

Advising International Students — Perspectives from the Field

Global student mobility trends, including the growing interest among international students to pursue education in the United States, are impacting the way that admission and college counseling professionals advise, recruit, enroll, and retain students. Students researching and applying to colleges and universities from abroad face the additional challenge of understanding a large, complex higher education “system” and are often dealing with language and cultural barriers.

In addition to the increase in numbers of international students applying from abroad, more students are beginning their US studies at American high schools than ever before. International students at US high schools can benefit from English language training, exposure to American culture and styles of teaching, and in many situations greater access to resources about applying to US colleges and universities.

The following articles present two perspectives on advising students in this increasingly global landscape. The first features seven tips from an independent educational consultant who has experience working with international students still in their home countries who are interested in coming to the US to pursue higher education. The second, by a US high school counselor, provides reflections on a growing international high school population in the US, and how this has impacted the counseling environment.

Advising International Students — Independent Educational Consultant Perspective

by Kristina L. Dooley, Member, Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA)

International students are applying to universities in the US at record numbers. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE)’s annual *Open Doors* study, there were 819,644 international students studying in the US during the 2012–13 academic year, up 39 percent from just a decade ago. Nearly 29 percent of these students are Chinese nationals, followed by Indian students just under 12 percent, and South Korean students comprising more than eight percent. However, one of the most notable changes was the 30 percent increase in Saudi Arabian students studying in the US since the Saudi government began awarding funds for students

via the King Abdullah scholarship program. Programs such as this and the Brazil Scientific Mobility Program are expected to augment the rise in students from these countries.

As the number of international students crossing oceans and borders to enter the halls of American high schools, colleges and universities increases, so, then, do the challenges faced by parties on both sides of the desk. Increasing issues of authenticity of documentation, cultural differences and competition have paved a path of uncertainty for many international students. With no uniform process in place for international applicants, many students may question whether this daunting process is worthwhile. Students benefit greatly from engaging academically and socially with peers from other countries and cultures. Greater diversity also enhances our institutions and the communities in which they

reside. Therefore, it is incumbent upon counseling and admission professions to ensure that globally mobile students and parents are aware of the many resources available to aid them in their college search. It is also paramount for students to be cognizant of potential hurdles and prepare to overcome them in the process. With a tremendous focus on international students misrepresenting themselves and their academic credentials, and on the ethical issues surrounding students receiving assistance with the application process, it is essential that all players are aware of how best to proceed successfully. These seven tips aid anyone working with international students applying to US colleges and universities:

- 1) **In-Country Resources:** Students intending to study in the US are wise to begin their process by locating reputable, trustworthy in-country resources, such as their local EducationUSA office. With Advising Centers in more than 170 countries, and supported by the US Department of State and IIE, EducationUSA can help international students with everything from researching institutions to demystifying the visa process. Comparable resources are available to students interested in studying in other countries, for examples those offered by the British Council (UK) and the German Academic Exchange Service, also known as DAAD.
- 2) **Online Resources:** Anyone who’s attempted to find information online regarding the plethora of opportunities available in higher education in the US knows that it’s difficult to distinguish the good from the bad



and, even worse, the ugly. There are many sites that tout themselves as providers of insider views of colleges but, in reality, it's a challenge to sort through unhappy ramblings of disgruntled former students to locate true nuggets of helpful information. Throw in the difficult task of navigating through all of the slang that can undoubtedly be confusing to a non-native English speaker, and you've discovered that the "resource" has just added to student anxiety. Still, international students can find value in things such as virtual college and university fairs offered by organizations, such as Hobsons and College Week Live. These virtual fairs, offered throughout the year, allow students from far and away to interact with admission officers from hundreds of schools throughout the US. These fairs can serve as a great introduction to the many offerings available to international students and offer a low-stress jumping off point.

3) Essay Brainstorming/Writing: Many international students, particularly those whose first language is not English, will find the process of preparing their essays and supplements a bit daunting. Students often attempt to prepare their essays in their native language and then translate them into English. The reality is that many ideas will get lost in translation this way. Though international students are fearful that they need to have English abilities that rival their domestic counterparts, most colleges will appreciate an essay that is easy to comprehend as opposed to one that is a grammatically correct trail of confusing thoughts. International students can always have a native English speaker read their essays to provide feedback about the clarity

of thoughts being presented. It's important, however, that the essay is the student's work in all aspects as admission officers are evaluating the student, not their parents or teachers, for admission. In fact, if the quality of the essay far surpasses the rest of the student's application, it may raise some immediate red flags in the eyes of the reviewer.

