

By Glenn Cook

Boosting International Recruitment Efforts by Working With Alumni

AS U.S. COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES work to boost international recruitment efforts, alumni who have graduated and returned to their native countries are sought after resources. But working with alumni can present a series of challenges if you don't have the proper elements—organization, resources, and understanding—in place.

Alumni can help connect with prospective students who come from the same country or region. "It can mean a lot when someone who is from your hometown has been to the school, has a successful career, and has returned home and made an impact. That's really powerful," says Aaron Zdawczyk, director of international recruitment at Northwestern University in Chicago.

But in many cases, budget-strapped admissions offices have come to rely on alumni to do more than they are qualified to do, and the end result is negative for all parties—students, staff, alumni, and the university.

"Because international recruiting can be so expensive, we've seen other universities that think of alumni as a cost-saving tool," says Wei Loon Leong, University at Buffalo's director of international alumni engagement. "These are volunteers who often are doing their best to answer questions, but they don't have the type of knowledge that a university employee does, so parents and prospective students don't get their questions answered. That can hurt you more than help you."

Appropriate Role of Alumni in Recruitment

In what admissions officials describe as a best-case scenario, Leong's background is perfect for his role at the university. The native of Malaysia received his bachelor's degree and MBA from the University at Buffalo, then worked in China for eight years in K-12 international school management before returning to his alma mater in 2012.

"I was an alum working to recruit and I've seen a little bit of everything, both good and bad," he says.

The University at Buffalo has nearly 4,700 international students—about two-thirds are graduate and PhD candidates—and more than 31,000 international alumni. But the university purposely limits the types of alumni it uses in recruitment and makes sure those who do help

know what to talk about and when to make a referral to staff, says Joseph J. Hindrawan, associate vice provost for international education.

"Unfortunately, not every alum is a good recruiter," Hindrawan says, noting that international graduates are always accompanied by a recruiter on site. "They may not have been on campus in 20 years and may not know about the new buildings, research, and social happenings. Students attend the recruitment events to make a connection and learn more about the university than what they can learn online, or they have very specific questions. When an alum representing the university does not have the answer, students are disappointed."

Leong looks for graduates who have previously worked with Buffalo's international admissions or education office, and seeks referrals from other alumni who live in a particular country. Like others in his field, he relies on social networking groups—LinkedIn, Facebook, and, in China, WeChat—to engage prospective alumni, then follows up with interested parties as needed via email. Because the university offers limited training to the alum before an event—usually only 30 minutes in a face-to-face meeting—word of mouth is key in finding good candidates.

"One of the greatest challenges is not biting off more than you can chew, and there are limitations on what you can expect from alumni," Zdawczyk says. "The alum's role is to essentially discuss their experience and direct people to the proper information, not to distribute information. I like to say their role is to enthuse, excite, and provide access."

Engaging With Prospective Students

Providing alumni opportunities to engage with prospective students is "a great touch point for the university," says Melissa Thammavongsa, international alumni officer for the University of South Florida (USF) in Tampa. Eleven percent of USF's 40,000-plus students are international.



“It is truly a win-win-win situation because alumni feel recognized and engaged through a strong international alumni recruitment program, students appreciate the contact with alumni, and the university develops a stronger connection with alumni through recruitment channels,” she says.

Thammavongsa engages alumni through a series of “cold messages”—emails from USF’s database and LinkedIn groups—and uses targeted Facebook advertising as a “rallying point” for events in specific regions.

“Engaging alumni who have never been engaged before is like looking for your lost pet,” she says. “You send mail, you post flyers, you hope with fingers crossed that someone responds positively to something and then you begin the process of welcoming them home and showing them how much has changed.”

Aruna Dasgupta, who works as the University of South Florida’s country adviser in India, arranges “tea sessions” for alumni to meet with prospective students in several of the country’s major cities a few times a year. The sessions are designed to give students a chance to meet with someone who has been in a similar situation “at that critical stage when we know they are making up their minds about which offer to take up.”

“The biggest advantage is the comfort level and the trust a student feels when talking to alumni, especially if the alumni are from their country and their city, and often speaking in their regional language,” Dasgupta says, noting that India has 22 officially

recognized languages. “We know this interaction plays a key part in the decisions students make.”

Dasgupta says alumni are asked to talk about “their experiences at USF, the big takeaways, and their professional journey” after graduation. Staff are on hand to answer administrative and technical questions.

“We are very clear about not briefing the alumni,” she says. “We tell them to answer the students’ questions with candor. There is total transparency, and the students and any accompanying parents appreciate that. I want to ensure the students see us as a university, and more specifically, as an India-based office that truly has their interest at heart.”

Zdawczyk, who has worked at Northwestern since 2004 and is the university’s associate director of admissions, says working with alumni takes patience, staff time, and a good vetting process.

“You have to dedicate resources and be active about it. Otherwise you run into issues and conflicts and disagreements about what alumni should do and what you’re asking them to do,” he says. “What we have to keep in mind is that these are volunteers, and anytime we are engaging alumni they are being engaged secondarily to what’s going on in the rest of their lives. We want to make their involvement a celebration, not an obligation.” ■

GLENN COOK is a freelance writer and photographer who lives in Northern Virginia.