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College Application With or Without Assistance of an Education Agent:

Experience of International Chinese Undergraduates in the US

This article focuses on the demographics comparing Chinese students who have or have not used agent assistance when applying for admission to American postsecondary institutions. The article was submitted for review in December 2010 and accepted by the Editorial Committee prior to the issuance of the NACAC Board of Directors' proposed policy statement regarding commission-based international recruitment. As this *Journal* goes to print, the NACAC Board has not finalized its recommendation to the NACAC Assembly regarding possible changes to the Statement of Principles of Good Practice on this issue.

Abstract

Using third-party education agents is a well-established practice in many countries. As a result, the number of international students placed by agents has grown considerably over the past years. However, in the US, the practice of using agents to increase international enrollment still carries a derogatory connotation in the educational community. Inexperience with agents coupled with incomplete knowledge about students' experiences using agents may contribute to misunderstandings about agent recruitment practices that may lead to biased institutional decisions. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, this study provides a better understanding of the use of education agents and how they may assist students' application to a US higher education institution. The study also reveals the potential problems for students using the services of agents.

Key words: education agent, international student recruitment, US higher education, Chinese undergraduate students

Introduction

International students are a highly-prized component in US higher education. During the 2008–09 academic year, the number of international students at colleges and universities in the US increased by eight percent to a record high of 671,616 students (Institute of International Education [IIE] 2009). International students are valuable contributors to academic internationalization, economic development and cultural exchange in US institutions and local communities (e.g., Altbach 1989; Bevis 2002; Harrison 2002). International students may provide significant connections between different nations and provide domestic students with opportunities of communicating with different cultures (Altbach 1989; National Association for College Admission Counseling [NACAC] 2010; NAFSA 2003; Peterson et al. 1999).

Although international student enrollment brings many positives to US higher education, it is highly competitive. The US—world leader of international student enrollment—is continuously challenged by other countries, particularly Australia, Britain and New Zealand. These countries' governments have enacted international education policies designed to increase their international student populations (Altbach 2004; Peterson et al. 1999).

Effective recruitment is key to international competition. Although promotional videos, university Web sites and interactive online approaches can reach a large pool of students in a cost-effective way, many international students in target markets favor a physical presence. Sending college representatives overseas is ideal, but highly expensive, making it less-favored when university budgets shrink. A more suitable option for American colleges seeking new or effective means of recruitment is to use local agents.

While working with or through education agents to increase international enrollment has long carried a derogatory reputation in the US, using agents has become a well-established practice in other parts of the world and has grown considerably, particularly in Asian countries (De Luca 2010). Inexperience coupled with insufficient knowledge about students' experience using agents may contribute to misunderstandings and biased institutional decisions.

This study intends to improve understanding of education agents who assist students applying in the US, and outlines associated benefits and problems. The researchers purposefully chose international Chinese undergraduate students on US campuses because, in the academic year 2009–10, China's student population in the US surpassed that of India, making China the country sending the most students to the US. Almost 20 percent of the US's international students are from China (IIE 2010). Additionally, many US colleges have experienced a rapid increase in Chinese undergraduate enrollment in recent years (Fischer 2009).

This study collected both quantitative and qualitative data from international Chinese undergraduate students enrolled in four American universities and colleges in Fall 2009. From surveys and interviews, the researchers collected information about student demographic characteristics, their rationale for using or not using agents for their college application, their experiences and satisfaction with agents, and extent to which agents assist students on their college applications. The specific research questions are:

1. What are the demographics, social economic status and academic backgrounds of international Chinese students who have



The international student market is changing. International student recruitment is affected by current events and the political environment.

used or not used an education agent in college application?

2. Why do some international Chinese undergraduate students choose to use or not to use an agent?
3. What factors predict international Chinese undergraduate students' choice of using or not using an agent?
4. What services do international Chinese undergraduate students expect to receive and what services do education agents provide?
5. To what extent are international Chinese undergraduate students who use an agent satisfied with the services?

Literature Review

Challenges of Increasing International Student Enrollment

The international student market is changing. International student recruitment is affected by current events and the political environment. For example, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, concerns of national security led to visa restraints and apprehension of international students, especially those from Muslim-predominated countries. Greater scrutiny was given to international students and student application processing fees were increased. These new rules and regulations for aspiring international students greatly hindered the growth of international education exchange (Arnone 2003; Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado and Rhoades 2006). As a result of this catastrophic event, 32 consecutive years of international student enrollment growth in the US came to an abrupt halt (IIE 2005).