4) Document Translations: According to the US Department of State, there are currently 197 schools in 135 countries that operate with support provided by the US government. These "American" schools follow US educational system standards and generally provide documentation/transcripts in English similar to that provided by schools within the US. Students attending these schools overseas won't have document translation issues; others will probably feel some frustration determining what is required. Unfortunately there is no standardized list of documents required by all US colleges and universities for international student applications. This means students need to confirm with each school what is required and whether their documents need to be translated and evaluated prior to submission or if the school has someone on staff who is trained to do this for international applicants. Some institutions will allow students to use a certified local translator/credential evaluator, while others specify which credentialing agency they would like the applicant to use. The National Association of Credential Evaluation Services (NACES) provides a database of foreign credential evaluators, many of which are recommended by universities throughout the US.

5) Testing: As is the case with domestic applicants, it's important international

It's important students understand that with ever-increasing numbers of international applicants to schools within the US comes growing selectivity in the admission process.

students know what tests are required by individual schools as there is no standard. For example: international applicants to MIT can choose to submit EITHER the SAT or ACT with Writing plus two SAT Subject Tests, or the TOEFL plus two SAT Subject Tests. Also, though many schools are now test-optional for domestic students, this same policy often does not apply to international applicants. Since many international applicants may not have their college lists defined by the end of their junior year of secondary school, and thus won't necessarily know what will be required for their applications, students may want to consider taking the TOEFL, ACT with Writing, SAT, and at least two SAT Subject exams. Of course, test center availability may be an issue so students should consult ETS, College Board and ACT well in advance of exam registration deadlines to confirm testing information.

6) Managing Expectations: A difficult piece of the college-search process for many international students is the fear of not being accepted to a school deemed "top tier" in their respective countries. There are many schools that offer amazing programs and opportunities but, unfortunately, are



often overlooked because they don't have the same name recognition as many others. It's important students understand that with ever-increasing numbers of international applicants to schools within the US comes growing selectivity in the admission process. More than ever students need to explore options that will best serve them academically and socially, and where they can fully contribute to the campus community. Students should understand rankings only tell a piece of the story and their success beyond college will depend more on what they do with what they've learned than simply what name is emblazoned on their diploma.

7) Financial Considerations: It is estimated international students contribute approximately \$24 billion to the economy each year. Still, a major hurdle for many international students with dreams of attending an institution of higher learning in the US is the financial piece. Non-US

citizens are ineligible to apply for federal financial aid and, unfortunately, are also not eligible for institutional aid at many colleges. However, there are schools that offer very generous scholarship opportunities to attract international students and others who offer alternative forms of financial aid to help offset tuition or fees. It's important students are aware of a school's policy before moving through the application process to avoid unnecessary disappointment at the end. In reality, most international applicants receive very little financial assistance and, according to the *Open Doors 2013* study, almost 64

percent of international students are covering their educational expenses with funds from outside the US.

International students interested in pursuing higher education in the US should understand the challenges involved in the process of applying, particularly from abroad, and begin preparing early. The most difficult piece is to understand there is no systematic, streamlined process and each institution will vary in its requirements and expectations. Though the process seems daunting, students choosing this path will undoubtedly find satisfaction upon receiving their offers of admission and, subsequently, heading off for their first year of college!



KRISTINA DOOLEY is a certified educational planner and founder of Estrela Consulting, an independent educational consulting firm specializing in boarding school and college searches for both domestic and international families. She is a member of IECA, Overseas ACAC and Higher Education Consultants Association and teaches College Admissions Consulting Resources for the UC Irvine Extension.

Advising International Students — School Counselor Perspective

by Elizabeth DePhillips

In the midst of my second cycle on the "other side of the desk," there are many things I didn't expect as I entered the high school college guidance scene at a small independent school in Kingston, Pennsylvania. As a former admission officer who worked at a highly-selective research institution in a diverse urban center, I naively assumed my greatest learning curve might come from living in a smaller town and working with a more homogeneous population. Boy, was I wrong. My experiences working with international students have allowed me to grow both personally and professionally in ways I could not have imagined.

