In an increasingly competitive space for recruiting international students, US universities are expanding their investment in staffing and resources to reach students around the world. Stagnant, and in some cases declining, domestic enrollment has forced some colleges and universities to actively recruit international students. In recognition and anticipation of shifting demographics in the US, Valparaiso University (IN) has been working with agents for over 10 years to expand our international student enrollment.

The landscape for international recruitment has evolved as the number of companies and agents has increased. The structure of such companies varies from truly multinational operations to small companies run by an individual in a specific city. The operations of these agencies also vary significantly with some full-service companies offering recruitment tours, transcript evaluations, visa preparation, and pre-departure orientations, while others simply help with application submissions. In some countries, companies have contracted with sub-agents to help recruit students, an arrangement that runs the risk of causing issues and confusion for the institutions and students with whom they work.

As a result of the evolving landscape, Valparaiso has changed how we engage with our agents. Of primary concern was the need to clarify roles internally and enhance communication with the various campus stakeholders (e.g., student services, financial aid, residence halls, etc.) leading up to the students arriving at the university. Previously, we ran into instances where it would not be clear who was responsible for communicating with the agents (admission staff, senior international officer, or staff from the international office), and there were times when processing an invoice would lead to confusion, straining relationships with agents. Such incidents helped our office realize how important it was to ensure that the finance office had access to agent contracts in order to process payments smoothly.

The process of selecting agent partners, communicating with those companies, overseeing operations, and maintaining relationships has evolved over the years. We currently have a system that helps clarify who we work with, our expectations for working with agents, and what an agent can expect from us in return. This has resulted in better communication, better applications, and better yield.

Institutional Process for Agent Selection

To improve our use of agents we have implemented several steps at the institutional vetting stage to help ensure campus buy-in and commitment. First, Valparaiso has a policy of primarily working with agents who are certified by the American International Recruitment Council (AIRC). This provides us with a level of confidence that we are working with agents who are committed to ethical standards. However, on rare occasions, we will consider partnering with agents that are not AIRC-certified. These are instances where a Valparaiso staff member already has an extensive working relationship with a particular company or the company is from a region where we are trying to expand
our focus. This policy has served us well in putting together a robust list of agents who are beginning to help increase applications to the university.

Second, we have established an agent review committee made up of three members from the graduate and undergraduate recruitment offices. Once a potential agent partner has been identified, we ask them to complete a survey with a series of questions designed to probe their agency’s history, past performance, vision and mission, services provided, expectations from the university, memberships, and outside recommendations. After we receive this information, the agent review committee will decide whether to partner with the company or agent.

And third, we streamlined the contract process, ensured that the process had oversight from our legal counsel’s office, and required that all documents be signed by the provost. While this process might seem bureaucratic, it has served us well by establishing an added layer of scrutiny.

**Needs Assessment and Agent Training**

Once an agency or agent has signed the contract, the agent review committee will initiate a conversation with the company’s leadership and assess their needs for materials and support from our university. This conversation allows our team to get to know the company better and conveys our intent in having a productive relationship. Early and frequent communication is critical for setting the tone for the relationship. We offer training sessions to help their staff become familiar with our university, programs, scholarships, etc. These sessions include phone calls, webinars, campus visits, and conversations at national meetings hosted by the Association of International Education Administrators (AIEA), the International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF), and NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

One of the things we stress from the onset is our zero tolerance policy regarding fraudulent documents. If we receive documents that are fraudulent (e.g., test scores, grades, etc.) it will be grounds for an immediate cancellation of an agent or agency’s contract. We have had a couple of occasions where, because of this, we have severed ties.

**In-Country Training**

In addition to virtual and on-campus training, Valparaiso staff who travel for recruitment purposes also make it a point to visit regional offices of agents. These visits are used to make personal contact with the staff and offer training on our admission criteria, unique programs, campus culture, and
academic support systems, as well as general information about our campus, community life, and safety. The training is a critical tool that helps overseas agents stay up-to-date about Valparaiso’s programs and offerings. For example, agents in some countries find information about the university’s programs that meet the diverse spiritual needs of our international population helpful when they talk to students.

We have started to track our engagement with agents and will soon be able to assess how productive our efforts have been. We plan to continue enhancing communication and ensure that application processing proceeds smoothly. Due to the relational nature of agent partnerships, staff turnovers within our institution as well as within the agencies with which we work are among the issues that will require continuous attention.

Additional Considerations

Compensation for agents and whether what we offer is adequate or too much is a point of continued internal discussion at Valparaiso. Based on the idea that some agents might channel applications to institutions offering the highest commission, some have advocated for increasing payments. Others are concerned about entering a “commissions race” with other universities—a problem that is likely to grow as we see a rise in the number of institutions planning to work with agents. There are also ethical concerns for universities to consider.

For example, any increase in agent compensation could impact the budget, potentially necessitating a reduction of scholarships for international students. Universities must weigh this issue carefully and make a strategic decision.

Another issue of concern is the race to process applications expediently. Agents often request faster processing times of their applications. An institution might already be working to improve efficiencies and reduce the time taken to provide an admission decision. There are certainly benefits to removing redundancies, reducing paperwork, and switching to electronic files. However, institutions should not race to reduce process time for the sake of making a quick decision. Expediency should never be favored over making well-informed admission decisions.

Conclusion

It is important to emphasize the necessity of a robust process for working with companies and agents and a good internal team to help coordinate. However, it is also important to understand that the success of such relationships can often be overshadowed by geopolitical events out of the university’s control. Well-managed agency partnerships with a long-term vision can help institutions weather the storm. Constant communication with the agency and its staff is critical to having a more engaged collaboration, rather than a merely transactional relationship.