

The Use of Agents in Recruiting Chinese Undergraduates

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Introduction

International student mobility is a rapidly growing and evolving phenomenon. During the 2008/09 academic year, the number of international students at colleges and universities in the U.S. increased by 8% to a record high of 671,616 students with about 15% from mainland China (IIE, 2009). 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; 2009) 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 the academic year 2008/09, there were approximately 900 Chinese undergraduate students at Iowa State University (ISU) as compared to approximately 600 graduate students. In the upcoming fall, ISU is expecting larger increase in the number of undergraduate students from China.

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 educational 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. It must be noted that it is not uncommon for an agent to accept fees from both the student and the recruiting institution (Lewin, 2008). Scholars have pointed out that some agents will portray an inaccurate picture of the universities and colleges that they are presenting (Mazzarol & Hosie, 1996). Even though the American International Recruitment Council was incorporated in Washington, D.C. in June 2008 with the purpose of combating unethical agencies, recruitment agencies still lack industry standards (Redden, 2009).

Although the use of paid agents to help higher education institutions to recruit international students in countries like Australia and Britain is a common practice, it has not been a widespread practice among American colleges and universities (Fischer, 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 their agents when 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 collected both quantitative and qualitative data from both international Chinese undergraduate students in the U.S. higher education institutions and prospective undergraduate students in China, who are considering future enrollment at a foreign university. From both sets of students we collected information about the students' rationales of using, or not using, an agent for their college application, and their experience and/or expectation of using an agent. Among those students who were enrolled in the U.S. colleges or universities, who have used an agent, the researchers reported on the main areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction regarding their experiences related to college application and the enrollment processes.

The specific research questions are as follows:

1. Why do some Chinese undergraduate students or prospective students choose to work with an agent? Why do some of them choose not to work with an agent?
2. What knowledge or information did the students who used an agent or planned to use one expect to receive from the agent?
3. What are the major difficulties that Chinese students encounter during application preparation?
4. What are resulting differences between students who do or do not use an agent among a host of experiences including: demographics, social economic status, pre-arrival information, administrative procedures (e.g. immigration and visas)?
5. What is the level of preparation and assistance provided by agents? Were students represented by agents subsequently better prepared than those who were independent?

Literature Review

Internationalization of Chinese higher education

To better understand the Chinese students' decision making process, a historical perspective in the reforms in China's higher education is adopted in this study.

In contemporary history, higher education in China has been experiencing conflicts between traditional values and the implanted foreign postsecondary education model, shifting between elitism and populism. Since the new People's Republic of China was established in 1949, China's higher education has experienced four major phases, conflicting between two contested lines: "the revisionist-supported Soviet model of elitism and the revolutionist- advocated populism of mass education and open access" (Liu, 2009, p.14).

After two decades of an elitism approach in the development of higher education in the post-Cultural Revolution period, a large-scale, since 1999 a rapid expansion has taken place for the benefit of meeting the demands of Chinese citizens for higher education as well as enhancing global competitiveness (Liu, 2009).

Meanwhile, great improvement in educational internationalization was witnessed as an approach to populism in China's higher education. China has been receiving increased worldwide attention from educators and scholars as "an emerging economy developing a mass higher education system and a center for transnational delivery" (The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education [OBHE], 2003, p117). Since the 1990's, higher education in China has been "internationalized" as a result of the trend of globalization (Yang, 2002). The U.S. was reported as the number one destination for students in China (Bishop, 2005) and currently almost 100,000 Chinese are studying in the U.S. (IIE, 2009)

Educational Agencies in China

With a rapid growth of internationalization in China's higher education, educational agencies have been booming in the past decade. Professional educational advising is increasingly seen as a compulsory component in the college application process for many students and their parents in China. A trustworthy agent can help with student application forms, visa interviews, travel arrangements, insurance, entrance examinations, and other pre-college requirements. The agent can also provide students with valuable counselling that can help them make institutional choice decisions as well as decisions on college majors. A trustful agent can save the student time by offering useful information about the study location, local transportation, cost of living, weather,

social and cultural life, and other important issues. However, a less responsible agent could harm students' study and life, by providing unreliable information or misleading them for the purpose of the agent's financial benefit. We examine what an agent can and cannot do, main areas of satisfaction and dissatisfaction of agency services, and whether students represented by agents were subsequently better prepared than those who were independent in terms of psychological and socio-cultural adjustments.

