

RESEARCH BRIEF

USE OF COMMISSION-BASED AGENTS IN THE RECRUITMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

INTRODUCTION

Institutions are constantly examining their international recruitment strategies to optimize their return on investment. For some secondary schools, colleges, and universities, partnering with commissioned agents—individuals paid on a per capita basis—to recruit international students is part of a multifaceted plan. It is always important to evaluate an agency-based strategy relative to the institution's current enrollment management practices, campus readiness, and alternative recruitment approaches.

Commissioned agents allow institutions to establish a local presence in strategic regions abroad, and to meet growing enrollment targets, oftentimes with limited budgets. From a student perspective, commissioned agents may be a main source of guidance for many families in countries that lack a significant presence of school-based college counselors, independent educational consultants, and college fairs.

However, NACAC maintains a healthy concern with this strategy. Despite the benefits, there are inherent risks to students and institutions. For students who interact with agents, these include financial risk, misinformation risk, and the risk of being referred to an institution based not upon what is educationally and socially best for them, but, rather, what is financially advantageous for the agent. Risks to institutions include financial, legal, and reputational risk. To protect all stakeholders, it is critical that institutions strategically develop and effectively implement operational protocols and institutional policies in line with best practice.

NACAC has been closely monitoring the use of commission-based agents by US higher education institutions for nearly a decade, leading up to NACAC's Commission on International Student Recruitment, which first convened in 2011.¹ In recent years, NACAC has collected more detailed information about agents on the annual Admission Trends and Counseling Trends surveys, including their role in secondary schools, to better understand the impact on the college admission counseling process.² This research brief highlights findings from the past three years.

SURVEY RESULTS

Recruitment Strategies for International Student Recruitment

Admission officers were asked to rate the importance of various strategies for recruiting first-time international students. Although website and email were the most important strategies across all institutions, commission-based agents play an important role for a subset of institutions. About 36 percent of respondents to NACAC's 2017–18 Admission Trends Survey reported that they use commission-based agents and another 27 percent were actively considering the practice. More selective institutions were less likely to be either using agents or interested in doing so.³

Among survey respondents that used agents (n=57), 39 percent rated them as considerably important to the recruitment of international students, and an additional 36 percent found them to be moderately important.

¹ NACAC (2013). *Report of the Commission on International Student Recruitment*. NACAC: Arlington, VA.

² Methodology information is available after the survey results.

³ Correlation (Spearman) acceptance rate and using agents (.320); considering agents (.299), $p < .01$.

Percentage of Institutions that Work with Agents

	N	Yes
All Respondents	160	35.6
Acceptance Rate		
Accepts fewer than 50 percent of applicants	26	7.7
50 to 70 percent	66	34.8
More than 70 percent	49	49.2

Percentage of Institutions Actively Considering Agents

	N	Yes
All Respondents	102	26.5
Acceptance Rate		
Accepts fewer than 50 percent of applicants	24	8.3
50 to 70 percent	42	21.4
More than 70 percent	30	46.7

On the 2016–17 Admission Trends Survey, respondents reported an average of seven business relationships with agents or agencies. The number, however, ranged from 1 to 30. There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to working with agents. It is critical to assess the capacity of the institution to manage agent partnerships, which will help determine an appropriate number of business relationships. [The University of Texas at Arlington](#), for example, decided to limit its partnerships to five to seven.⁴ [New Brunswick Community College](#) (Canada) decided to pare back the number of agents with whom it partnered by 50 percent to ensure proper attention was provided to those with whom they continued to work.⁵

Institutions use various policies and practices to define their relationship with commission-based agents and to support the agents in representing the institution well. For 2017–18, Admission Trends Survey respondents were asked to indicate which of the following policies they had implemented. Nearly all institutions required agents to enter into a formal contract, and three-quarters assess the students who are recruited by agents. Larger institutions were both more likely to require recommendations and to assess recruited students.⁶

