Towards Professional Standards and Practices in International Student Recruitment

A White Paper from the American International Recruitment Council†
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This White Paper by the American International Recruitment Council (AIRC) discusses the issues surrounding the use of international student recruitment agents by U.S. colleges and universities in today's global higher education marketplace, and the role of AIRC and other key organizations in ensuring that high professional standards and ethical practices are followed in recruiting international students.

Introduction

Colleges and universities in the United States seek to attract students from throughout the world to provide the kind of international learning environment on campus that students need to prepare them for today's borderless careers.

While U.S. higher education institutions possess enormous educational capacity, and a growing population of young people around the world is clamoring for higher education, linking the U.S.'s ample educational supply to this expanding global demand poses many challenges. Among these, providing qualified students throughout the world with the information they need to select an appropriate educational program and institution, and the assistance they need to apply and gain admission, is particularly challenging. Few colleges or universities have the funds or the expertise to conduct an effective global student recruitment program in today's increasingly competitive international higher education marketplace.

As this global student market has developed, specialized recruitment organizations have emerged to represent higher education institutions and recruit students on their behalf. Universities in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere have used these services for many years and they are popular with prospective students and their parents who are seeking support in understanding the complexities of study abroad.

Yet many U.S. institutions have been understandably hesitant to retain the services of such overseas student recruiting agencies without assurances that they operate according to high professional standards and provide quality services to students seeking higher education. Further, there is an ongoing debate in the United States regarding whether it is appropriate and ethical to enter into partnerships with recruiting agents, and U.S. government agencies have taken conflicting postures on the issues.

About the American International Recruitment Council

The American International Recruitment Council (AIRC) was founded in 2008 by a leading group of accredited U.S. colleges and universities to promote high professional standards in international student recruitment. AIRC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit membership organization officially registered with the United States Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission as a Standard Development Organization. As of the release of this White Paper, AIRC's membership includes 125 accredited U.S. colleges and universities and 32 certified student recruitment agencies with offices in 39 countries.

AIRC has developed a rigorous process of certification for international recruitment agencies seeking to work with U.S. colleges and universities. It is closely patterned on the U.S. higher education accreditation process.

In brief, agencies that have applied for certification and have been advanced to candidacy by the AIRC Board of Directors must complete a comprehensive self-study that assesses the agency's compliance with AIRC's Certification Standards. This is followed by a site visit and evaluation by a trained AIRC external reviewer. The AIRC Certification Board reviews the agency's application, an independently generated due diligence report, its self-study, and the site visit review, and determines whether the applicant meets AIRC's standards. The Certification Board makes the final determination regarding the certification status of agency applicants.

AIRC's certification process is supplemented by professional development activities to promote best practices for both institutions and agencies.

Additional information on AIRC can be found at the AIRC web site at www.airc-education.org.

The Global Higher Education Market and International Recruitment Agencies

Over the last several decades a highly competitive global international student market has developed and international recruitment agencies are firmly established within it. Although the United States continues to be the most attractive destination for most international students, U.S. colleges and universities that want to attract these students cannot afford to ignore the realities of this marketplace. Conducting an effective global recruitment effort poses many more challenges than recruiting domestically in the United States for several reasons.

First, the sheer scope of recruiting internationally, and the challenge of trying to be engaged in several major markets at the same time, is daunting. Most U.S. institutions have very small international recruitment staffs (if they have any staff dedicated to international recruiting at all), and the costs involved in deploying them internationally are often prohibitive. If institutions rely only on their staff resources, they can only be present in a few international locations for a few days each year.

Second, it is very difficult to understand the unique and subtle complexities of individual international markets and to know what are the most effective strategies and messages to use in them. Individual institutions cannot develop the expertise to operate effectively

in the diverse cultural contexts found in Brazil, China, India, Turkey, Vietnam, etc. How students choose a college or university, who is involved in the decision, what matters and what does not-are factors which vary greatly in different international student markets.

Third, the international student marketplace is very competitive, and U.S. institutions find themselves competing with host institutions from many nations, not just their usual peer institutions domestically. Several nations with more centralized higher education systems, such as Australia and the UK, have organized well-funded national initiatives to increase their institutions' share of the international student market. International students represent a major source of revenue for higher education institutions and competition is fierce.