Agency Theory

Agency theory, in general, can be adopted to explain any contractual relationship of two (or more) parties, where one party (principal) engages another party (agent) to perform some service on the behalf of the principal. Usually the principal provides a financial payment for the agent's service (Ross, 1973; Jensen & Meckling, 1976). Agency theory identifies the opportunistic proclivities of agencies; agents are likely to maximize their benefit by emphasizing their interests over those of the principals. However, according to the theory, it is hard to find a solution, due to information asymmetry which favors agents and different attitudes toward risks that are held by two parties. "Agency theory is founded on the triad of agent opportunism, information, and risk" (Sharma, 1997, p760).

Agency theory originates from the fields of economics and has been applied in the fields of accounting, marketing, public administration, not-for-profit organizations, politics, etc. However, agency theory is less familiar to researchers in higher education and only a small amount of research has been conducted in the field. For example, Kivisto (2005) used agency theory to illustrate and examine the inter-organizational relationship between government (principal) and publicly funded higher education institutions (agents). Van der Meulen (1998) examined the field of science policies through the perspective of agency theory.

This study uses agency theory to explore the relationship between students and their parents, designated as the principal, and the international educational agencies, designated as the agent.

Methodology

Research Sites

This research was conducted in both the U.S. and China.

Four institutions in the U.S. were purposefully chosen because they represent different types of institutions. These institutions located in the Midwest and the West, included a large private research university, a large public research university, a public master university, and a private liberal arts college.

In China, the researchers focused on prospective undergraduate students in Zhengzhou, Henan. Located in the North Central China, Zhengzhou (population over 6,000,000) is the capital city of Henan Province, 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, but a fast increase in the number of students pursuing a bachelor's degree in the U.S from this city and other North Central cities was reported by Chinese agents (Aoji Education Group, 2008). However, it remains unknown whether the large increase is related to the booming educational agent services or other potential factors. Research in Zhengzhou can represent 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.

The researchers visited five different high schools or equivalent schools in Zhengzhou, including a top public high school in Zhengzhou, a public high school specializing in foreign language education, a private English training school affiliated with a public university, a private college preparatory school, and a private English training school that provides language test preparation.

Methods and Participants

In the U.S. research sites, data were collected by means of an online survey, which was written in both Chinese and English, and individual interviews on site or via the telephone. More than 1000 international Chinese undergraduates in the four institutions were invited to participate via email. In total, 315 students responded to the online survey link and 257 completed the survey (see Table 1). Of these participants, the average age was 20 years old, 49% were female, 53% were freshmen in college, and 61% had at least one parent with a bachelor's degree. Interviews were conducted with those who volunteered to speak to the researchers. Approximately 30 students were interviewed in person or through the telephone.

In China, the researchers met over 500 students from the five different schools. A paper based survey written in Chinese was hand delivered to each student. A total of 471 students completed the survey and one third reported that they did not plan to receive a bachelor's degree from a foreign country. Therefore, these students were excluded from this research, which was designed to understand students' experiences of using or not using an agent to assist in the college application process. Of those who planned to pursue a bachelor's degree in a foreign country, the average age was 18 years old, 50% were female, 60% were seniors in high schools or equivalent schools, and 50% had at least one parent with a bachelor's degree. Of those students, approximately 60% planned to study in the U.S.

All students were invited to participate in face-to-face interviews. About 60 students were interviewed but only the interviews of the 48 who expressed interests of obtaining a bachelor's degree from a foreign institution were included in this research.

Table 1. *Number of Participants in the U.S. and China*

	U.S.		China	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Planned to pursue a degree in a foreign institution	257	100%	314	67%
Not Planned to pursue a degree in a foreign intuition (Excluded from the study)	N/A	N/A	157	33%
Total	257	100%	471	100%

Data Analysis

Descriptive and discriminate analysis were used to analyze the quantitative data. The qualitative data results were presented in terms of themes supported by quotations.

Findings

Why do some Chinese undergraduate students choose to work with an agent?

In the survey, students at both research sites were asked to provide multiple reasons why they chose to or plan to use an agent. Over two thirds of participants in China claimed that they planned to use or had started using an agent to assist their college application in a foreign country.

At U.S. research sites, slightly over half participants reported that they used agents' assistance when they applied to U.S. colleges.

The most popular reason, quoted by 66% at China sites and 72% at U.S. sites, was that students possessed little knowledge regarding the college application process. Lack of knowledge in visa application and lack of knowledge in foreign colleges and universities were reported respectively as the second and third important reason by both participants in China and the U.S.

Approximately 40% in China and 50% in the U.S. reported that they felt they were more likely to be accepted if they had used an agent (see Figure 1).

