

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE USE OF COMMERCIAL AGENTS IN  
INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT

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of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Education

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by  
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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE USE OF COMMERCIAL AGENTS IN  
INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT

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## DEDICATION

In honor of my father:

John A. Galloway, Ph.D., Professor of History,  
whose personal ethics continue to influence his daughters,  
his grandsons, and all the many students he taught.

He is still an inspiration to us all.

September 22, 1919 – April 17, 1997

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# ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE USE OF COMMERCIAL AGENTS IN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The pervasive ideologies of entrepreneurialism, globalism, and neoliberalism have influenced higher education to adopt a business model. Some critics view the university as having strayed from its public service role; others see this adaptation as the way to keep universities relevant to a modern global society. Response to these influences can be observed in the current efforts to internationalize campuses and, concurrently, increase revenues through the recruitment of international students. As competition for international students increases, many institutions have begun using commercial third-party agents, yet this practice is often considered to be unethical. Because administrators need to make informed decisions in the best interests of individual students and, at the same time, preserve the reputation of their institutions, this study was conducted to explore the ethical dimensions of this growing phenomenon.

This multi-case qualitative study examined the experiences of international students who had been recruited through commercial agents and of institutional personnel who recruit through commercial agents. The case studies, conducted at two institutions in a state in the Midwest, included interviews with two recruiting officers and twelve international students. Other data sources included a survey completed by recruiting officers from 22 institutions and documents from the institutions, agents, and professional organizations for international educators and commercial agents.

Framing the study was a model relating “other-regarding” as “student-centered” and “self-regarding” as “profit-driven.” This lens was implemented in the analysis of data as four distinct themes emerged: power and control, information flow and accuracy, financial and recruiting benefits, and accountability and trust. These themes led the study into another dimension as the framework evolved into a new model represented not in a linear expression but as a representation of the equitable positions of each stakeholder: student, agent, and institution. The resulting implications for practice are specific steps that recruiting officers may take to protect the student’s best interests and the institution’s reputation during all stages of the recruitment process. Future research that would further inform the ethicality of using commercial agents might explore the agent’s perspective or examine the impact of culture on the perception of ethicality in the process of recruitment-through-agent.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

#### *Background*

Internationalization has become a popular effort across the United States as four-year institutions and community colleges strive to achieve varying degrees of global education for their students (Altbach, 2002; Bartell, 2003; Connell, 2003; Floyd, Walker, & Farnsworth, 2003; Hansen, 2002; Hser, 2005; Ping, 1999). To encourage internationalization, these institutions offer study abroad programs, promote foreign language acquisition, incorporate international elements into the curriculum, and facilitate the admission of international students. All of these efforts provide students in higher education with opportunities for cross-cultural awareness and understanding, leading to a broader educational experience. So important is this concept that NAFSA: Association of International Educators (NAFSA) and the Alliance for International Educational and Cultural Exchange have called for

a [national] policy that promotes the internationalization of learning in the broadest sense, including supporting the learning of foreign language and knowledge of other cultures by Americans, promoting study abroad by U.S. students, encouraging students from other countries to study in the United States, facilitating the exchange of scholars and of citizens at all levels of society, and enhancing the educational infrastructure through which we produce international competence and research. (Wood, 2003, p. 23)

Although a national policy has not yet been established (Altbach, 2002; Jenkins, 2005; Johnson, M., 2005), its fundamental purpose of promoting internationalization has been

observed by several prominent United States leaders, including President William Clinton (Hser, 2005) and President George W. Bush (Bollag & Field, 2006; Bush, 2006), as they acknowledged the significant role international education plays in the world today. Other foresighted congressional leaders, Senators Norm Coleman and Jeff Bingaman, were instrumental in the unanimous Senate approval in October 2005 of an amendment to the “‘American Competitiveness Through International Openness Now’ (ACTION) bill” (NAFSA, 2005, ¶ 1). The bill requires the establishment of a national “strategic plan for enhancing the access of foreign students, scholars, scientists, and exchange visitors to institutions of higher education of the United States” (¶ 2). Certainly this bill and the show of support from the Senate are indicative of the importance of international education and the need to create a national policy that will aid the United States in maintaining its position as the top destination of foreign students.