Percentage of Colleges with Various Agent-Related Policies

	2017–18 (N=57)	2016–17 (N=52)	2015–16 (N=101)
Require Recommendations	44.0	53.8	35.6
Require Formal Contract	94.2	94.3	73.3
Provide Training Manual	58.8	48.1	32.7
In-person Training Sessions	58.8	59.6	40.6
Assess Students Recruited by Agency	78.8	75.0	59.8
List on Student-Facing Website	28.0	17.3	5.9

Though more institutions reported listing agency partners on student-facing websites over three academic years, it is alarming that just over a quarter of institutions that work with agents do. One of the biggest concerns with commission-based recruitment is the lack of transparency around the practice. Namely, that students and families are unaware of the financial relationship between agents and the institutions for which they recruit, as well as the potential influence this can have on the guidance they receive. NACAC is firm in its belief that institutions have an obligation to students to help ensure that greater awareness and understanding is achieved, and through its [code of ethics](#) requires members to disclose and provide contact information for agent partners.⁷

Role of Agents in Secondary Schools

According to the 2017–18 Counseling Trends Survey, nearly 70 percent of private schools and 39 percent of public schools enrolled at least one international student. Schools with larger enrollments and fewer students receiving free or reduced-price lunch (a proxy for income) were more likely to enroll international students.⁸

⁴ Larson, L. (2018). *Wading into the waters of international student recruitment agents*. NACAC: Arlington, VA.

⁵ Sullivan, S. (2018). *International student recruitment agent management*. NACAC: Arlington, VA.

⁶ Correlation (Spearman) enrollment and require recommendations (.482), assess recruited students (.373), $p < .01$.

⁷ NACAC. (2018). *Commissioned agents and NACAC's code of ethics series: Institutional transparency*. NACAC: Arlington, VA.

⁸ Correlation (Spearman) enroll international students and total enrollment (.114), FRPL (-.240), $p < .01$.

Percentage of Secondary Schools that Enroll Any International Students

	Yes	No, but plan to	No
All Respondents	48.3	2.8	38.3
Type			
Public	38.6	3.5	57.9
Private	69.3	3.7	26.9
Enrollment			
Fewer than 500 students	42.5	4.3	53.2
500 to 999	48.9	3.3	47.8
1,000 to 1,499	54.2	2.8	43.1
1,500 to 1,999	63.4	0.8	35.8
2,000 or more students	55.3	4.5	40.2
Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL)			
0 to 25% of students eligible	58.0	3.7	38.3
26 to 50%	41.6	2.2	56.2
51 to 75%	37.7	3.4	59.0
76 to 100%	30.2	5.8	64.0

Like colleges and universities, secondary schools utilize a variety of strategies—including partnerships with commission-based agents—to recruit international students. In fact, there are numerous initiatives that help facilitate these business relationships and guide best practice, such as the [inaugural ICEF Secondary Education event](#) and the [Council on Standards for International Educational Travel's model standards](#) for international recruitment agencies.^{9,10}

Many of the international students that secondary schools enroll also use agents to assist them in the college admission process. Often students continue to work with the same agents that helped them with the secondary admission process. Counselors at these schools have varying levels of awareness of their students' engagement with agents, and only nine percent reported having a written policy that outlines whether and how school-based counselors should engage with agents hired by students and their families. Levels of awareness varied by school type, with 72 percent of counselors at private, non-parochial schools reporting awareness of student relationships with agents, compared to 52 percent at private, parochial, and only 13 percent at public schools. Awareness was also more common at small schools, those with low numbers of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch, and those with low student to counselor ratios.¹¹

Percentage of Schools Where Counselors Are Aware of Students Working with Agents

	Yes
All Respondents	36.1
Type	
Public	12.7
Private parochial	51.9
Private non-parochial	71.9
Enrollment	
Fewer than 500 students	48.2
500 to 999	36.5
1,000 to 1,499	25.0
1,500 to 1,999	22.4
2,000 or more students	5.8

Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRPL)	Yes
0 to 25% of students eligible	44.2
26 to 50%	18.9
51 to 75%	17.2
76 to 100%	15.8
Students per Counselor	
100 or fewer	55.2
101 to 200	46.1
201 to 300	20.8
301 to 400	22.7
401 to 500	20.8
More than 500	37.2

⁹ ICEF Secondary Education event. Retrieved from <https://www.icef.com/events/icef-secondary-education/>.