In addition to the given choices, both students reported that lack of time was another important factor encouraging them to use an agent. They had to prepare for tests for entering a U.S. college while preparing application materials; or they still attend a regular Chinese high school and had to finish all the required course work and examinations.

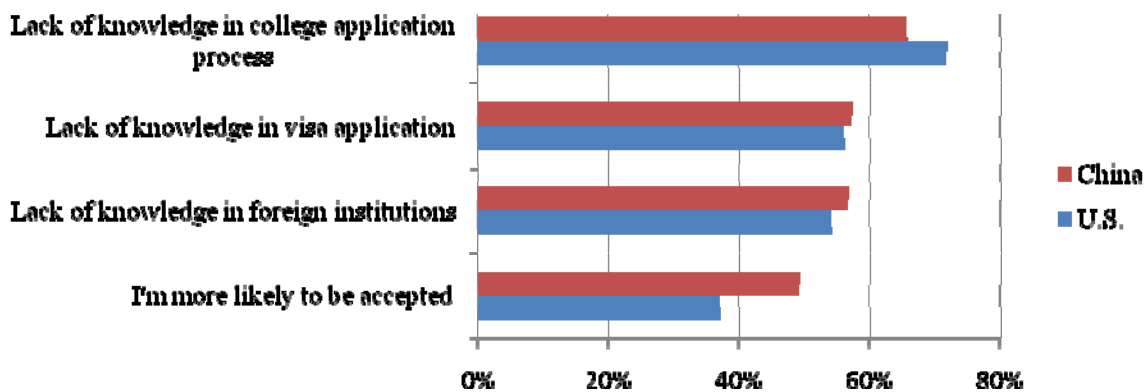


Figure 1. Reasons why students in China and in the U.S. planned to use or used an agent.

Why do some Chinese undergraduate students choose NOT to work with an agent?

In China, 31% of students reported that they decided not to use an agent to assist their application. Of these students, approximately 38% cited a lack of trust of agents' promises or their abilities to help as the major reason for their choice (see Figure 2). Nearly one quarter of the students thought agents charged too much for their services. More than 18% of the participants believed that they were capable of processing the application without assistance and over 17% indicated that they had access to application assistance or information through parents, family friends, or relatives.

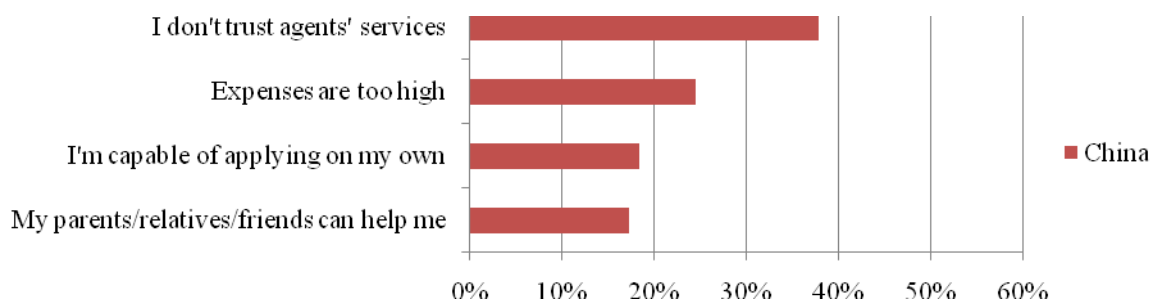


Figure 2. Reasons why students in China did NOT plan or did not use an agent

In addition, about 6% of the participants cited friends and/or peers, who had negative experiences working with agents.

Approximately 43% of the respondents in the U.S. reported that they did not use an agent in their college application process (see Figure 3). The most popular reason was “I am capable of applying on my own,” which was chosen by more than half of the students. Over one fifth indicated that they did not trust agents’ service. “Expenses are too high” was chosen by 15% students and “my parents/relatives/friends can help me” by 13%. A small percentage of students reported that they went through exchange programs and thus had no need of an agent.

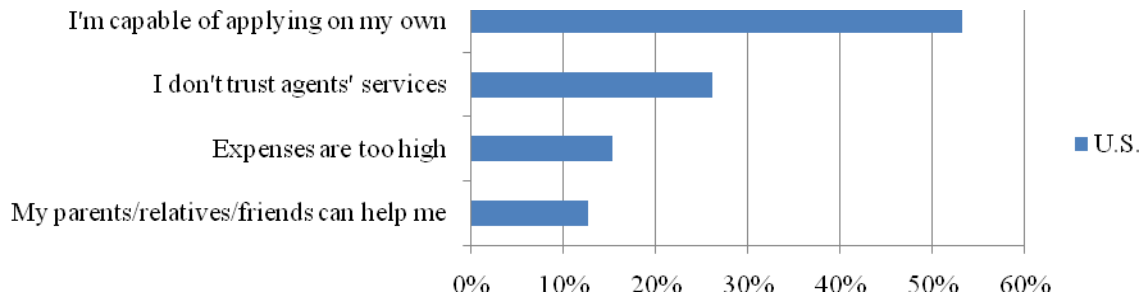


Figure 3. Reasons why students in the U.S. did NOT use an agent

What knowledge or information did students expect to receive from the agent?