#### *Benefits of International Students on United States Campuses*

On many levels internationalization creates positive opportunities and yields a variety of benefits, both to individual students and beyond (Dalton, 1999; McCloud, 2004; Peterson, et al, 1999). In terms of social benefits, students develop an appreciation for and an understanding of diverse cultures, as well as a sensitivity toward the people within those cultures. Also, as they interact with people of diverse nationalities, students dispel myths and stereotypes associated with other cultures. Recent studies have also touted the cognitive and affective gains for students who interact with persons from other cultures:

Through engagement with diverse peers, students debate and actively confront multiple points of view while learning to manage strong emotions engendered by



conflict. These cognitive and emotional processes promote the skills and thinking abilities needed to make a pluralistic democracy function effectively. (Hurtado, Engberg, Ponjuan, & Landreman, 2002, p. 164)

Other studies have also addressed the concept of cognitive growth through exposure to culturally diverse classmates, particularly as non-course interactions and classroom discussions have led native students to examine their own beliefs and preconceptions (Flannery & Vanterpool, 1990; Heyward, 2002; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora, 2001).

As the late Senator J. William Fulbright stated, the goal of the Fulbright scholarship program, which facilitates international student and faculty exchanges (Ping, 1999), is to “bring a little more knowledge, a little more reason, and a little more compassion into world affairs and thereby to increase the chance that nations will learn at last to live in peace and friendship” (Wood, 2003, p. 21). U.S. Secretary of State Condoleeza Rice, in her address at the 2006 U.S. University Presidents Summit on International Education, reflected on her own experiences with international students while teaching at Stanford University: “Our citizens learn from the different perspective that foreign students bring to our classrooms. . . . And when these students ultimately return to their home overseas, they have new friends that they have met and memories of America that they will never forget” (cited in Kujawa, 2006, ¶21). Indeed, not only friendship and memories but also principles of democracy are experienced first-hand by international students living and studying in the United States (Wood, 2003, p. 4). While Rice acknowledged the proliferation of U.S.-educated world leaders in her generation, she expressed concern that the next generation is not studying here; therefore, her goal is

to “reinvigorate U.S. efforts to connect America to the people of the world through education” (Kujawa, ¶20).

In terms of economic benefits, American students who interact with foreign students develop intercultural skills and contacts to succeed in a global work force. In fact, “the belief that globalization places new demands on the workplace is now so widely accepted that it is a cliché” (Siaya, Porcelli, & Green, 2002, p. 3). Of immediate economic benefit in the United States is the monetary contribution made to local communities and institutions by international students (Hira, 2003; Peterson, et al, 1999). During the 2005-06 academic year, for example, international students and their families contributed more than \$13.5 billion to the United States economy (Institute, 2006). Indeed, “because of its [economic] potential, international education is now classified as a traded service by the Department of Commerce and is today the nation’s fifth-largest service export” (Heyneman, 2003, p. 43).

Benefits are also seen in the areas of medicine, science, and technology as international students contribute their expertise and skills, especially in the field of scientific research (Brain, 2006; Brainard, 2005). Indeed, academe depends heavily on international graduate students in these fields. As Wilson (2004) reported, “It is graduate students who perform the research and help write the academic papers that help win professors tenure and promotion” (p. A 39). Moreover, the current decline in the number of American students pursuing degrees in science and mathematics (Dunnett, 2000) has prompted not only educational leaders but also business leaders to encourage the recruitment of foreign scholars as a way of stimulating interest in these fields (Feller, 2005) and preventing a void in technical industries (Lochhead, 2005). According to

reports compiled by the Institute of International Education, the top fields of study for international students in both 2004 and 2005 included engineering, mathematics, computer science, and physical and life sciences (Institute, 2006). As McCloud (2004) observed, “Without doubt the greatest value attributable to international students within American higher education is their research productivity. . . . [as] American business, government, and education sectors are the primary beneficiaries of research completed in the United States” (pp. 3-4). Without the participation of foreign graduate students, the United States would find it difficult to maintain its position in the fields of science and technology.

#### *Current Challenges for Universities Seeking Increased International Student Enrollments*

Despite the many positive aspects of bringing international students to the United States, however, “international educational exchange is not a universally revered enterprise” (Wood, 2003, p. 4). Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, concerns for national security have led to increased apprehension regarding foreign students living and studying in the United States (Green, 2002), and visa restrictions have intensified as a result of these fears. At the same time, other countries, such as Canada, Great Britain, and Australia, have increased their promotional activities to encourage international students to study in programs in their universities (Fung-Surya, 2001). After years of leading the world in foreign student enrollments, the United States is now in competition for what McCarthy (2000) called the “global pool of students” (p. xiv). In 2003, American universities reported only a slight increase in international student enrollments, and applications for the following year dropped significantly (Institute, 2003). The result is a loss of students in university degree programs and research

programs, loss of income for schools and communities, and loss of enrichment from diversity for campuses and communities. Thus, although faculty and administration may strongly support internationalizing their institutions, circumstances beyond their grasp are challenging their ability to accomplish the goal. Therefore, to effectively combat the decrease in enrollments and to successfully internationalize their campuses, many institutions have developed recruitment policies to encourage international students to choose to further their education in the United States.