Now the US is facing serious international student enrollment challenges from other countries. Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and many other countries have taken steps to make their educational programs more attractive to international students. These countries also have improved services in college application, transition of life, accommodation of learning, and even immigration after graduation. The US has more competition from emerging international education leaders; they are gaining more and more students from the global pool (Altbach 1989; 1998; 2004; Lee and Rice 2007; Peterson et al. 1999).

International Student Recruitment Methods

Facing increasing competitiveness, many colleges and universities are seeking more economical and novel approaches to accrue a larger pool of prospective students. Online applications are widely used by many universities to provide an easier and cost-effective application process to potential applicants (Brown et al. 2002). University recruiters also rely heavily on electronic media, such as videos, DVDs and university Web sites. However, students in some countries or regions have limited access to online information due to technology or expense. Educational fairs provide students with personalized information via direct conversations with recruiters, but they can be very expensive for universities and are inconvenient for students living far away from the host city (Gray, Fam and Llanes 2003).

EducationUSA, supported by the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) at the US Department of State, is a global network of more than 400 advising centers in 170 nations, "offering accurate, unbiased, comprehensive, objective, and timely information about educational institutions in the US and guidance to qualified individual on how best to access those opportunities" (EducationUSA 2010). The "EducationUSA" information centers provide first-hand information to local students, but most are located in limited areas, such as the US embassies and consulates. For example, the only EducationUSA in China as of 2009 was located in Beijing. With US colleges in high demand, it is obvious that this small number of centers are not able to serve a wide range of prospective students.

Using Education Agents to Recruit

Another type of overseas advisement is the third-party education agent, sometimes referred as a representative or consultant. In this study, an education agent is defined as a person, a company or an organization that provides services to students seeking to study and earn a degree abroad in exchange for a fee from the students. The agent may also receive a commission from foreign institutions with which it has an agreement (Hagedorn and Zhang in press).

International student recruitment with the assistance from education agents is prevalent in Asian countries and has a strong influence on whether and where a

student will pursue postsecondary education (Pimpa 2003). During the past decade, China has experienced a rapid growth in the number of education agents, such that approximately 400 agents are registered there (The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China 2010). Many agents provide “one-stop” style services, including choosing an institution, preparing for language tests, preparing application materials, and assisting in the preparation and scheduling of the visa interview (Hagedorn and Zhang in press). A reliable agent can benefit students by offering useful information and valuable suggestions, as well as help colleges and universities become more competitive in foreign target markets by providing direct access to students with the same language, a local infrastructure, timely feedback, permanent representation, etc. (De Luca 2010; NACAC 2010). However, less responsible agents could harm students' study and life, and contaminate institutions' reputations overseas (Hagedorn and Zhang in press). Quality control, misrepresentation, conflicts of interest, and student enrollment-based compensation were also reported as problems in agent recruitment practice (NACAC 2010).

Methodology

Research Sites

This study includes four American colleges and universities that were purposefully chosen to represent different types and sizes of institutions, including a large private research university, a large public research university, a public master university, and a private liberal arts college.

Methods and Participants

Approximately 900 international Chinese undergraduates in the four institutions were sent an email invitation to participate in the study. Three institutions agreed to provide international Chinese undergraduates' email addresses and one sent the invitation email and reminders on behalf of the researchers. In total, 315 students responded to the online survey and 257 completed it. All students were invited to participate in follow-up interviews and 28 students volunteered to speak to the researchers in person or via telephone. All interviews were conducted in the Chinese language to preserve the natural settings of the participants and minimize the barriers of sharing.

In the study, students who chose to use an education agent in their college application were defined as agent-assisted, while those who did not use were identified as non-agent-assisted students.

Data Analyses

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted. Descriptive analysis was first conducted to provide background information regarding the international Chinese undergraduate students' demographic characteristics and a foundation for further analysis.

Logistic regression was used to identify statistically significant predictors of students' choice of using or not using an agent.

Qualitative data were first transcribed from interview audio records and then open coded to define subjects or topics. Findings of the qualitative data were presented by themes with supporting quotations (Esterberg 2002).

Results

Question 1: What are the demographics, social economic statuses and academic backgrounds of international Chinese students who have used or not used an education agent in college application?