When asked to identify the most important service an agent should provide, more than one fourth of the participants in China and almost 25% in the U.S. who used or planned to use an agent, expected the agent to contact all necessary personnel in institutions, departments, or admission offices on their behalf.

More than 20% students in China expected an agent to provide advice on choosing a destination country and college based on their personal interests, academic background, financial capability, and other personal factors (see Figure 4). Approximately 19% of the participants reported a need for advice on future major and career choices. About the same percentage of students indicated that they would like to receive information regarding visa application.

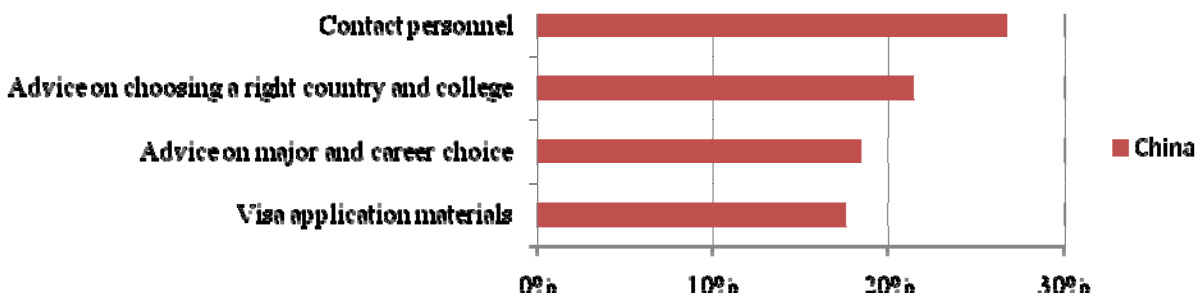


Figure 4. Expected agent services by prospective Chinese students in China.

In the U.S. more than 20% of the participants expected agents to provide assistance in college application material preparation and 18% would like to receive recommendations to find the best-matching destination country and institution (see Figure 5). The fourth important service, chosen by approximately 16% participants, was visa application preparation.

Receiving information about scholarship applications was a top priority only for a small percentage of students in both China and the U.S.

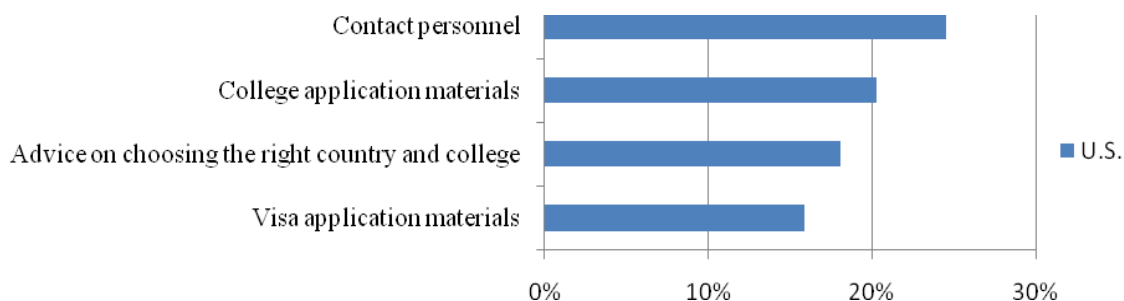


Figure 5. Expected agent services by Chinese international students in the U.S

What are the major difficulties that Chinese students encounter during application preparation?

This question was answered by data collected from individual interviews with both students in China and in the U.S., including those who used and did not use an agent.

No matter if an agent was involved in the application process, students in China contended that English tests (e.g. TOEFL or ITELS) or tests in English (e.g. ACT or SAT) was the most challenging part of their application preparation. Interviews with students in China showed that many students did not do long-range planning. They planned to attend a foreign college or university the next semester. In such a short time English improvements are hard to achieve. Students also complained what they learned in high school did not necessarily apply to these tests. In order to gain better scores, many of them transferred to private English training schools particularly in preparation for these tests. However, the students who attend the English training schools were subsequently not prepared for the Chinese College Entrance Examination.