#### *Recruitment Methods and Venues*

In recent years, university recruiters have come to rely heavily on electronic media such as promotional videos and DVD's, commercial Internet websites, and university websites. Other recruiting tools include student-attended educational fairs, alumni clubs and newsletters, and marketing through advertisements in magazines and other printed literature. While many potential applicants have access to the Internet, in some countries the cost is prohibitive or the technical infrastructure is limited, making it difficult for students to obtain information about U.S. academic programs. Likewise, traveling to educational fairs to meet with college recruiters can be expensive for students who live a great distance from the host city, and those who do attend the larger fairs with thousands of other students come away with stacks of printed literature that only serves to confuse them. For these reasons, educational advisement centers have become a mainstay for students seeking personal counseling and assistance in choosing an appropriate overseas destination for study.

Located in major cities throughout the world, educational advisement centers promote study in the United States. In fact, the U.S. Bureau of Educational and Cultural

Affairs sponsors some 450 such advising centers in 170 nations, assisting approximately “25 million prospective international students each year in person, by telephone, through e-mail, and on the Internet” (Bureau 2006). Often located in United States embassies, banks, or public office buildings, these “EducationUSA” information centers are frequently associated with Fulbright programs or other non-profit organizations that promote international education (EducationUSA, 2006). Through government and private funding, as well as income from United States institutions participating in EducationUSA fairs and promotions, these particular advisement centers operate independently of student fees. In the Middle East, a similar collaborative relationship exists between the United States embassies and AMIDEAST, a private organization that encourages understanding and offers opportunities to increase cooperation between Americans and people from the various nations comprising the Middle East. Like the EducationUSA information centers, they staff local educational advisement offices and administer standardized tests required for admission to universities in the United States (Recruiting Middle, 2006, p. 5).

Another type of overseas advisement center of particular relevance to this study is the third-party commercial educational agency. The use of commercial agents is a practice which numerous United States, Australian, Canadian, and British institutions are adopting as part of their international recruitment policies. These commercial agents, also referred to as representatives or consultants, are widely used by international students seeking help with the selection and application process. Many recruitment agencies are well-established businesses in upscale offices, especially in such countries as Japan and Korea, where students traditionally depend wholly upon agents to guide them through the

application process. As Pimpa (2003a) observed, “The concept of the ‘one-stop shop’, in which a full-range of information, counseling, application, and visa-processing services are offered to students wishing to study abroad, applies to many agents” (p. 180). He suggested, then, that the relationship of agents, students, and institutions is worth consideration, especially in light of the powerful influence agents can have on the educational choices students ultimately make.

When students seek guidance through the somewhat intimidating process of selecting the best academic program for their needs and interests, they are placing, to a large extent, their future and their finances into the hands of the advisor. As institutions contract with commercial agents to pay commission fees for recruitment of students, a wide array of ethical issues may surface, depending on the level of integrity operational among the stakeholders, i.e., the agent, the institution, and the student. If institutions of higher education adopt policies that allow international student recruitment through commercial agencies, are they subjecting themselves to unethical practices? Are they promoting dishonest gain? Or are they engaging in a competitive effort to draw international students to their campuses? Does the end result of increased revenues from international students justify the means of paying commercial agents to recruit these students?

On the surface, the use of commercial third-party agents, or educational consultants, may seem a reasonable course of action, both on the part of students seeking guidance through what may be an overwhelming process and on the part of the institutions who recruit these students. Contractual agreements between commercial agents and institutions can help ensure the protection of all the stakeholders, yet

violations of elements within the contract may be difficult to address, even if such violations were to be detected by the other party. Some institutions prefer to engage in the use of commercial third-party agents without formal, written agreements, in some cases to sidestep the question of ethics. This ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell’ approach, however, is even more suspect in terms of propriety and may lead to a greater risk for unethical behavior. Regarding the specific practice of using commercial third-party agents in international recruitment and the policies that govern the practice, whether formal or informal, the relative ethical issues are both representative of and resultant of deeper, broader ethical issues pervasive in higher education today.

