

Recruiting International Students: Decisions to Consider (Part Two)

In my previous post, I introduced some of the fiscal issues related to enrolling international students. In this post, I'll share tips on how to find international students and how to market your school.

As a public school, how do you find international students?

When I started my sabbatical year, recruitment was my biggest concern. It was the missing piece of the puzzle. I figured I could create or hire someone to create marketing materials, I could polish up our image, I could create a robust orientation, and I could figure out how much it would cost us to do it. But how were we going to find students to come here? Private schools find international students all the time, but how?

The answer was simply through recruiting agencies, and there are thousands of them. These agencies serve as the link between countries, connecting students who would like to spend time abroad with schools that can give them that experience. All agencies are not the same; not all are reputable, so it's important to check their references. And it's also helpful to know if they are certified by the [Council on Standards for International Educational Travel](#).

Not only do these agencies find students, but many of them also are responsible for finding, vetting, and preparing host families for these students. For a while, our team at Montpelier High School considered finding, vetting, and preparing host families ourselves, but then we realized that that would be an enormous endeavor. Managing host families is not our expertise. Sure, it would be cheaper for the sending-families if we directly recruited students and found them host families ourselves, but it is probably well worth the sending-family's money to have another party take care of managing host families, since they have years of experience in doing just that.

The Value of Marketing

One of the unexpected benefits of developing an international recruiting program came simply through the process of developing marketing materials for the school. We had to do some serious thinking about our school's identity and strengths. What were we good at? How could we present that concisely to the world? How could we present an image to families from a different culture that would demonstrate that we would provide a substantial value to their students? I think it really helped us as a school to hone in on our values and our message. By the end, we knew what we were about, we knew our school's "elevator pitch." After going through the process of creating marketing materials we were able to say, "Here are the three things we're all about." (For us, that happens to be community, sustainability, and personalization.)

This process also impacted our student culture as well. I recognize that this is just anecdotal evidence, but when we showed students at our school the marketing materials and they saw themselves and their peers represented there, they saw that we were proud of them. They stood a little taller. It furthered this feeling that our school really did provide something of value to our students.

How it Works Elsewhere

One recruiting agency, with whom my school partnered, put on a school fair tour in Europe. So I went to four countries in Europe representing Montpelier High School at a series of fairs. I met lots of families and local recruiting agents. At some of these fairs I had a booth where families would visit. At others, I presented to a group. I was unsurprisingly the only American public school on the tour. There were a handful of other American private schools represented there. But I wasn't the only public school. There were schools represented from Australia, New Zealand, and Canada and *all of them were public schools*. Apparently it's entirely normal for public schools outside of the US to actively recruit international tuition-paying students.

I found this baffling and illuminating. On this tour, I saw non-American public schools present a polished, professional image of themselves with a well-crafted message about their strengths and what they could offer to students. It was inspiring. Usually American public schools only have to do enough marketing that people will vote yes on their school budgets. Convincing a family to spend more than \$30,000 to send their student overseas to study at their school is an entirely different level of branding.

There are a few reasons why I think this kind of recruiting is not normal for American public schools. One is structural. Effectively in these other countries, any international students have to go through a government department that also monitors educational quality. This department is the entity that accepts or rejects international students and directs them towards a school that would be a good fit for them. This department is also in charge of quality control and accreditation for schools. So it's sort of like the [New England Association of School and Colleges](#), through whom my school is accredited, also doing the recruiting. Comparatively, American schools are all left to recruit and admit or reject students on their own, rather than being controlled by an educational department of their government.

The other reason that I think American public schools don't generally do this is that I suspect that we have a little bit of an inferiority complex when we compare ourselves to private schools. Maybe we don't think we sound that impressive next to the expensive private school down the road, but in so many cases, I have found that the education Montpelier High School provides to be just as good as the education provided by private schools. Our inferiority complex is all in our heads, and really it comes down to marketing. While I was on tour, more than once after I had given a presentation or a pitch, people responded with, "Wait, and you're a *public* school?" Yes, and we're really proud of that.

However, one of the key differences I discovered between private schools and public schools in regard to international recruiting is that there is a federal law that prohibits international students from attending a public school for more than 12 months. This law does not apply to private schools, where international students can attend for four years or more on the same kind of F-1 visa. How did that happen? I'm not sure, but repealing this law has apparently been a part of every federal immigration bill for last few years. It's just that no immigration bill has passed at all in the last few years. And, apparently, it has not been a big enough concern to warrant its own bill.

Hopefully, the upcoming change in administration and the prospect of any immigration bill passing will open the door for more public schools to retain international students beyond 12 months, which may get more schools thinking about this possibility. For now, Montpelier is ready and eager to welcome the world to our school, an important value in our ever-shrinking world.