“I heard from my friends that ACT is not hard at all, as long as you understand the questions. My friends told me that they lost points mainly because they didn’t understand the questions. I hope that I will achieve a large improvement in English at this [English training] school and have a good ACT score.”

Visa application was another prevalent barrier, regardless agents’ involvements. This was particularly true for those who decided to study in the U.S. Although Chinese students with completed materials are likely to be awarded a student visa, participants from China and the U.S. both expressed their concerns and regard applying for a visa as a huge challenge. A student in China stated that:

“I am afraid that I have everything ready but still won’t be issued a Visa to study in the U.S. It is just so unpredictable.”

With the same concern, students, who were not assisted by agents in college application preparation, asked agents to help them with visa application and interview practice.

Preparation of application materials was also reported by individual applicants as a difficult and complicated part in the process. Writing a personal statement was new to most Chinese students and they felt they had little to write about themselves due to lack of opportunities to explore their personal interests or to participate in extracurricular activities when studying in middle school

and high school in China.

“Chinese high schools focused too much on examinations; I have nothing to talk about myself except for my scores. In high school we were not given much time to participate in activities or clubs. I don’t want to make up my experiences, but I really don’t know what to write about.”

Preparing personal statements could be extremely overwhelming especially when one applied for multiple universities individually. Students who did not use agents reported that they were frustrated with the process of writing and rewriting. A male student referred to writing personal statements a time consuming but a rewarding experience.

“I applied to 12 universities without using an agent. For each of them I had to write a different personal statement. You really need to be well organized, otherwise you would have a headache by just looking at the millions of icons of word document on the desktop...It was overwhelming, but through the process I knew better about my interests and my writing in English was improved.”

Additionally, students, including ones assisted by agents and those not, expressed their concerns regarding choosing a university and/or a major. They were cautious about their decision and hoped to receive professional advice from a knowledgeable source since they were less familiar with American higher education institutions or institutions in other foreign countries. A student who just started her application process in China shared her anxiety with the researchers.

“I’m worried that the decision that I made is not the best for me. I prefer to have an expert to guide me through the process and tell me when I make a bad choice.”

A junior in one of the U.S. institutions said that she was only concerned with finding a university that has a major she wanted to study and was highly regarded in the U.S., when she was searching intuitions with an agent.

“I didn’t care about the location and other things at all. I don’t understand why some students are willing to attend a university just because it is located in a tourist city with wonderful weather all year around. I am not here for a vacation.”

It appeared that completing the application forms was a more frustrating procedure for those students who did not utilize the services of an agent. They questioned the repetitiveness of information collection in the forms and wished the forms could be designed in a simpler and easier fashion.

It seemed that students assisted by agents encountered less difficulties, but they reported finding a responsible agent as a challenging and significant step in their application process. These students and their parents usually learned about the agent from someone they knew. Friends’ positive feedback and successful cases were the most important criteria in engaging the services of an agent. Students also shared stories of themselves or their friends’ working with irresponsible agents. These agents not only put students and parents at great risks of monetary lost, but also wasted their time and efforts. A senior in a U.S. institution shared her own story before traveling to the U.S.:

“With about 20 students, I was introduced by the agent to a Singapore college preparatory school, which is similar to a high school, and I was told that I could be admitted by the top universities in Singapore as long as I maintain good scores. However,

about 2 years later, I learned that transcription from the school was not valid for four-year institution application at all; at the most I can be admitted by a three year college.”

What are resulting differences between students who do or do not use an agent among a host of experiences?

To answer this question, we applied discriminant analysis. Discriminant analysis is often used to predict which group assignment (Leech, Barrett, & Morgan, 2008). Discriminant analysis is also useful to determine factors that most define or discriminate one group from another (e.g., agent and non-agent assisted). By employing discriminant analysis, the researchers are able to devise one or more equations to maximally discriminate participants in the agent assisted group from those in non-agent assisted group.

The data collected from China and the U.S. were analyzed separately. In each group, among the participants who reported to have used or were planning to use an agent, discriminate analysis was employed to evaluate whether student demographic characteristics, educational background, social economic status could distinguish those who used or planned to use an agent from those who did not. The researchers first checked the assumptions that the relationships between all pairs of predictors were linear. Multivariate normality must exist within groups, and the population covariance matrices for predictor variables must be equal across groups. We verified that all assumptions were met.

