

WADING INTO THE WATERS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT AGENTS

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To use agents or not use agents? That question is asked by many enrollment managers, recruitment/admission professionals, as well as university administrators as they develop an international recruitment and enrollment strategy.

I have worked at four institutions of higher education since December 1994, and in international enrollment management since December 2000. Early in my career, there were not as many recruitment agencies as there are today. Three of the four institutions allowed me to explore the possibility of working with third parties in the recruitment of students. This my story.

It wasn't until I started traveling to Southeast Asia in early spring 2001 that I became familiar with the term "recruitment agency." I began to hear stories of successful endeavors along with the horror stories we all know so well—lack of transparency, students' best interests being jeopardized, and fraudulent applications. I was hesitant to even consider the agent option until one day I opened my email and found an unsolicited invitation from an agent in Nepal. I wondered how this person had even heard of Northern Arizona University (NAU).

After many weeks of back-and-forth emails regarding a proposed visit to Kathmandu, I was intrigued enough to schedule a visit. The agent promised at least 50 undergraduate students for an in-country presentation at a local hotel.

I requested a slide projector for the presentation (this was before laptops and PowerPoint), and though it was provided, I walked into the hotel meeting room to find no lights or heat. It was not a perfect situation, but to a certain degree it worked: There were more than the promised number of students in the room, and I presented and answered questions for three hours.

The next day, I went to that agency's office. There was a line of students out the door waiting to meet with me. I sat at a desk for 10 hours speaking to each one. The students were amazing and all of them met NAU admission requirements.



In the next few years, this same agent sent us dozens of students and I got over my fear of using a third party. NAU signed contracts with a handful of other agencies and committed appropriate resources to help with undergraduate recruitment.

In 2006, I took a job with Saint Mary's College of California, a bucolic campus with rolling hills, mission-style architecture, and a classic curriculum. With guidance from colleagues and relying on past experiences, the school created a template agent agreement, an online agent questionnaire, and a vetting process. In addition to the productive Nepalese agent I knew from NAU,



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the college entered into agreements with representatives in India and China—two markets where the institution was looking to grow enrollment.

Saint Mary's was already well-known locally and in some parts of the world, including the Philippines, Central America, and Indonesia. Our goal was to grow and diversify the undergraduate applicant pool. I traveled globally one to two times a year, checking in with the agencies, training staff, and meeting students and families. With the help of agents, the college was making a name for itself in areas where it was previously little-known.

Unfortunately, the economic turbulence of late 2007 to early 2010 was not kind to Saint Mary's or the international student population. We received a number of qualified and successful students from our agent partners, which supplemented those we recruited directly. But the economic situation affected enrollments, which fell quickly. It took many years to rebuild.

At the University of California, Berkeley—the institution I joined in 2010—the question of working with agents at the undergraduate level was never an issue. We simply didn't. Although, we knew it was likely our international applicants were engaging with and paying agents to advise them on the UC Berkeley application process, UC System policy prohibited the use of any third party in the recruitment of students.

UC Berkeley, however, had the advantage of name recognition. There were few places I traveled where students and parents had not heard of the university. Working or not working with agents was never going to have a significant impact on enrollments at Berkeley.

The question of whether to use agents arose again when I joined The University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) in 2017. UTA, a top doctoral research university, has a long and respected history of educating international students, boasting international student enrollments of more than 4,500.

As a recruitment specialist working for the College of Engineering, my goal was to diversify the applicant pool, specifically within the college's Masters of Science in Engineering and Masters of Engineering programs. The majority of UTA's masters-level applicants commonly hail from India. But as was the case with many institutions this past fall, UTA's international student enrollment had experienced significant declines.

As a new administrator to campus, I needed to find reliable and efficient means to reach a large number of prospective students. We revamped our print materials for international applicants and made adjustments to the website targeting this population. But we needed more. With the winter holidays looming, travel was not a viable option. I learned the university had worked with one to two agents previously and might be interested in exploring future endeavors.

The American International Recruitment Council (AIRC) offered a solution. The annual conference was scheduled for December in Florida. I knew I was a bit rusty on the agency playing field, but I still understood the basics. Given the green light from senior leaders to attend and meet representatives, off I went with marketing materials in hand.

At first, I was hesitant given the inherent risks of working with recruitment agencies. The horror stories from years gone by, recent discussions on the NAFSA: Association of International Educators listserv, and firsthand accounts from trusted colleagues gave me pause. Thankfully, peers from all over the US were at the conference; with their help and assurances, I met with several agency representatives.



Although a few agents gave me chills, were a little too pushy, or didn't listen to me, those individuals were the exception. For the most part, the agents presented with an air of genuine confidence, honesty, understanding, and enthusiasm. Upon returning to campus, I met with the campus decision-makers in enrollment management and shared with them company profiles of agencies I thought would benefit UTA. We decided to dip our toes in the water.

With one company already sending us numerous students, that partnership agreement was signed immediately. An agreement with a second agency followed a few days later with a firm that had sent students in the past.

We decided to approach our first year using agents as a pilot program and plan to review graduate and undergraduate enrollment numbers in twelve months. Ultimately, we will limit the number of agreements with agencies to five to seven. Allowing a year for experience, trial and error, and lessons learned, suits us for now.