

The Use of Agents in Recruiting Chinese Undergraduates

Abstract

The number of undergraduate Chinese students has been steadily increasing in the U.S. and many of them first become aware of specific American institutions and subsequently chose one through the use of an agent. However, there is virtually no research regarding the balance of costs and benefits of using an agent nor is there evidence of any testing if Chinese students have been well served by the agent. This study will collect data from 1) Chinese international undergraduates and 2) prospective undergraduate students about their rationales of using, or not using, an agent and the main areas of dis/satisfaction.

Importance of the study

International student mobility is a rapidly growing and evolving phenomenon. During the 2007-08 academic year, the number of international students at colleges and universities in the U.S. increased by 7% to a record high of 623,805 with about 15% from mainland China (IIE, 2008). Historically, the international Chinese students in the U.S. have generally studied at the graduate level. However, research conducted by the Institute of International Education (IIE, 2005; 2006; 2007; 2008) has indicated that the number of undergraduate Chinese students has been steadily increasing. In fact, on some campuses, the number of Chinese undergraduate students has surpassed the number of Chinese graduate students. For instance, in academic year 2007-2008, there were approximately 700 undergraduate Chinese students at Iowa State University (ISU) as compared to approximately 500 graduate students.

The model of college choice for Chinese students who are considering postsecondary enrollment at an American university often follows a model unique from that followed by American students. A large number of Chinese students first become aware of specific American institutions and subsequently chose one as their institutional choice through the use of an agent. In China, as well as in some other international locales, agents are often hired to assist students in finding an international institution fitting their academic goals. It must be noted, however, that while the majority of agents operate from a premise of finding the best institutions for their clients, not all education agents in China (or elsewhere) adhere to the highest of ethical standards (Franklin, 2008). In fact, the actions of some agents have raised educators' concerns. For instance, it is not uncommon for an agent to accept fees from both the student and the recruiting institution (Lewin, 2008). Even though the American International Recruitment Council was incorporated in Washington, D.C. in June 2008 with the purpose of combating unethical agencies,

it remains that such recruitment agencies lack industry standards (Redden, 2009).

There is virtually no research regarding the balance of costs and benefits of using an agent nor is there evidence of any testing if Chinese students have been well served by the agent while applying to American universities. Facing a fast, steady growth of Chinese undergraduate students on American campuses, it is essential for the university enrollment office to understand the role that education agencies play in Chinese undergraduate recruitment.

This study will collect both quantitative and qualitative data from 1) Chinese international undergraduates on an American campus and 2) prospective undergraduate students in mainland China about their rationales of using, or not using, an agent for their college application, their experience and/or expectation of using an agent, and the main areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction among the international Chinese undergraduates regarding the application and enrollment processes.

The result of this study will allow researchers to recommend strategies and policies for Chinese undergraduate student recruitment, based on a comprehensive understanding of individuals' features and their experiences. The study will also produce guides and information (written in Chinese) for Chinese students considering undergraduate studies in the U.S.

Research Questions

This study will examine two sets of students both current Chinese undergraduates enrolled in U.S. universities as well as current Chinese high school students in China who are considering future enrollment at a U.S. university. The specific research questions:

- Why do some Chinese undergraduate students choose to work with an agency? What knowledge or information did they expect to receive from the agency?
- What are the reasons underlying institutional choice among Chinese students considering American universities?
- What are the major difficulties that Chinese students encounter during application preparation?

- What are the main areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction among international and prospective Chinese undergraduate students regarding the application process, as well as the factors contributing to these impressions, e.g. social economic status, level of English efficiency, geographic location, etc?
- What are resulting differences between students who do or do not use an agent among a host of experiences including: demographics, pre-arrival information, accommodation, administrative procedures (e.g. immigration and visas), classroom and academic experience, and social and academic integration?
- What is the level of preparation and assistance provided by agents? Were students represented by agents subsequently better prepared than those who were independent?

Research Design

In the first phase, the researchers will perform a search of the literature both in the U.S. and, to the extent possible, in China on the topic of college choice and international recruitment.

Second, the researchers will gather and analyze national trend statistics on international Chinese undergraduate students, their national distribution, and demographics. We will concentrate on four postsecondary institutions; three located in the Midwest and one in the West. We plan to include Iowa State University (ISU) of Ames, IA; Fort Hays State University (FHSU) of Hays, KS; Grinnell College (GC) of Grinnell, IA; and the University of Southern California (USC) of Los Angeles, CA. These institutions have been purposefully chosen because they are currently experiencing a dramatic increase in Chinese undergraduate enrollment (Welsh-Huggins, 2008). We will build an historical table of enrollments pertaining to these institutions.

In Phase 2, we will build upon the extant knowledge with student interviews and focus groups. We will conduct focus groups at Iowa State University to guide us in subsequent survey questions and interview scripts. Both phases 1 and 2 will be completed no later than May 15, 2009.

At phase 3 the researchers will send a letter and a link via email to all the Chinese international undergraduates at the targeted institutions: ISU, FHSU, GC, and USC, with an invitation to participate in an online survey. At the end of the survey those who are willing to

participate in a follow-up interview can input their contact information. Eventually, a minimum of 20 students who indicated working with an educational agent and 20 who did not will be interviewed individually either on site or through telephone. The researchers will transcribe the interviews and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data in accordance with the stated research questions. The interviews will be completed by July 30, 2009.

Phase 3 will be conducted in Zhengzhou, Henan, China in the summer of 2009. Located in the North Central China, Zhengzhou (over 6,000,000 people) is the capital city of Henan Province. This province is the most populous province in China with a population of over 100 million. Compared to large cities like Beijing and Shanghai, Zhengzhou students have fewer educational opportunities and very limited access to international education. Interestingly an increasing number of Chinese undergraduate students enrolled in the U.S. in the past few years were from North Central China. However, it remains unknown whether the large increase is related to the booming educational agent services or other potential factors. It will be of significance to conduct this project in Zhengzhou because it may be representative of many cities of similar size and limited access to international education. The results of the research can be useful to other locations and help open international education opportunities across China. One of the researchers is originally from the Zhengzhou area and has contacted provincial education administration and two regional high schools and has received initial permission to survey and interview students who plan to pursue a bachelor's degree in the U.S. We provide a letter of support from China. A paper survey in Chinese will be delivered to the students and a series of follow up focus group and/or individual interviews will be conducted with students volunteering to speak with us.

From September 2009 to January 2010, researchers will analyze the quantitative data from

the survey and the qualitative data from the interviews from both prospective and international Chinese undergraduate students and complete the final report.

Planned Outcomes

The researchers plan to present the results to the International Admissions Office at the site universities, the officials at the high schools in Zhengzhou, and present at national/international conferences in 2010. The researchers will also use the results to create a national web page, which is open to prospective Chinese students, their parents, and anyone who is interested in seeking more information about roles that educational agents play in international Chinese undergraduate recruitment in the U.S. The website will be in both Chinese and English. Although the website will be a stand-alone entity, we will encourage the Department of Admissions at the site locations to link to it. The website will clearly and without bias state what agents can and cannot do for Chinese students, the pros and cons of using an agent, and the procedures for applying to U.S. colleges and universities.

Project Bibliography

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