Within this complex and highly competitive global marketplace, specialized international student recruitment agencies have emerged throughout the world to assist universities in meeting these challenges and to help students seeking education abroad. Universities in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and many other nations have been successfully using the services of these agencies for many years as a means to increase their share of the international student market through their local presence and knowledge of their local markets.

Recruitment agencies have also proven to be popular with prospective students and their families. Faced with a bewildering flood of information over the internet, often only in English, about their study abroad options, students and their parents struggle to choose among thousands of institutions and to understand the complexities of the admissions process, financial issues, and student visa challenges. Understandably, they seek the services of local recruitment and advising agencies, staffed by local bilingual counselors, in their local time zone, to help them find their way through this confusing maze.

U.S. colleges and universities must, of course, decide for themselves whether they want to work with international recruitment agencies, but the reality is that agencies do play important roles in the international student marketplace in many nations. Although many factors have played a role in the decline of the United States' share of international students over the last decade – a loss of seven percent in global market share since 2001 according to the Institute of International Education – the expanding role of recruitment agencies and the reluctance of U.S. institutions to utilize them is surely one of them.

AIRC has been established to provide support to U.S. colleges and universities to identify international student recruitment agencies with high professional standards.

The Need for Professional Standards for International Recruitment Agencies

Although disreputable agents will not usually survive for long in the competition for clients, AIRC recognizes that there is a compelling need for the development of professional standards governing the work of recruitment agents. This is not, or should not be, surprising. International student recruitment is a new profession and it takes time for best practices to evolve and be defined and for standards development organizations to become established and recognized. This is AIRC's mission.

While AIRC agrees that there is a need to develop and enforce standards, it is also the case that many critics of international recruitment agencies are prone to exaggerate the scope of abuses and to make such claims without supporting data. For example, one leading critic has recently claimed that institutions that use recruitment agents have authorized the agents to make actual admissions decisions on behalf of the institution; however no evidence whatsoever supports this claim. Critics of recruitment agencies need to be more careful and judicious in their claims, and avoid generalizations regarding abuses that are not based on factual data.

Ethical Issues Regarding International Student Recruitment

Discussion and debate within U.S. admissions circles regarding the ethics of international student recruiting, especially concerning the use of recruitment agents and commission-based compensation, abound. Unfortunately, much of this debate, marked by strident charges from entrenched positions based on little information, has not been helpful in clarifying the issues. AIRC is dedicated to elevating the level of this dialog and promoting clear, coherent thinking about the real issues and problems in international recruitment.

Critics often charge that recruitment agents cannot properly serve prospective students and their families because they often only represent a few institutions, causing them to recommend only these institutions to their clients even if other institutions might be better suited to the student's needs. Agents are portrayed as a modern day Procrustes, the mythical Greek criminal who was obsessed with making his victims fit their beds by either stretching them if they were too short or cutting off their legs if they were too long. But this situation prevails throughout modern economies regarding all kinds of products, and consumers are skilled at dealing with it. Further, these critics are not bothered regarding the activities of recruitment officers from individual institutions, who are only representing a single college or university. If it is inappropriate for recruitment agents to represent a few institutions, why is it not a concern that college and university officials only represent one?

Critics charge further that paying agents on a commission basis exacerbates this situation, motivating agents to refer students to institutions paying the highest commission whether or not they will meet their needs academically. The profit motive, it is claimed, further corrupts the advising process, leading to students being placed at inappropriate academic institutions. Of course, such professional misconduct is possible. However, is there anything unique in this situation? Isn't it the case that the profit motive can lead to unethical practice in most professions? Professionals in many fields are compensated on the basis of the services they provide. Doctors, dentists, attorneys, accountants, plumbers, electricians, and many others are compensated based on the procedures, tests, products and services they perform. The more services they provide, whether needed or not, the more they are compensated. Yet in all of these fields, we rely on professionals to do no more than necessary. In all these areas we have developed standards, best practices, and sanctions to guide professional conduct. AIRC believes that this should be the case with international student recruitment agents as well and it is our mission to lead this effort.