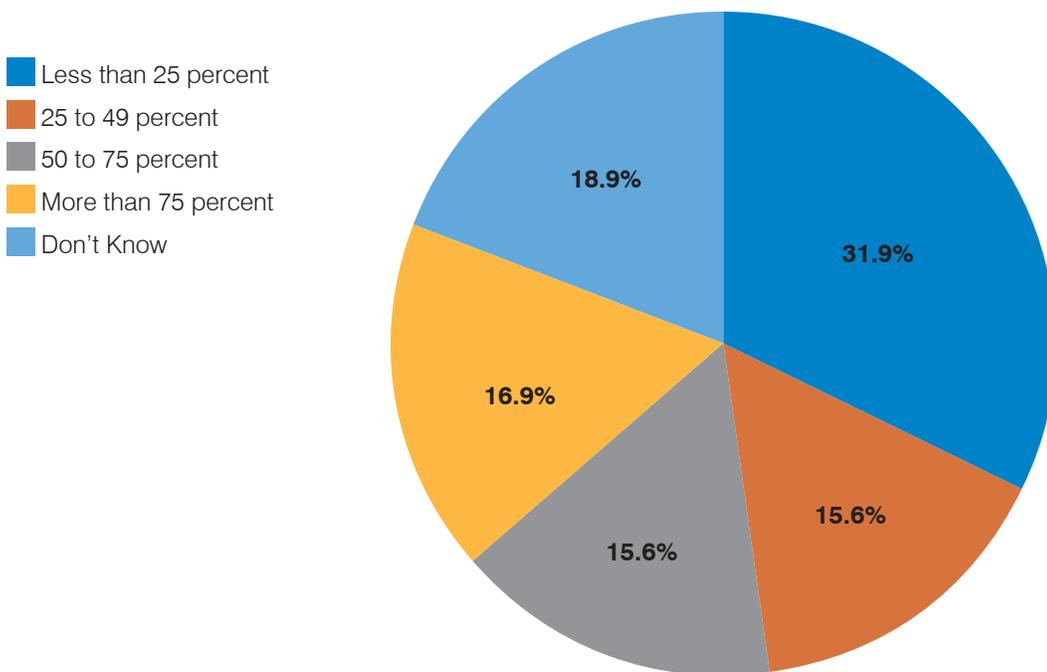
¹⁰ Council on Standards for International Education Travel. (2018, August 21). *CSJET to begin new certification process for F-1 student recruitment agencies at the secondary level* [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.csiet.org/2018/08/21/csiet-press-release-f-1-high-school-recruitment-agencies-new-evaluation-process/>.

¹¹ Correlation (Spearman) aware of student relationships with agents and enrollment (-.253), FRPL (-.325), student to counselor ratio (.161), $p < .01$.

Counselors who reported being aware of student/agent relationships also were asked to report the proportion of their international students who work with agents for college admission. At almost one-third of schools (32 percent), counselors reported that less than 25 percent of international students worked with agents. At another third of the schools, however, counselors reported that more than 50 percent of international students work with agents.

Acknowledging that the use of a third party in the admission process is common in other cultures is important, and greater transparency around the student's network of advisers and those individuals' roles in the process can be in the best interest of the student who often feels caught in the middle. Counselors should proactively communicate with international students and families early in the college admission process to explain that there is greater benefit in working with the agent rather than against them. Developing policies that ensure all relevant stakeholders are engaging in ethical practices is vital for the student, the school, and the agent.