The results from the descriptive data analysis revealed valuable information about the international Chinese students studying in the US. Of the participants, the average age was 20, nearly half (49 percent) were female, 53 percent were freshmen in college, more than 60 percent had at least one parent with a bachelor's degree, and almost all students (91 percent) lived in urban areas in China. With regard to their reasons for studying in the US, students believed that studying at an American institution would deliver better quality, higher education (55 percent) and a more prestigious degree (18 percent). Additionally, about 12 percent of them favored American culture over others. Among 257 respondents, 57 percent reported using an agent to assist their application to US colleges and universities while the rest (43 percent) indicated that they were not assisted by an agent.

Table 1 represents the background characteristics of the sample by student type. Agent-assisted and non-agent-assisted students presented similar distributions with respect to age and gender. The majority of the students were between 18 and 20 years of age. Male and female students were equally distributed in both groups, although a slightly higher percentage of male students were found among agent-assisted students (53 percent vs. 49 percent).

The Chinese students were confident in their English abilities. None of them reported their English as “poor.” A higher percentage of agent-assisted students regarded their English ability as “fair,” while more than twice as many non-agent-assisted students indicated that they were “excellent” in English listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

Approximately 35 percent of agent-assisted students reported majors in science, technology, mathematics, or engineering (STEM), while the percentage of non-agent-assisted students in STEM majors was almost 10 percent higher. Business and engineering were the top two majors for both sets of students. For example, nearly 40 percent and 20 percent of agent-assisted students studied in business and engineering, respectively, at the time they responded to the survey.

Approximately half of the students who were not assisted by an agent took the Chinese college entrance examination prior to their arrival in the US, while 70 percent of agent-assisted students took the examination prior to their arrival in the US.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Characteristics by Type

Variable	Percent among	
	Agent-Assisted (n = 146)	Non-Agent-Assisted (n = 111)
Gender: Female	46.8	51.4
Age		
20 and below	72.4	70.4
21 and over	27.6	29.6
High School Track		
Science	61.6	54.6
Liberal Arts	29.5	32.4
Undetermined	8.9	13.0
Ranking in HS senior year		
Low	0.7	1.9
Middle	28.3	41.0
High	37.9	57.1
High School Location		
Rural	0.7	0.0
Suburban	9.0	8.3
Urban	90.3	91.7
Classification		
Freshman	60.3	39.7
Sophomore	25.2	28.2
Junior	9.2	25.6
Senior	5.3	6.4
English		
Poor	0.0	0.0
Fair	33.1	22.7
Good	57.7	54.6
Excellent	9.1	22.8
Major		
STEM	34.6	43.0
Non-STEM	65.4	57.0
Father's Education		
Middle school and less	7.7	8.0
High school	16.2	13.8
Associate	8.5	12.6
Bachelor's	45.8	34.5
Master's	17.6	20.7
Doctoral	4.2	10.3
Mother's Education		
Middle school and less	10.6	5.8

High school	17.0	15.1
Associate	22.0	22.1
Bachelor's	37.6	41.9
Master's	12.8	10.5
Doctoral	0.0	4.7
College Entrance Exam		
Did not take	30.1	49.5
Took	69.9	50.5
College Attendance in China		
No	65.1	73.0
Yes	34.9	27.0
If took SAT or ACT		
No	75.3	56.9
Yes (either one)	24.7	43.1
If took TOEFL or IELTS		
No	7.7	9.3
Yes (either one)	92.3	90.7
Family Income (RMB)		
<20,000	4.2	0.0
20,001-50,000	10.0	4.4
50,001-100,000	12.5	19.1
100,001-300,000	31.7	27.9
300,001-500,000	16.7	17.6
500,001-1,000,000	15.0	17.6
>1,000,000	10.0	13.2

In general, parents of non-agent-assisted students received more education when compared to their agent-assisted counterparts. Although a higher proportion of bachelor's degree awardees were found among fathers of agent-assisted students, almost 10 percent more fathers of non-agent-assisted students obtained master's and doctoral degrees. Regarding mothers' education attainment, higher percentages of bachelor's, master's and doctoral degree awardees were identified among non-agent-assisted students.

