

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT AGENT MANAGEMENT

RYAN SULLIVAN, DIRECTOR OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION,
NEW BRUNSWICK COMMUNITY COLLEGE, CANADA

Prior to 2014, internationalization was not a priority for New Brunswick Community College (NBCC). At that time, the college was mandated to largely focus on educating students from the province. Indeed, there were few students enrolled from elsewhere in Canada, let alone abroad. International students represented less than 2 percent of the student population.

Daily solicitations from prospective agents were, at times, overwhelming. The college did not have a specific international strategy and while increasing international enrollment was becoming an area of interest, a clear plan for attracting international students had not been developed. There were partnership requests from many education agents, but determining which requests came from legitimate, well-meaning agents was challenging. NBCC formed a limited number of successful partnerships with education agents, but there were very few safeguards in place to ensure quality control.

Then, as with many institutions, the desire to diversify the student population and the prospect of declining domestic enrollments resulted in a new mandate to grow the international student population. NBCC's two-person international team looked to leverage the use of agents as a way to reach prospective students who may be interested in a two-year college in Canada. By working with agents we hoped to maximize our limited travel budget while still recruiting in multiple markets.

Testing the Waters

In the spring of 2015, our international education team registered for its first ICEF workshop. ICEF (International Consultants for Education and Fairs) brings together international educators, industry service providers, and carefully screened student recruitment agents at networking events around the world, helping to create strategic partnerships and increase international student enrollments. During the event, other colleges and universities readily shared pointers, offered

recommendations, and introduced NBCC staff to preferred agents. Over the course of the three-day workshop we conducted 30 one-on-one interviews with agents, each lasting 25 minutes.



The next step was to develop a review process. NBCC created a profile form for each prospective partner agent to complete. The form asks for a wide-array of information, including the agent's company structure, core clientele, target geographical market(s), number of students assisted annually, a list of other institutions the agent represents, their familiarity with the Canadian education system, and a list of other services provided to students (immigration counselling, language training, travel arrangements, etc.). NBCC also requires a list of credentials or certifications and references from three educational institutions. Once the proper due diligence is complete, a NBCC partnership contract is signed with agents who meet the college's standards.

NACAC

National Association for
College Admission Counseling

nacacnet.org

Copyright © 2018

Finding the Right Fit

NBCC made a conscious decision to work with smaller boutique agencies. Because the college is not well-known and pays commissions commensurate to its low tuition rate, we knew our unique attributes ran the risk of getting overlooked within larger agencies.

By partnering with small agencies, NBCC has been able to carve out niche markets within priority recruitment regions. And NBCC's low tuition (\$9,300 CAD per year) gives agents an attractive option to present to lower-income families.

To ensure expectations are met, the first contract for each agent included a one-year probation period. The international team knew that in order for the relationships to be successful, an investment in training was necessary. Training was provided to each agent and their teams primarily via Skype, though agents in primary recruitment markets received in-person training.

In the first full year of the new agent engagement initiative, the number of international students attending NBCC more than doubled, going from 104 to 241. Approximately 40 percent of the increase could be attributed to our agent partnerships.

Managing Growth

Some think that after signing an agent partnership agreement the bulk of the recruitment work can be left to the agent. In fact, a good agent partnership requires as much, if not more, work than managing and engaging a team of full-time staff.

On the surface, the significant enrollment growth was great news. International students from 45 different countries now accounted for 6 percent of the college's total enrollment. But there were underlying concerns. The fast growth strained internal resources and service standards were sacrificed. Inquiry response times, decisions, and regular contact with agent partners all slowed, which is particularly troubling for a college that offers admission on a rolling basis. Some agents indicated that unless these issues were addressed, they would not continue to work with the college.

Good agents are very conscious of providing timely, informative service for students and parents. If the partner institution cannot provide the agents with the required information and admission decisions in a timely manner, it reflects poorly on the agent.

A review of all agents was conducted and a decision was made to renew only the contracts of agents who regularly engaged with NBCC and met both quantity and quality expectations related to applications. Paring back the number of agents by approximately 50 percent allowed for better service and helped ensure that the proper attention was provided to agents in the form of training, regular updates, and appropriate response times. Fortunately, there was no indication that any agents were not acting in good faith so the focus when selecting the agents with whom contracts would be extended was based on performance and engagement.

Looking Ahead

To manage agent networks efficiently and strategically moving forward, NBCC's international education team connected with colleagues at neighboring universities, colleges, and high schools to examine opportunities to work together. Believing agents would be better positioned to promote the region if they represented a number of institutions from the province, NBCC organized a familiarization (FAM) tour for agents. The tour included stops at each of the collaborating educational institutions, as well as some popular tourist New Brunswick tourist destinations.

NBCC is also in the process of adding staff to the international education office with the intent of continuing to strengthen agent management and add new markets. Annual training with program and policy updates is now provided by NBCC to partner agents via webinars; agents will be visited at least once every two years for onsite training and participation in fairs, schools visits, and/or seminar presentations. Prospective students of partner agents are offered virtual information sessions if a visit is not feasible. The college is also conducting surveys and focus groups of current students who were recruited via agent partners to gather feedback on the service levels of both the college and the agents.