China Data. The classification results show that the model correctly predicts 68% of those who did not use an agent and 76% of those who used an agent or planned to use one. The correlation coefficients in table 2 indicate the extent to which each variable correlates with the resulting discriminate function; it is moderately highly correlated with the overall discriminate function. Wilks' lambda was significant, $\lambda = .79$, $\chi^2 = 71.60$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .08$, which indicates that the model including these variables was able to significantly discriminate the two groups. Table 2 presents the standardized function coefficients, which suggest that the plan to take a foreign language test (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS, SAT, or ACT) contributes most to distinguishing those who used or plan to use an agent from those who didn't or didn't plan to use an agent.

The second most important indicator is the student reported family annual income. The higher the family income the more likely a student is to choose to use an agent during their application process. Also, those who didn't plan to or did not take the Chinese College Entrance Examination, whose overall English ability is lower, and whose mother has a higher degree, were more likely to use an agent.

U.S. Data. The classification results show that the model correctly predicts 64% of those who did not use an agent and 69% of those who used an agent. Wilks' lambda was found significant as well, $\lambda = .82$, $\chi^2 = 49.59$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .06$, which indicates that the model including these variables was able to significantly discriminate the two groups. The standardized function coefficients (see Table 1) suggest that the strongest discriminator between the two groups was if the student and his/her parents had domestic or international travel experiences. The second most important indicator is whether students took the Chinese College Entrance Examination, followed by student rank in senior year in high school, overall English proficiency, and mother's education.

Table 2. *Standardized Function Coefficients and Correlation Coefficients*

	Standardized function coefficients	Correlations b/w variables and discriminant function
<i>China Data</i>		
Exam (if a student took or plan to take TOEFL/IELTS/ ACT/SAT)	.53	.66
Family Annual Income (yuan)	.43	.60
Chinese College Entrance Exam (if a student plan to take the Exam)	-.40	-.52
English (self-reported English proficiency level)	-.31	-.28
Mother's Education (the highest degree)	.25	.24
<i>U.S. Data</i>		
Family Travel (domestic and international travel of a student and parents)	-.71	-.51
Chinese Entrance Exam (if a student took the Exam)	-.52	-.45
Rank (self-reported ranking in senior year high school in class)	.44	.43
English (self-reported English proficiency level)	.29	.47
Mother's Education (the highest degree)	.19	.20

What is the level of preparation and assistance provided by agents? Were students represented by agents subsequently better prepared than those who were independent?

Only participants who completed the application process were asked what services the agent provided if they used one. Thus, only data collected from the U.S. were analyzed.

The results of the online survey suggested that more than 78% of the participants in the U.S. of those who used an agent reported that the agent provided service in visa application preparation. Over 72% indicated that the agent helped them select the best fit country and/or college. Approximately 66% students informed that agents assisted them to prepare for their application materials. Additionally, 62% admitted that their agents initiated communication with the institution(s), department(s), professor(s), and/or recruiter(s) (see Figure 6).

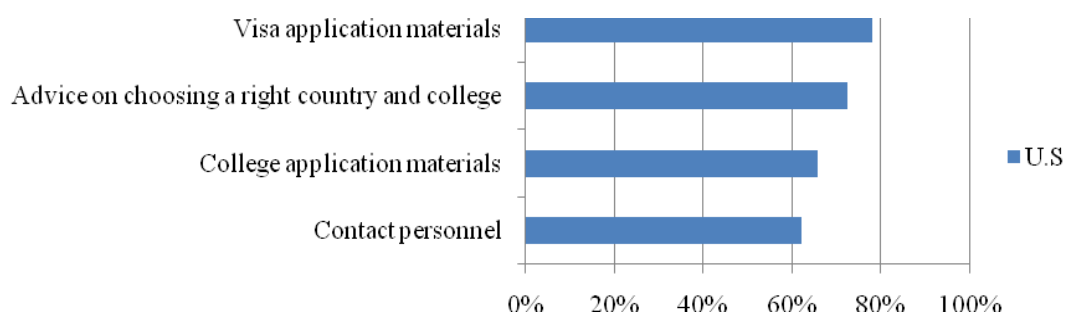


Figure 6. Assurances provided by agent (reported by Chinese international students in the U.S.)

From individual interviews with students in the U.S., the researchers explored various formats of using an agent. Figure 7 provides a conceptual framework for the categories in which students used agencies.

