As the use of third-party international student recruitment agents becomes better understood in the US, it will naturally take institutions time to develop ways of working with overseas partners that are straight-forward, mutually beneficial, and put students first. One common misconception among institutions new to working with agents is that once the contract is signed, admitting students will be like picking ripe apples off a tree. If only that were the case! In reality, signing a contract is more like planting a seed: Attention, nurturing, and cultivation are needed for the partnership to eventually bear fruit. For a successful relationship to evolve, institutions must think of their agent partners as just that—partners.

The following are recommendations for institutions to create and maintain successful relationships with agents from the perspective of a US-based agency representative:

**Have shared goals and a mutual vision for short- and long-term success**

A true partnership is only possible when both sides agree upon what is determined as success. Before entering into a partnership, articulate what a successful year’s funnel and yield will look like so both parties are able to evaluate the relationship based on the same set of expectations. It’s recommended that institutions initially establish a three- to five-year term for the partnership. That way, the agent has enough time to build a funnel of prospective student interest and the institution can see what initiatives are and are not working.

A vision for long-term success should feel like a collaboration. An agent brings valuable in-country expertise regarding student trends and areas of program interest that the institution might not have had access to previously. Institutions should draw on this local market intelligence to help identify opportunities and shape their marketing strategies for better return on investment.

Successful agents often have relationships with institutional representatives that feel similar to that of friendly, trusted coworkers. Working relationships underpinned by trust are sustainable and benefit both sides. Taking an agreeable and congenial approach shows the agent is a priority for the
institutions, helps the agent learn about the school firsthand, and ultimately enables the agent to more accurately and positively convey information to students. Travel by institution reps to an overseas agency office or inviting agents to campus enables these types of interpersonal bonds to evolve and allows trust and camaraderie to develop.

Be open to exploring alternative admission procedures

While agents can work within institutional constructs to address a college or university’s specific recruitment goals, it is also important to consider accommodations to help agents reach their potential. Oftentimes admission leaders do not recognize institutional barriers or believe them to be immovable. However, listening, being flexible, and working to remove or reduce such barriers can end up benefiting the institution and students directly.

Take application turnaround times. From an agent and student perspective, time is of the essence when waiting for an admission decision from an institution. IDP Connect’s Buyer Behavior research suggests that roughly 17 percent of students take the first offer they receive irrespective of choice, and a quick processing time shows both the student and agent that they are important to the institution.

One institution that IDP Connect partnered with initially appeared inflexible in its ability to quickly release admission decisions, which led the school to lose students to a competitor. Then, based on partner feedback, the institution’s admission office was able to go to individual departments and make the case for faster turnaround times. Once the feedback was accepted, multiple departments committed to improving turnaround, which enhanced the next intake’s yield. The institution’s initiative showed agency counselors that it was flexible and willing to take feedback, which positively influenced students’ choices.

This is not to say that an institution must change its application turnaround times to satisfy its agents. Rather, this example illustrates how making accommodations can be productive for each side and serve as a sign of good faith. The decision was ultimately in the best interest of students, the institution, and the agent, making it a win for all sides.

Support agents by committing resources to a user-friendly application experience

Institutions that adopt certain practices, as described below, can help agents more effectively support international applicants:

• Maintain a user-friendly and easy-to-navigate admission website. Admission processes and timelines often vary widely among US colleges and universities. It is in an institution’s interest to make its admission website easy to navigate so that both agents and students can find information and applicants can submit their materials with ease. Institutions might also consider including site translations in several languages, which facilitates communication with students and family members.

• Employ a tagging system. A tagging system allows agents to demonstrate that the student with whom they have been working has enrolled at an institution. This process is essential to facilitate commission payment. At the outset of the partnership, establish the means agents should use to notify you when one of their students applies and enrolls at your institution.

• Pay invoices in a timely manner. With any successful partnership, it is important to follow through with the terms of the agreement, including paying agents on time and for the full amount indicated by the contract. Failure to pay or a delay of payments could negatively influence the agent’s perception of an institution and cause the relationship to deteriorate.

• Establish an agent portal on the admission website. Utilizing an online agent portal ensures that all of your agent’s interactions with your site are standardized, trackable, and kept in one place. Agent portals are now used by many institutions and agents almost always prefer to have their students apply via these portals.

Provide timely and clear communication

Whether it is assistance with an application file or waiting on an admission decision, responsiveness is a key concern for agents. Given the time differences between US institutions and most agent offices, responding to an overseas partner’s email within 24 hours is best practice. Time is of the essence and it always works to an institution’s benefit to respond to agent e-mails in a timely manner. Beyond impacting student decision-making, prompt replies signal to agencies that they are valued, which usually reinforces the strength of the working relationship.

Invest time and resources into your agents

It is possible for a tree to sprout if you put it in the right conditions and nurture it accordingly. However, to truly maximize the growth of the seed, fertilizer is needed. For agent relationships this means that additional investments should be made beyond the signing of a contract. Of course, every institution has different contexts, staffing structures, and budgets to work with, so the solution will always look a bit different depending on the school. But being intentional and data-driven with your agent plan will most often lead to results. There is always something that can be done to bolster the way you support your agents, whether that means putting resources toward a digital marketing strategy, harnessing lead generation technology, investing in a new CRM, employing more admission counselors, raising travel budgets, or attending agent fairs. In turn, your institution can expect a greater return on investment.