Although I live off campus, I have many responsibilities that contribute to the daily well being of our on-campus boarding community. I never imagined driving a Chevy nine-passenger van to transport students to the movies on Friday nights or the TOEFL exam on Saturday mornings. I didn't expect my conversations with students from Mexico, Taiwan, South Korea, China, India, Hungary, Japan, and Afghanistan over family-style dinner would make an impact on their integration into American culture. I didn't realize how difficult it was for students to address an envelope to a college admission office. And, I certainly would not have an appreciation for Vietnamese coffee if it weren't for my students from Hanoi.

Wyoming Seminary, located in Northeastern Pennsylvania, is an independent school educating students from preschool through the post-graduate year. The Upper School enrolls 450 boarding and day students in grades nine–13, representing 15 states, the District of Columbia and 20 additional countries. In the 2013–14 academic year, approximately 30 percent of our student population is international/non-US citizens, an increase of approximately eight percent in the last five years. Wyoming Seminary's college counseling team is comprised of two full-time counselors and three part-time counselors.



Our numbers show a vast increase in our international boarding population over the past five years. This increase likely came as a result of global trends, but it is also presumed that international students are attracted to the type of school Wyoming Seminary espouses to be. Our mission states: “Within an exponentially changing world, Wyoming Seminary dares to teach our students to honor and strive for the true, the beautiful, and the good.” As a result of this increase, my colleagues and I are very fortunate to work with a diverse group of students from near and far, with a myriad of academic and extracurricular talents. With their help, I reflect on our commitment to counseling an increasingly diverse international population.

Time

College guidance takes time and patience, and each student’s journey is an individual process. Working with international students requires additional time and resources. It takes time to educate international students about the US application process, and it takes time to undo misinformation they’ve gathered along the way. We must dedicate time to truly get to know a student and to appreciate the pressures of his or her home culture that contribute to or often drive the college search.

We spend numerous after-office hours working with boarding students because this school is also their home, and for the time being we act in parental roles. Creating a standardized testing strategy does not just involve planning dates and testing locations. We help them prep for the TOEFL, SAT and ACT, as well as provide transportation to testing centers. We are also the shoulder to cry on when best-laid plans go awry.

Crafting a personal statement often requires weekly meetings for months on end. First, we must convince many of our international

students to show their vulnerable side in their essays and to write freely, something they are not often used to or comfortable doing. However in some cases, we need to rein them in because their cultural tales are not always appropriate within the American context or the admission process. Finally, we spend much of our time helping many of them with their English language and writing skills, and encouraging that creativity in writing is sometimes more effective than a structured essay.

Managing Expectations and Working with Limited Criteria

One of the most challenging and time consuming aspects of counseling is educating international students about the importance of developing college lists that reflect their academic performance and future interests. We show them the graphs, the admission statistics and the probabilities, but somehow many still believe they can gain admission if they memorize and regurgitate each college’s homepage in their “Why” essays. An obsession with rankings also complicates students’ receptivity to college options and impacts how we advise.

When meeting with international students to discuss their college criteria, we often hear statements like: “My college must be ranked in the top 50,” “It must be located only on the east coast or west coast” or “It should have 10,000 to 15,000 students.” Though we certainly get similar demands from our domestic students, our greatest challenge in working with many international families is effective education and communication about the college process in the US. The US college “lingo” is difficult to convey to the many parents from a variety of backgrounds and, with most international families, we’re also working with a language barrier.

Working with Consultants

Some parents can effectively communicate

Working with international students requires additional time and resources. It takes time to educate international students about the US application process, and it takes time to undo misinformation they’ve gathered along the way.

with our counseling staff via email, Skype or phone call. More often than not, however, we find international parents hiring consultants or agents to translate our message. Unfortunately, I am fairly certain that *a lot* gets lost in translation. Very well intended parents want to diminish the stress of the college process on their high-achieving children by hiring a consultant. Without a productive and open partnership between the consultant and the institutional guidance counselor, the students often suffer the increased stress of being caught in the middle of conflicting advice.

