://bit.ly/2VO410o)