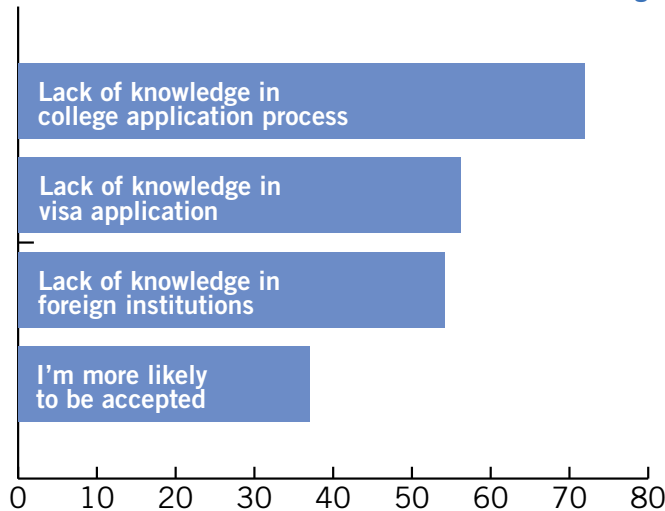
Approximately half of the students who were not assisted by an agent took the Chinese college entrance examination prior to their arrival in the US, while 70 percent of agent-assisted students took the examination prior to their arrival in the US. Correspondingly, a higher proportion of agent-assisted students attended college in China (35 percent vs. 27 percent) before transferring to the US.

Regarding family average income in the past five years, the two groups of students presented differently. A higher percentage of agent-assisted students reported ¥50,000 (approximately equivalent to \$7,500) or lower while a higher proportion of non-agent-assisted students indicated that their family's income was ¥300,000 (approximately equivalent to \$45,000) or above.

Question 2: Why do some international Chinese undergraduate students choose to use or not to use an agent?

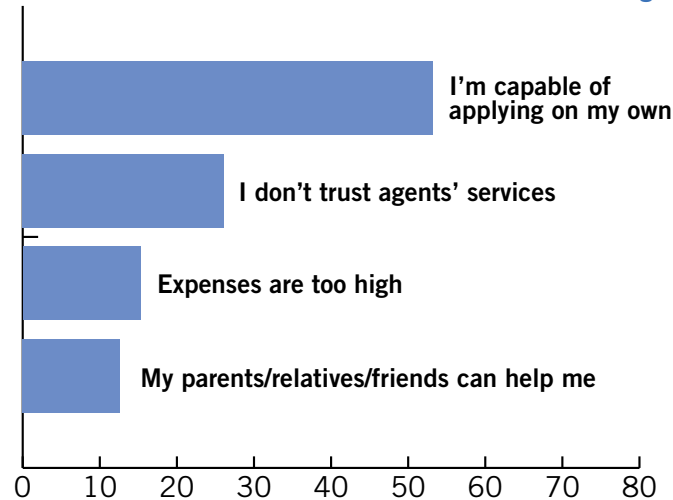
Almost 60 percent of the participants reported that they used agents' assistance when they applied to US colleges. The students were asked to provide the top three reasons that led them to use an agent. The most popular reason, cited by 72 percent of agent-assisted students, was little knowledge regarding the college application process. Lack of knowledge in visa application and limited knowledge about the US higher education institutions were reported respectively as the second and the third important reason. Nearly 40 percent of agent-assisted respondents indicated that they felt they were more likely to be accepted by the university if they applied with assistance of an agent (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Reasons Why international Chinese Undergraduate Students Chose to Use an Education Agent



Approximately 43 percent of the respondents reported that they did not use an agent in their college application process. The most popular reason was "I am capable of applying on my own," chosen by more than half of the students (see Figure 2). More than one-fifth indicated that they did not trust agents' service. "Expenses are too high" was selected by 15 percent of non-agent-assisted students and "my parents/relatives/friends can help me" by 13 percent. A small percentage of students mentioned that they went through exchange programs and thus had no need of an agent.

Figure 2. Reasons Why international Chinese Undergraduate Students Chose Not to Use an Education Agent



Findings from the qualitative data collected from follow-up interviews echoed the results of the survey data. Understanding of US college application procedures, choosing an institution and/or a program that can best fit students' capability and interests, and preparing for college application documents and visa interviews were identified as the biggest barriers for application, as well as the most important reasons for using an agent.

1) Understanding US college application procedure.

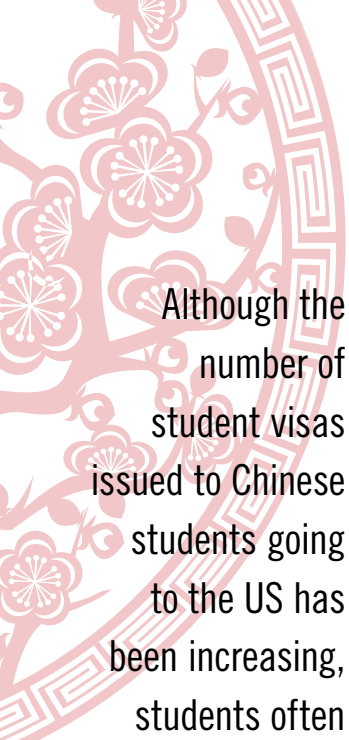
Due to the differences in the higher education systems in both countries, Chinese students shared their confusion about applying to US colleges with the researchers. A college junior regarded his application process as an "easy piece" after studying in the US for about one year. However, he wasn't sure where to start the application when he first decided to study in the US.