**Proportion of Students Working with Agents
(Among Respondents who Reported Being Aware)
(N=308)**



ABOUT THE SURVEYS

Admission Trends Survey (2017–18)

For the 2017–18 administration of the Admission Trends Survey (ATS), the questionnaire was divided into two parts—one set of questions was sent to university admission offices and another sent to institutional research (IR) offices. Both portions were administered online using SurveyMonkey. The IR survey was emailed in February 2018 to 1,266 four-year postsecondary institutions. In August 2018, the admission office survey was sent to all 1,241 four-year postsecondary institutions that were NACAC members. Admission offices also were asked to provide additional data if the IR portion had not been submitted. At the time of the survey, NACAC member institutions represented 70 percent of all degree-granting four-year, not-for-profit, baccalaureate degree-granting, Title-IV participating institutions in the US. NACAC received 493 responses, for an overall response rate of 39 percent. Of the 493 responses, 220 institutions submitted completed surveys (both admission and IR sections) and 273 submitted just the IR portion. All responses were utilized in the analyses.

NACAC 2017–18 ATS respondents had a similar average acceptance rate compared to all colleges, but private college respondents had lower yield rates when compared to the national average. NACAC survey respondents also had larger undergraduate enrollments.

NACAC 2017–18 Admission Trends Survey Sample Compared to National College Population

	NACAC Respondents	All Colleges	NACAC Public Respondents	All Public Colleges	NACAC Private Respondents	All Private Colleges
N (%)	493	1,817	184 (37%)	579 (32%)	309 (70%)	1,238 (68%)
Mean Enrollment (Full-Time Undergrad)	6,204	3,947	12,716	8,602	2,557	1,768
Mean Selectivity	64.4	65.4	67.9	69.3	62.3	63.5
Mean Yield	27.9	33.6	32.0	34.0	25.3	33.4

NOTE: Data for all colleges was drawn from the 2016–17 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) using the following criteria: US location, four-year, not-for-profit, baccalaureate degree-granting, and Title IV-participating. Of the 1,817 total institutions, approximately 1,567 (86 percent) provided both selectivity and yield data for fall 2016.

SOURCES: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2017–18.

US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2016–17). Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Data Center. Washington, DC: NCES.

Admission Trends Survey (2016–17)

For the 2016–17 administration of the Admission Trends Survey, the questionnaire was divided into two parts—one set of questions was sent to university admission offices and another set to institutional research (IR) offices. Both portions were administered online using SurveyMonkey. The IR survey was emailed in March 2017 to 1,110 four-year postsecondary institutions. In September 2017, the admission office survey was sent to all 1,383 four-year postsecondary institutions that were NACAC members. At the time of the survey, NACAC member institutions represented 80 percent of all degree-granting four-year, not-for-profit, baccalaureate degree-granting, Title-IV participating institutions in the US. NACAC received 604 responses, for an overall response rate of 44 percent. Of the 604 responses, 127 institutions submitted completed surveys (both admission and IR sections); 202 submitted only the admission office portion of the survey; and 275 institutions submitted only the IR office portion. All responses—including those from universities that only answered one half of the survey—were utilized in the analyses.

NACAC 2016–17 ATS respondents were relatively representative of all colleges. NACAC respondents had lower yield rates, particularly among private colleges, when compared to the national average. Public NACAC survey respondents were less selective than all public colleges.

NACAC 2016–17 Admission Trends Survey Sample Compared to National College Population

	NACAC Respondents	All Colleges	NACAC Public Respondents	All Public Colleges	NACAC Private Respondents	All Private Colleges
N (%)	604	1,736	111 (34%)	558 (32%)	218 (66%)	1,170 (68%)
Mean Enrollment (Full-Time Undergrad)	6,049	4,106	11,335	8,825	3,067	1,855
Mean Selectivity	67.3	66.1	76.2	69.5	62.4	64.4
Mean Yield	24.8	35.1	29.1	35.8	22.3	34.8

NOTE: Data for all colleges was drawn from the 2014–15 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) using the following criteria: US location, four-year, not-for-profit, baccalaureate degree-granting, and Title IV-participating. Of the 1,736 total institutions, approximately 1,555 (90 percent) provided both selectivity and yield data for Fall 2014.

SOURCES: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2016.

US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2014–15). Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Data Center. Washington, DC: NCES.