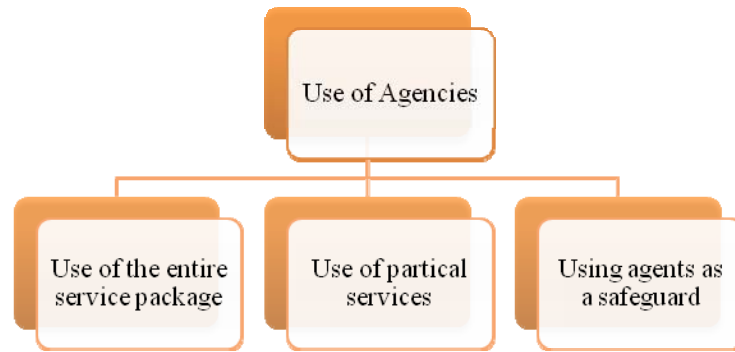


Figure 7. Framework of use of agencies

1) Use of the entire service package

Many interviewees indicated that agents helped them with their entire college application process, from selecting an institution to preparing Visa interview questions. They agreed using an agent made their application process much easier. These students focused on preparing language tests while having agents help them with preparing other application materials. Although providing a score of TOEFL/ILTES or ACT/SAT is not compulsory for being admitted by some U.S. universities, these students planned to increase their English skills to gain a high score on the tests to enable them to go to a more competitive university. For this reason, many students and their parents chose to use the complete package service while the students were working on the tests.

“I really don’t have time to prepare for other application materials since I spend most of my time for TOEFL. My parents and I agree that it will benefit me if I can only focus on the exam.”

Some students used every service available due to alterations in their plans for college. They had not thought about going to a foreign country until they learned about their scores of the China College Entrance Examination in mid June and hoped to start school in the next January. For example, a student stated:

“I decided to study in the U.S. after I received my exam report. My scores were not high enough, so I didn’t have chance to go to the university that I always dreamed of. My parents and I thought I would have more opportunities if I went to the U.S., Canada, or Australia. I wanted to start as soon as I can, so I went to the agent.”

2) Use of partial services

Some interviewees indicated that they used an agent’s services for only the most challenging parts in the application process. Preparing for the Visa interview and writing the personal statement emerged as the most difficult procedures according to the conversations with the students. To obtain a student visa to study in the U.S., in addition to college admission, Chinese students must go a designated U.S. Embassy Office in China for an interview. This is significant because a student’s application efforts could be totally in vain if he/she failed to obtain a visa. Since it is more subjective than a test, many students viewed the interview as mysterious and were anxious in preparation for it.

“I had everything ready and I didn’t want to fail at the last step. So, I went to the best

agent in my city and paid 20,000 yuan (which is equivalent to \$3,000) just for assistance in student visa application and preparation...Now I know they overcharged me... but I still think it's worthy of using the help. Their service guaranteed that I could start school as I planned"

3) Self preparation but also using agents as a safeguard

The researchers also interviewed students who claimed that they applied to universities on their own but upon deeper probing found that they had in fact consulted with one or multiple agents. A major reason for these students to use agents was to increase the likelihood of being admitted. The students or their parents wanted to make sure that at the end of process, the students at least could receive one admission letter. These students worked on the application process for universities that they were most interested in; meanwhile, they or their parents also asked agents to find quality universities with a greater chance of being accepted.

"Agents don't know individual students; they only recommend their partner universities or the institutions that they are familiar with. I was confident with my own ability, but I did use an agent for a couple of lower ranking, less competitive universities...just in case there was something wrong with my own application. [With agent's help,] I still have somewhere to go in the end."

In addition, the researchers found students may not intend to use an agent, but their parents urged them to use one or, in some cases the parents themselves hired an agent without informing the student. One student complained that he didn't know his parents asked an agent to apply to universities on his behalf until he landed at the U.S. University at which he applied by himself.

"I didn't know until I came [to the U.S.] I told my parents many times that I was able to do it on my own, but they just didn't believe me. They felt it was safer if some so called expert helped me. Most of agents even haven't traveled overseas or studied in a foreign country, so how do they know which is the best university for me? Anyways, my parents decided to use an agent but I didn't need one."

Many agents provide thorough services for students and can meet many students' needs. However, the researchers found the available services ended after successfully sending students to U.S. Colleges or Universities or institutions in other foreign countries, but neglected to further assist students to better adjust to a new learning environment. Students also recognized this and hoped agents could provide extended services after students landed in the U.S.

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

A couple of agents, reported by the students, asked former students who used their services to help the new cohorts.

"My agent gave me a list of students who used the same agent and are studying in the same university. I contacted all of them and met several of them, but one person never responded to me."

Although some agents provided contact information of older cohorts to the younger ones, it was not written in any contract and it was totally dependent on the older cohorts' willingness to help.