Now I can say the application process is not hard. But if you don't know... you just don't know where to start with. My agent walked me through the process, which saved me a lot of time and effort.

2) Preparing application documents.

Preparing application materials, such as personal statements, transcripts and financial support documents can be a complex, time-consuming process. Even completing the application form may be a formidable task for some international students. Many students turn to agents for their professional advice to assist them in these application-related tasks. A freshman reported that he was willing to pay for the expertise of an agent to make sure that his documents met the college requirements.

My English was poor when I applied to the Midwestern University. It took me a couple of weeks to figure out how to complete the online application form... I am serious. I finally gave up and found an agent to assist my application.



Although the number of student visas issued to Chinese students going to the US has been increasing, students often regard the application and interview a mysterious process and feel they have little to no control over the result.

3) Preparing for visa interviews.

Visa interview preparation was another prevalent barrier that drove students to work with agents. To receive a student visa (F-1), Chinese students must make an appointment with the US Embassy office by using a specific pre-paid telephone card. They have to travel to one of the five US Embassy or Consulate Offices in China to be interviewed individually. As most hopeful students can attest, there is no guarantee that students who present valid admission documents from accredited US institutions will be issued a student visa. The visa application is the last obstacle that students have to overcome to study in the US. Almost all interviewees expressed their worries and concerns related to this final step. Although the number of student visas issued to Chinese students going to the US has been increasing, students often regard the application and interview a mysterious process and feel they have little to no control over the result. For example, a junior acknowledged that one of her major criteria in the choice of an agent was whether the agent had a high rating on visas obtained.

My biggest concern was the rate of successful visa applications. The agency I chose to use was known as the best in my home city. I was told that its rate of successful visa application was 100 percent.

With the same concern, some students who did not use an agent in college application preparation, employed agents for the sole purpose of helping them with visa application and interview. For example, a senior female student expressed,

My cousin was in a... university while I was preparing my application. He taught me how to apply to American universities and how to prepare visa interviews as well. But my parents thought I should use an agent, since getting a visa is the key to study in the US.

Findings from the interviews suggest that students who did not use an agent encountered a similar set of difficulties when compared to agent-assisted students. Students who were not assisted by agents were confident in searching for information alone or had assistance from others in locating the kinds of information that agents can provide. A senior who had transferred from a Chinese university related his experiences regarding the application process:

I applied to 12 universities without using an agent. It was overwhelming, but I know it is doable... through the process I knew better about my interests and my writing in English was improved. It is not what an agent can provide.

A freshman consulted his uncle, who obtained a Ph.D. from a US university, about how to succeed in the college application process.

He (the uncle) told me everything that I need to know for my application. He also told me how to apply for jobs on campus and scholarships for undergraduate students.

Question 3: What factors predict international Chinese undergraduate students' choice of using or not using an agent?

The descriptive results and qualitative findings depict students who used or did not use an agent in college application and their rationale. The researchers also analyzed a hypothetical predictive model to examine the factors that affect students' decisions. The validity of the hypothetical predictive models was examined through statistical tests. The significance of regression coefficients were examined at a significance level of $p < .05$ or $.01$.

The independent variables were entered through a forward block procedure that allowed the researchers to determine the set of variables most responsible for the explanation of variance. Model 1 included students' demographic characteristics and family backgrounds. Model 2 added students' education experiences in China to the equation. Model 3 incorporated variables that measure students' academic preparation for US colleges and universities. Table 2 illustrates the odds ratios in each model and Table 3 presents the final odds ratios and standardized regression coefficients of Model 3.

Background Information

Five independent variables were included in the first block. With the exception of gender, all other variables (student age, parents' education, parental income, and GDP of home province) revealed significant negative associations with student choice of using an agent. By the final step in the equation, age and parents'

education remained significant negative predictors of using an agent. In other words, younger students and students whose parents had less education were more likely to use an agent to assist them in the college application process.