Further, this argument overlooks the potentially corrupting influence of other incentives that come into play in the international student recruitment arena, such as pay increases, bonuses, promotions, contract renewals, and enrollment quotas. Are not all these potential influences on the behavior of admissions professionals also able to generate unethical practices? The recruiter from a financially troubled college who is far behind in meeting the college's international student application targets (i.e. quota) who knows his or her job is on the line is perhaps more prone to encourage students to apply who are not a good fit for the college. Recruitment agents are not alone in needing to prevent personal incentives from leading to unethical practice in the international student marketplace.

Finally, opponents of using international recruiting agencies point to the fact that U.S. financial aid law prohibits institutions from paying commissions to recruit American students. If it is illegal to pay commissions to recruit students domestically, they argue, shouldn't it be banned internationally as well? But the logic of this argument leads to the conclusion that anything illegal in the United States should be illegal outside the U.S. as well and this is obviously an absurd conclusion. Furthermore, it is important to realize that the ban on commission-based recruitment in the U.S. was included in the laws governing federal financial aid and was enacted to protect these funds from predatory practices. There is no comparable situation internationally and the statute in question explicitly authorizes commission-based recruiting internationally.

Those who make these criticisms fail to make an important distinction. It is critical to distinguish between activities which are inherently unethical and those which may be unethical depending on how they are done. It is AIRC's view that it is not inherently unethical for agents to represent individual universities or for them to receive commission-based payments for recruiting students. The concerns regarding unethical practice in international recruiting are not unlike those we face in many areas of professional practice. Certainly, it is the case that there is the possibility of abuse and unethical behavior on the part of recruitment agents. Undoubtedly, such professional ethical abuses have and will take place. But the remedy for these problems is to set high professional standards, encourage the development of best practices; establish structures that reward good behavior and discourage abuses.

In sum, while there certainly is room for abuse and unethical practice in the international recruitment marketplace, there is nothing inherently unethical in the activities of international recruitment agents. The kinds of abuses we find in international recruitment are not essentially different from those found in many professional fields. This leads AIRC to the conclusion that the best way to address these problems is not to try to prevent U.S. universities from using recruitment agents, and deny them access to an important recruitment tool, but rather to set high professional standards and encourage best practices on the part of international agents.

Working Together to Promote Professional Standards and Practices in International Recruitment

The global international student marketplace is a reality and there is no indication that it will go away. U.S. colleges and universities need to compete effectively in this market in order to retain their leadership position in

attracting international students. Few U.S. institutions have the resources needed to conduct an effective global recruitment effort on their own, lacking the recruitment staffing, the knowledge of individual markets, or the funding needed. International student recruitment agents have established an important place in the international student marketplace in many parts of the world. While individual colleges and universities need to make their own decisions regarding whether they want to use international recruitment agents as a component in their recruitment program, an increasing number of U.S. institutions are doing so. This trend will continue in the future.

However, it is difficult for individual colleges and universities to make informed decisions in selecting recruitment agencies and to have confidence that the agents they select operate according to best practices and high ethical standards. While there is nothing inherently wrong in working with international recruiting agencies, there is room for abuse and unethical behavior on the part of agents, and it is difficult for individual universities and colleges to identify agencies that operate according to the highest professional standards. AIRC has come into being to provide assurance to U.S. institutions that agencies that have achieved certification operate according to AIRC standards and conform to professional best practices. AIRC certification does not replace institutional due diligence in guiding and monitoring the work of recruitment agencies, but does provide valuable and reliable information to institutions in making these decisions.

While AIRC plays a fundamental role in promoting best practices in international recruitment, many other organizations need to be involved in this effort. U.S. colleges and universities need to insist on the highest professional standards by utilizing the services of AIRC certified agencies whenever possible and promoting the AIRC standards. U.S. higher education associations concerned with admissions and recruitment can play a valuable role by turning their attention to professional development programs on best practices for staff of both institutions and agencies. U.S. government supported educational advising centers around the world − which should be expanded and strengthened − can be extremely helpful in providing valuable education and professional development for local recruitment agents which have demonstrated their commitment to best practices. In addition, the U.S. government agencies involved in international student recruitment, namely the Department of Commerce's U.S. Commercial Service, and the Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, need to resolve their differences regarding international student recruitment, and to develop policies to encourage and assist international agents dedicated to high performance. AIRC stands prepared to work with all organizations dedicated to improving standards in international student recruitment.

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