We also find some families elect to pay someone to manage their student’s process entirely, from visits and interviews to a stringent testing plan and even application management. In these cases, it has proven effective to ask our students for their consultant’s information to foster a relationship that is in the best interest of our students. Though independent consultants add a new dynamic to providing a holistic counseling experience for our students, we strive to help students achieve their “best fit” in a college environment and experience.

Money, Money, Money

Money talks and it’s personal. Obviously, there are plenty of students, international and domestic alike, who are capable of paying for college. The biggest challenge



I have faced in working with this population is helping international students who have significant demonstrated need. As an independent boarding school, we are fortunate to have the resources to offer financial assistance to international high school students. In the last year and a half, I've worked with at least four international students who genuinely needed financial aid to attend college, and it dictated their college choices. These students have the difficult task of finding schools that 1) offer financial aid to international students and 2) take the chance on them in the admission process. Last year, our office worked with a high need international student who was a top academic achiever, active in school activities, and a model community citizen, yet he did not receive a single offer of admission from his original "most selective" list. This experience underscored the challenge of finding financial resources to support stellar international students. Moving forward, we recognize that these resources are finite at both the high school and collegiate levels.

The Curveball

Just when we when think our guidance plan is a homerun (college high school visits, campus tours, free lunches, and an alumni interview or two to seal the deal) we're thrown a curveball! We learn a student has no idea if he or she submitted their Common Application, or whether they sent their standardized test scores to any college on their list. Perhaps they suddenly learned of an additional \$30,000 in a family trust. Or maybe they decide to change their major because "We've decided business is a better future for me." Regardless of what the curveball is, we have to be prepared and ready to pick up the pieces. Though similar scenarios exist among domestic students, the curveball situations seem to occur much more frequently in working with international students.

Rewards

The immense pressure international students feel to attend top tier institutions likely has an impact on how they approach the college admission process. Some were sent to the US with every penny their family could pool together and their main goal is to gain admission to a college or university "ranked in the top 50." For these students, we must work to show them the wonderful opportunities at schools beyond their "magic list." Some students get so lost in American culture and academics, become so exhausted from translating each day and are overwhelmed by the guidance of their consultant that the process becomes daunting. These students need help to find their voice and to make *their* process their own. I have found that the few students who become completely open and vulnerable in the process, who listen to our guidance and who choose the right schools for them and their interests tend to learn a lot about themselves. Ultimately the process helps to define the young adults they are striving to become.

Working in college guidance is one of the most rewarding careers in our industry. At Wyoming Seminary, we're accustomed to working with a class size of 120, with 25 percent of the class being international boarding students. Now, we're gearing up for the largest class of international students in the school's history. Approximately 39 percent of the Class of 2015 will be international boarding students, and this

year has certainly been an eye-opener for me. The reality is that counselors who work with diverse populations and international students need to be knowledgeable and flexible, ready to work with any student who may come their way. We must continue to find ways to be creative with our time and resources, given that all boarding students (international boarding students in particular) simply demand more of us.

Looking back on my time in college admission, I wish I had been more aware of the complexities of an international boarding student's experience. At the end of the day, these students are 100 percent invested in succeeding in a college prep program and in gaining admission to a highly selective college or university. They meet with their teachers to improve research papers, and prepare for tests on a daily basis. They disobey lights out at 11:00 p.m. to study for an AP US history test, calculus exam or to finish SAT/ACT preparations. They eat lunch with their native peers because they simply need a moment to remember where they come from, and to speak their native language. They wait outside our office doors at 8:00 a.m. because they don't understand the difference between the FAFSA and the CSS Profile, yet many are not required to submit either form. They are accomplished athletes, artists, musicians, hip-hop dancers, actors, engineers, designers, magicians, and above all, they are scholars. They are courageous, and for a short time, they rely on us to guide, console, advocate, and defend them in the college admission process.



ELIZABETH A. DEPHILLIPS is associate director of college guidance at Wyoming Seminary College Preparatory School, PA. In addition to college counseling, she serves as site coordinator for testing, academic advisor and girls' softball assistant coach. Prior to Wyoming Seminary, she worked in undergraduate admission at The George Washington University (DC) where she also earned her BBA in International Business and her MTA in Event and Meeting Management. She is a current member of NACAC and Pennsylvania ACAC.