Table 2. Odds Ratios in Each Model

Variable blocks	Odds Ratio		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Background Information			
Gender: Male	1.448	1.294	1.198
Age	0.766	0.659	0.634*
Parents' education	0.617**	0.548**	0.583*
Parental income	0.847	0.931	0.953
GDP of home province	0.873	0.878	0.896
Education Experience in China			
Ranking in high school		0.319***	0.370**
College Entrance Exam		2.590	1.691
College attendance		1.348	0.951
Academic Preparation			
English proficiency			0.839
SAT/ACT			0.270*
TOEFL/IELTS			2.017
Nagelkerke R Square	0.128	0.353	0.402

Logistic Regression Predicting Student Choice of Using or Not Using an Agent by Block

Table 3. Final Odds Ratios

Variable blocks	B	S.E.	Wald X ²	Odds Ratio	p
Background Information					
Gender: Male	0.180	0.521	0.120	1.198	0.729
Age	-0.455	0.231	3.877	0.634	0.049
Parents' education	-0.539	0.227	5.645	0.583	0.018
Parental income	-0.048	0.182	0.071	0.953	0.790
GDP of home province	-0.110	0.171	0.414	0.896	0.520
Education Experience in China					
Ranking in high school	-0.995	0.355	7.870	0.370	0.005
College Entrance Exam	0.525	0.617	0.725	1.691	0.395
College attendance	-0.050	0.707	0.005	0.951	0.943
Academic Preparation					
English proficiency	-0.176	0.522	0.114	0.839	0.736
SAT/ACT	-1.309	0.604	4.701	0.270	0.030
TOEFL/IELTS	0.701	0.811	0.748	2.017	0.387
Nagelkerke R Square	0.402				

Education Experience in China

This block consisted of three variables: student senior year ranking in high school, whether students took the national college entrance

examination in China and whether students attended a college in China prior to their study in the US. Among the three variables, only taking the China college entrance examination had a positive relationship with student choice of using an agent. At the final step, ranking in high school remained a significant variable that predicted student choice of using an agent. More specifically, students with a higher ranking in their senior year of high school were less likely to use an agent to assist their application.

Academic Preparation for Study in the US

Three variables entered in this block: student self-reported English proficiency, whether students took a standardized test for American higher education institutions (e.g., American College Testing (ACT) and/or Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)) and whether the student took language tests for non-native English speakers for admission at any US institution (e.g., the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and/or International English Language Testing System (IELTS)). Self-reported English proficiency and taking SAT or ACT had negative correlations with student choice of using an agent, but taking TOEFL or IELTS had positive correlation with using an agent. By the final step, taking SAT or ACT prior to arrival in the US remained a significant predictor to choice of using an agent. In other words, students who took the SAT and/or ACT test were less likely to use an agent during college application.

Question 4: What services do international Chinese undergraduate students expect to receive and what services do education agents provide?

Services Expected from Students

Almost a quarter of agent-assisted students expected the agent to contact all necessary personnel in the American institution, department or admission office on their behalf (see Figure 3). More than 20 percent of the participants expected agents to provide assistance in college application material preparation and 18 percent would like to receive recommendations in finding the best-matching destination country and institution. The fourth important service, chosen by approximately 16 percent of agent-assisted participants, was visa application preparation.

Services Provided by Agents

Results indicated that agent-assisted students used multiple services. Nearly 80 percent reported that the agent provided service in visa application preparation. More than 70 percent indicated that the agent helped them select the best fitting country and/or institution. Approximately two-thirds informed the researchers that the agent assisted them in preparing application materials. More than 60 percent admitted that their agents initiated communication with



Additionally,
the researchers
uncovered cases
where agents
crossed the line of
ethical practice.
A couple of
students
mentioned that
their agents
wrote personal
statements or
recommendation
letters for them.

the institution(s), department(s), professor(s), and/or recruiter(s) (see Figure 4).

Question 5: To what extent are international Chinese undergraduate students who use an agent satisfied with the services?

In general, the majority (70 percent) of agent-assisted students were satisfied with services provided by their agents (see Figure 5). Approximately 57 percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that the cost of using an agent was reasonable. Two-thirds indicated that they would recommend the same agent to their friends.

Quantitative data revealed that many agents provided thorough services, but interviews with students noted that agents' services, in many cases, ended after successfully sending students to the US. Some agents helped students with their visa renewal and airplane ticket purchase during their college years. A couple of agents arranged for former students who used their services to help the new cohorts. However, it was very rare to have an agent provide students with information regarding the transition. None of the students indicated that agents better prepared them for adjusting to a new living and studying environment. A senior female student reported,

I didn't think I was better prepared for studying in the US compared to those who didn't use an agent. My agent did what they promised, but the service only included college and visa application. They did not have services available after I landed in the US.

