

Going it alone

Higher education institutions in the USA are often reluctant to work with education consultants overseas, owing to a tradition of not paying third parties to recruit students. However, increasing competition from other study destinations means that many are having to rethink their practices. **Bethan Norris reports.**

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The USA has always been the most popular study destination for international students worldwide. According to *Education at a Glance 2000: OECD Indicators*, the USA attracts 32 per cent of the total worldwide international student population, double the number of students attracted to the second most popular country, the UK. At a time when education institutions in most countries throughout the world use education consultants to recruit international students as a matter of course, the USA continues to drag its feet.

Some US institutions remain reluctant to use education consultants because of the controversy surrounding the subject of paying commission in return for student enrolments. “We believe it to be unethical to pay for students,” states Kari Gazdick, Assistant Director of International Admissions at Point Park College in Pittsburgh. “If someone is making money to get students to come to our college, there might be more pressure on them to enrol than normal.”

Exacerbating the situation still further, some associations, such as the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO), forbid commission payments in their membership regulations.

There is a prevalent attitude among some education institutions in the USA, particularly among state-funded universities, that education provision should be distanced from money-making activities. Sherrie Kelly, Director of the American Language and Culture Institute at California State University, San Marcos, says, “The language institute is able to pay commission because it is a self-support unit whereas the university is supported by state taxes.”

State universities are hampered by the fact that they are audited annually and the payment of commission is not seen as an appropriate use of public money. However, there are ways round this. “We call the commission ‘marketing fees,’” says Arlene Spencer from Fulton Montgomery Community College, which is a publicly funded college in New York State. “It’s a much more acceptable term. We have an agreement with each agency and in that agreement, the agency is performing services in addition to recruitment – this includes

marketing, advertising, orientation, translation, etc. Therefore, when a service is performed it is appropriate to pay a fee for that service.”

The negative attitude towards education consultants is undoubtedly hampering US market growth in the international education industry. “Some universities and colleges in the USA think that education has nothing to do with doing business,” says Marcela Serra, from Passport agency in Argentina. “It is amazing the difference between talking with a person who is an academic and someone from marketing.”

Jesus Vela-Alvizu, from Universitas Travel and Study agency in Mexico, reports that there are very few opportunities for consultants in Mexico to work with universities in the USA. “[US universities] think that working with agents in a way affects their



seriousness as an educational institution," he says. "When you try to work with a new one it is quite difficult, starting with the fact that many do not have a department or person responsible [for] working with agents. Bureaucracy in [some] universities is a [serious] obstacle."

However, the global battle for international students is heating up, with increasing competition from relatively new study destinations such as Australia and New Zealand. In addition, the terrorist attacks on the USA last year have affected the desirability of the USA as a study destination. As a consequence, many US institutions are becoming increasingly aware of the need for more effective marketing overseas.

Juan Mosquera, Associate Director of International Admissions at Alma College in Michigan, is currently looking into the possibility of using consultants as a way of making better use of his time and resources. "I have lots of offers to travel to countries such as the Middle East, China and Japan but it is very expensive to travel there and there is too much work to do in the office," he says. "I have been approached by many education consultants by email, some offering their services for free and others wanting a fee for their services. I have not finalised any agreements with agents yet."

The reluctance of many US institutions to pay consultants commission, coupled with the fact that consultants in some markets are inundated with requests for study programmes in the USA, has led some consultants to pass their agency fee on to the student. "We have to charge our clients for the US market," says Dennis Browning from Da Di Overseas Studies Services Centre in Hong Kong. "Most [universities] want our students but expect me to make the student pay."

Official policies towards the payment of commission vary from institution to institution, and consultants often have to be flexible in their business practices. "Private universities [in the USA] give 10 per cent commission. State universities mostly

do not, so we [charge] a placement fee [from students]," confirms Omer Cekelez, from Hamle Consultancy and International Trade in Turkey.

There are, of course, lots of universities and colleges in the USA that have managed to build up successful and mutually satisfactory relationships with overseas consultants and the key to their success is often in the careful choosing of consultant partnerships.

"For the most part, consultants contact us," says Joy Colelli, Vice President for Enrolment Management at Mercy College in New York State. "We ask for references and speak with other college officials who have worked with them and we speak to a few students. We draft a letter of understanding and maintain frequent discussions."

Kelly, from California State University, also asks for

references and membership of professional associations when looking for new consultants to represent the institute. "We attend agent fairs to meet face to face with potential representatives. We also respond to email enquiries with a questionnaire to be filled out and returned," she says. "Since agents are more familiar with the local market, they are more effective

locally. They also provide a two-way flow of information between us and students."

However, many consultants experience problems in their dealings with US institutions and believe that these stem from a lack of understanding of their business practices. "[Some US institutions] do not know how to deal with agents overseas," says Serra. "They do not reply to emails promptly or send information on time."

"[Universities] are too bureaucratic," adds Matias Gialgia, from Ingles en el Exterior in Argentina. "[There is] too much red tape compared to colleges and [private] English schools. They are not flexible either in terms of dates."

The long-term effects on the international education industry in the USA of the terrorist attacks in USA and subsequent military activities and global unrest have yet to be fully realised, but there is evidence that fears about safety is causing many foreign students to seek study opportunities elsewhere (see pages 2-3).

"The new bookings we are having after September 11 are for destinations like Canada and Europe. Students still don't want to know about New York City or Washington," confirms Cornelia Sierich, Course Director at IVI Idiomas Vivos in Venezuela. "Of course, New York City and Washington will have to seek support in order to re-establish [their business] and agents can be a key aspect in this procedure." ○

Selection of higher education institutions in the USA	agents	state/private	marketing fee
Alma College, Alma, MI		private	
American Institute of Baking, Manhattan, KS		private	
American Language and Cultural Institute, California State University, San Marcos, CA	✓	private	✓
Armstrong State College, Savannah, GA		state	
Fulton-Montgomery Community College, State University of New York, Johnston, NY	✓	state	✓
Haverford College, Haverford, PA		private	
Lewis-Clark State College, Lewiston, ID	✓	state	✓
Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, NY	✓	private	✓
Point Park College, Pittsburgh, PA		private	
Truman State University, Kirksville, MO		state	

"We attend agent fairs to meet face to face with potential representatives"

The case for agents

Many institutions in the USA are reluctant to hand over any control of their selection process to an overseas consultant. "Our admission process is mostly centred on selection, and outside agents would not have enough insight into that process to be useful in our situation," says Delsie Phillips, Director of Admission at Haverford College in Pennsylvania.

However, this ignores the fact that the main role of an education consultant is that of an independent, impartial advisor and the enrolment decision still ultimately rests with the institutions themselves. Reputable education consultants are unlikely to recommend unsuitable candidates to institutions, if only because the success of their own business rests on the reliability of their reputation in their own country and abroad.

"We've found that consultants serve as defacto admissions counsellors overseas. They assist in solving problems," says Joy Colelli, Vice President for Enrolment Management at Mercy College in New York State. Personal contact with reputable consultants, as well as the establishment of a reliable two-way information exchange, serves to establish an open working partnership between institutions and consultants which can be beneficial for all concerned and result in increased satisfactory enrolments.

Burcin Turkkan Beyhan, President of USEH – International Training and Education Services in Turkey, stresses that consultants can be useful in ensuring that only bona fide students are sent to study at institutions in the USA, especially in the light of the terrorist action against the USA last year. "Education agents can function as a filter for the institutions. Our organisation, for instance, does make a background search and reference check for all candidates applying for any type of programme we offer," he says.