Admission Trends Survey (2015–16)

For the 2015–16 administration of the Admission Trends Survey, the questionnaire was divided into two parts—one half of the survey was sent to university admission offices and the other to institutional research (IR) offices. The survey was emailed in March 2015 to admission and IR representatives from 1,380 four-year postsecondary institutions that were NACAC members, representing 76 percent of all accredited four-year, not-for-profit, baccalaureate degree-granting, Title-IV participating institutions in the US. NACAC received 687 responses, for an overall response rate of 50 percent. Of the 687 responses, 208 institutions submitted completed surveys (both admission and IR sections); 131 submitted only the admission office portion of the survey; and 348 institutions submitted only the IR office portion. All responses—including those from universities that only answered one half of the survey—were utilized in the analyses.

NACAC 2015–16 ATS respondents were relatively representative of all colleges with respect to control (64 percent private survey respondents compared to 68 percent nationally). All regions of the country were represented. NACAC respondents had lower yield rates, particularly among private colleges, when compared to the national average. Public NACAC survey respondents were slightly less selective than all public colleges.

NACAC 2015–16 Admission Trends Survey Sample Compared to National College Population

	NACAC Respondents	All Colleges	NACAC Public Respondents	All Public Colleges	NACAC Private Respondents	All Private Colleges
N (%)	687	1,807	250 (36%)	575 (32%)	437 (64%)	1,232 (68%)
Mean Enrollment (Full-Time Undergrad)	5,978	3,902	11,068	8,491	2,659	1,760
Mean Selectivity	65.1	65.8	70.6	68.3	61.6	64.6
Mean Yield	28.8	36.2	33.6	36.9	25.6	35.9

NOTE: Data for all colleges was drawn from the 2014–15 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) using the following criteria: US location, four-year, not-for-profit, baccalaureate degree-granting, and Title IV-participating. Of the 1,807 total institutions, approximately 1,555 (86 percent) provided both selectivity and yield data for Fall 2014.

SOURCES: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2015.

US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2014–15). Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) Data Center. Washington, DC: NCES.

Counseling Trends Survey (2017–18)

In May 2018, NACAC distributed the 2017–18 Counseling Trends Survey (CTS) to a school counseling office staff member at 16,252 secondary schools ending in 12th grade. NACAC preference for respondents at each school started with the school counseling department chair, followed by school counselor, college placement adviser, and college adviser. The list of counselors was purchased from MCH Strategic Data. The survey was administered online using SurveyMonkey. Responses were collected through the middle of June 2018.

NACAC received 2,251 responses to the survey. The following table provides a comparison of the characteristics of NACAC CTS respondents to those of all public and private secondary schools in the US (ending in grade 12). NACAC survey respondents were 68 percent public, 18 percent private non-parochial, and 14 percent private parochial, making the sample under-representative of public schools in favor of private, non-parochial schools. Among public schools, NACAC respondents were similar to the larger population in the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. NACAC survey respondents reported larger enrollments compared to all secondary schools.

NACAC 2017–18 Counseling Trends Survey Sample Compared to the National Secondary School Population¹

	NACAC Survey Respondents	All Secondary Schools	NACAC Public School Respondents	All Public Schools	NACAC Private Non-Parochial Respondents	All Private Non-Parochial Schools	NACAC Private Parochial Respondents	All Private Parochial Schools
N	2,251²	32,881	1,510	26,398	403	1,996	300	4,487
% of schools			68.2%	80.3%	18.2%	6.1%	13.6%	13.6%
Mean enrollment	787	570	905	650	514	214	553	286
% of students eligible for FRPL	37.3%	—	49.4	51.5	8.2%	—	12.6%	—

—Not available for private schools.

¹ Includes schools ending in grade 12.

² The number of public and private NACAC respondents does not add to the total because 38 schools did not report school type.

SOURCES: NACAC Counseling Trends Survey, 2017–18.

US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2015–16). The Elementary/Secondary Information System (EISi) web application was used to download data from the Common Core of Data (CCD) and Private School Survey (PSS) for the 2015–16 school year. Calculations performed by authors.