Additionally, the researchers uncovered cases where agents crossed the line of ethical practice. A couple of students mentioned that their agents wrote personal statements or recommendation letters for them. A male freshman said,

My agent wrote the recommendation letters for me. I just need to provide three names of my high school teachers or college instructors, and he took care of the rest... I don't know what's in the letter!

Summary and Discussion

The descriptive statistics revealed that many international Chinese undergraduate students studying in the US were from middle-class families, lived in urban China and had parents who had at least a bachelor's

degree. Among the participants, 57 percent were assisted by an agent and 43 percent were not when applying to a US university.

In general, using an agent can be attributed to unfamiliarity with US college application procedures and student visa preparation. Limited knowledge about US higher education institutions also contributed to student choice of using an agent. Moreover, the data showed that students viewed agents as professionals and believed they can be better prepared for college application and more likely to be accepted with the assistance of an agent.

Students who did not use agents appeared to reject the idea of an agent mostly because they already had access to the information regarding college application, either from their own study abroad experiences, or parents, friends or relatives familiar with the US college education system. Students also reported expense as a factor that influences their decisions not to use an agent, as well as mistrust of agents.

Through a sequential logistic regression model, the researchers found that students who were younger, were ranked lower in high school senior year, did not take the SAT and/or ACT test, and whose parents had less education were more likely to use an agent to assist their application. It is not surprising that younger students were found more likely to use an agent. When compared to their older counterparts, younger students were likely less experienced, thus requiring additional assistance in the college application process. Students who were ranked lower in high school senior year implied that they were less prepared in academic study or less capable of learning new knowledge.

The US college application process to some degree is a new territory to Chinese students as it requests self-guided and motivated activities. Because the SAT and ACT tests were designed for US high school students, they are not well known among most Chinese students and their parents. Taking the SAT and/or ACT prior to study in the US may suggest that students were either familiar with the higher education system in the US or they have gained access to the application information. Another possible explanation is that the students may

receive application information from the classes or schools they attended for the SAT or ACT training. Therefore, it became unnecessary for these students to use an agent. Parents who received less education might be unfamiliar with academia and have less information about higher education in China and the US. As a result, they may feel less capable of assisting their children in applying to a US college and more likely to look for professional assistance.

Echoed with application difficulties, the most needed services from agents were:

1. Initiating contact with any necessary personnel (e.g., admission officers, department secretaries, program directors, etc.) at target universities.
2. Preparing college application materials (e.g., providing a flow-chart of application process, filling out the forms for clients, writing or editing any necessary English documents, etc.).
3. Choosing a designated country and/or institution that can best fit students' interests and capabilities.
4. Preparing all necessary documents for student visa applications and/or training for the face-to-face interviews with US embassy officers. Some agencies have English speaking consultants to help students practice interview questions.

Agent-assisted participants indicated that agents met their expectations and the majority of them were satisfied with their services. More than 60 percent of agent-assisted students would recommend the same agent to others and more than half thought the expenses were reasonable. However, unethical practices, focus on short-term benefits and higher prices than anticipated were problems with working with agents.

Implication for Practice and Future Research

Using an education agent to assist application to a foreign university has become a common practice in China. Like other professionals, education agents provide information and knowledge in a specific area. Professional, responsible agents can provide students with valuable assistance in choosing the most fitting university and program based on student preferences (e.g., expenses, major, location, diversity, etc.) and academic preparation (e.g., ACT scores, English proficiency, ranking in high school, self-motivated learning abilities, etc.). The wide range of services provided by agents demonstrates that education agents play an important role in assisting Chinese undergraduate students applying to US institutions and the high satisfaction rate suggests that agents could provide satisfactory services.