These students were not obligated to help the newcomers to adjust themselves to the new culture and a different learning environment. The researchers did not identify any agents that had a mature plan for assisting students in their transition. Agents may be able to help students to make the college application process clearer and visa application less complicated, but based on the findings of this research, it was very rare to have an agent provide students with information regarding their transition to the new living and learning environment. Their services end when students are landed in the foreign country. Therefore, we cannot draw the conclusion that students represented by agents were better prepared than those who were independent.

Furthermore, the researchers found cases where agents crossed the line of ethical practice. A couple of students told us that their agents wrote their personal statements, or produced writing samples purportedly written by the student. Of course these materials were designed to assess students' English skills, personal interests, and overall abilities.

One student claimed that she received good service from the agent that was recommended by a friend. She used "satisfactory" and "convenient" to describe her experience. She only met the agent once for the entire application process (not including visa application training). The agent prepared everything after learning some basic information about the student at the first meeting. When asked whether she read her personal statement, she answered,

"They [the agency] don't allow me to read it. The agent told me that they have to protect their work and don't want it to be copied or used by other people. I did tell the consultant about my personal interests, experiences, and other information, but was never asked to review my personal statement before it was mailed... and I still don't know what they wrote."

Conclusions and Implications

Using educational agents to assist with college applications has become a popular practice among Chinese students who intend to pursue a degree at a higher education institution outside of China. Students and parents seek out agencies for their specialized knowledge in the entire college application process. Educational agents are regarded as experts in international education, who possess rich resources of information regarding quality of higher education institutions in foreign countries, college application procedures, costs of education, and other facts. Based on the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, the researchers identified six most commonly referred services that an agent could provide:

- (1) Choosing a designated country and/or institution.
- (2) Preparing college application materials (e.g. providing a flowchart of application process, filling out the forms for clients, writing or editing any necessary English documents, etc.).
- (3) Initiating contact with any necessary personnel (e.g. admission officer, department secretary, program director, etc.) at target universities.
- (4) Translating Chinese documents (e.g. support letters from high school teachers, parents' income statement, high school transcription, etc) to English and translating English documents (University webpage, emails from the contact person in the U.S. University, admission requirements, etc) to Chinese.
- (5) Preparing all necessary documents for student visa applications and/or training for the face-to-face interviews with U.S. embassy officers (This is particular to the agents who

are specialized in U.S. college application). Some agencies have English speaking consultants to help students practice interview questions.

(6) Comprehensive agencies offer training for TOEFL, ITELS, or ACT.

However, unlike the principal in the widely studied agency relationship, students and parents often times are unable to evaluate the skills, knowledge, and services of the agent due to the very nature of professional work. They may also have difficulties understanding every item on the contract, what procedures they have to follow, and what specific services they need from the agent. Sharma (1997) indicated that not knowing what the agent does is aggravated in not knowing how the agent does the job.

Although it would appear that the majority of agents are responsible and provide satisfactory services, the researchers identified three major problems associated with the services of some.

- (1) Unethical practice by educational agents in assisting students in application process, and
- (2) Lack of consideration of students' needs
- (3) Prices that may be higher than anticipated

To prevent using an irresponsible agent, students and parents could do research on the ability and knowledge of a prospective agent, but they have less power in the relationship. The agents not only provide services but also recommend what type and to what extent services that the principal needs. This asymmetry of information places the professional agent in a more powerful position than the information-seeking principal (Sharma, 1997). Not surprisingly, students who have made it to the U.S. reported that some services that the agent suggested they use were not necessary at all.

Much power of students and their parents rests on giving feedback to the services, recommending friends or relatives to use or not to use the agent, based on their own experiences. Apparently, negative feedbacks from students could have adverse effect on the agent's reputation, although it could be very difficult to advertise the unethical practice of the agent by word-of-mouth transmission. The researchers found word-of-mouth feedback plays an important role in selecting an agent for students and parents. The majority of students who reported the most important criteria of finding an agent is whether it has a good reputation, particularly whether someone they know had a positive experience.

Since students and parents are not always able to determine whether they have received exceptional or substandard service, agent's self-regulation within professional associations or among peers is critical. The unethical cases that were explored in the study strengthen the fact that there is a need for oversight or even regulation of agents. This study also suggests that students should only use agents accredited by the China Ministry of Education and should be aware of what an agent can do and cannot do, regardless of promises.

This study explored the relationship between students and educational agencies and fills a much-needed gap in the literature regarding college application experiences with or without an agent's assistance. Further research is needed to explore roles that agents play in other types of recruitment (e.g., community college) and the exchanges between educational agencies and the U.S. higher education institutions in Chinese undergraduate student recruitment.

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