Within the agent-student relationship, students are vulnerable to unethical practices. Frequently they fully depend on agents'

Figure 3. Expected agent services by international Chinese undergraduate students

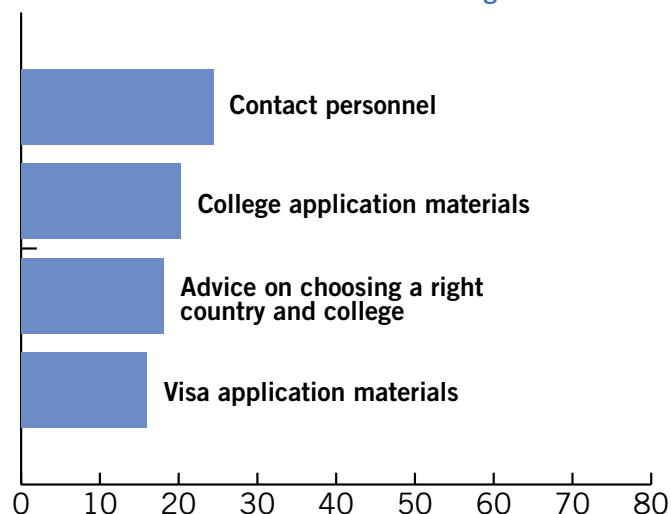


Figure 4. Services provided by education agents

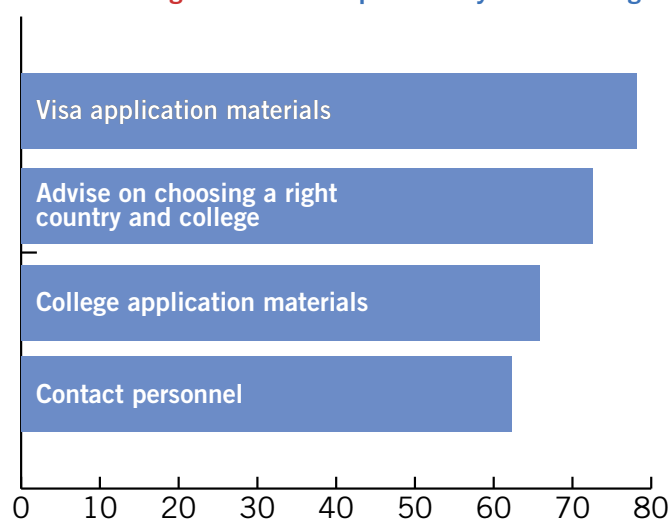
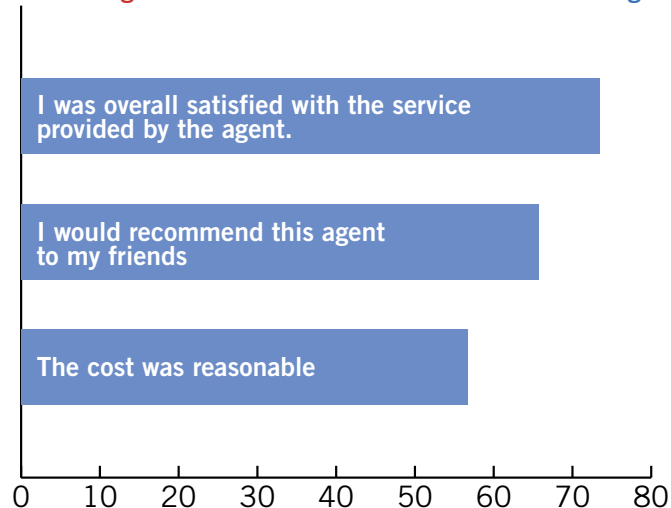
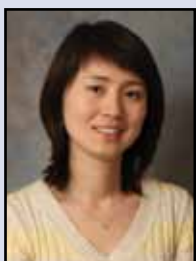


Figure 5. Student satisfaction with education agents



information and cannot necessarily determine whether the agent is providing the appropriate services. To improve this unbalanced relationship, American colleges and universities must explore the best approach for working ethically. The US must face up to the fact that the practice is growing alongside student need and devise ways to work within this new paradigm. If agents operate in the best interest of the students and exhibit ethical practices while recruiting, their services could greatly benefit both international students and American higher education institutions. American colleges and universities should not ask "Is the practice of recruiting through an education agent ethical?" but, rather, "How can the use of a third-party agent be supervised so that students' interests, as well as the accountability of the institution, can be guaranteed at all stages of the recruitment process?"

Further research should be conducted to explore the specific means to work with agents in all cultures and regulate unethical practices. The results of the study provided insightful knowledge about working with agents from a student perspective. However, it is also important to study agent-assisted recruitment from an institutional level. Studies focusing on partnerships between universities and agents should be conducted to enrich the literature. Additionally, this study only included students from mainland China. Further studies are needed to explore roles of agents in recruiting students from different nations and identify patterns across countries. In so doing, researchers, admission officers and international recruiters can gain a fuller understanding about practice of agent in international student recruitment in a global context.



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