### *Conceptual Underpinnings of the Study*

An evolution has taken place in higher education over the past several decades—an evolution that some contend has cut at the very heart of higher learning (Couturier, 2005). To others, this evolution is a natural phenomenon of modernity. Whether one laments the loss of altruism—and its accompanying sense of civic responsibility—or celebrates the entrepreneurial efforts in higher education (Breneman, 2005; Miller, 2003; Thomas, 2003; Toepler, 2004), it is apparent that a debate is raging over the gradual adaptation of higher education to big business (Breneman, 2005; Couturier, 2005; Denman, 2005; Giroux, 2001; Gottfried, 2002; Grayson, 2003; Hodson & Thomas, 2001; Marginson, 2002; Scott, 1999; TESL-EJ Forum, 2004), a trend labeled by Rhoades and Slaughter (1997) as “academic capitalism” (p. 9). Within that debate brews a myriad of issues, each leading to the topic of international student recruitment as a revenue source, but not without ethical implications.

### *Funding Shifts*

The first issue related to academic capitalism in higher education is the shift in funding sources. During recent years of extensive state budget cuts (Arnone, 2004; Bogue & Aper, 2000; Davies, 2003; Rhoades & Slaughter, 1997; Romesburg, 2003), higher education institutions have turned increasingly to other revenue sources, such as increased student tuition (Becker, 2004; Callan, 2004; Lovett, Newman, & Couturier, 2002; Reaping, 1998) and funding from the private sector (Rhoades & Slaughter), especially in regard to the “privatization and commercialization of research” (Kezar, 2004, p. 439). In their discussion of industry/higher education research-centered partnerships, Bogue and Aper (2000) noted that what started as a “federal effort to enhance research related to defense, health, and education . . . has been transformed into a major multimillion dollar enterprise of research centers, parks of extensive and expensive facilities, faculty stars and entrepreneurs, and academic haves and have nots” (p. 208). These partnerships are seen by critics as problematic in more than one aspect of ethical sensibilities. For example, Giroux (2001) observed that “as large amounts of corporate capital flow into universities, those areas of study that do not translate into substantial profits get marginalized, underfunded, or eliminated” (p. 4). Thus, not only is corporate funding for research a gray area in higher education due to such issues as conflict of interests (Bok, 2003; Cichy, 1990) and academic property (Newson, 1998), but it can also influence the curricular offerings in universities as administrators, faculty, and even students are encouraged to pursue the more lucrative courses of study rather than traditional liberal and creative arts programs.



In addition to the issue of public universities receiving corporate funding, some non-profit institutions have become for-profit in order to supplement income through various business ventures to offset the rising costs of education. In fact, in 2002, it was reported that 12% of all four-year institutions of higher education were for-profit (Introduction, 2004), and a number of them are even regionally accredited (Kinser, 2005). As Armstrong (2004) explained, “many students are over-served by the research university, that is, forced to pay for features that they do not fully utilize and consequently do not value highly” (p. 8). As a result, the traditional university is vulnerable to competition from commercial for-profit universities that offer programs and price structures to match the needs of a certain segment of students (American, 2004; Armstrong, 2004; Birnbaum, 2001).

Beginning in the 1980’s, those public colleges and universities operating as not-for-profit institutions have been faced with enormous fiscal challenges. In an effort to avoid raising student fees, institutions have been urged to engage in cost containment or cost cutting (Bogue & Aper, 2000; June, 2002). Also referred to as “retrenchment” measures, cost containment may take the form of “deferring maintenance, freezing open positions, reducing scholarships, cutting equipment purchases” (Bogue & Aper, p. 128) and establishing “responsibility center budgeting” (p. 129) in which academic and administrative units are responsible for balancing expenses and revenues within their sphere of operation. In other instances, state funding for public institutions requires subjection to accountability measures and performance indicators (Atkinson-Grosjean & Grosjean, 2000; Higdon, 2003; Liefner, 2003; Reaping, 1998; Wellman, 1999). Bogue and Aper (2000) discussed “performance funding,” one of the methods adopted in some

states to accomplish the goal of matching funding to measurable outcomes. They noted that criteria used in performance funding formulas often includes “number and percentage of students passing licensure exams, eligible programs holding professional accreditation, level of alumni and enrolled student satisfaction with programs and services, and achievement of minority access goals” (p. 118). However, Bok (2003) cautioned:

No university can measure the value of its research output or determine reliably how much its students are learning. . . . For this reason, efforts to adapt the corporate model by trying to measure performance . . . are much more difficult and dangerous for universities than they are for commercial enterprises. (p. 30)

As universities are expected to conform to increasingly restrictive guidelines for state and federal funding, many institutions turn to student tuition hikes to offset reduced resources. Some public institutions have more than doubled tuition since 1990 (Kirp, 2003; Lovett, Newman, & Couturier, 2002), with out-of-state students (including international students) paying considerably more than their in-state counterparts. It is not surprising, then, that colleges and universities are turning to international student tuition and fees to boost revenues (Altbach & Peterson, 1998; McMurtrie, 2005; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004).

### *Democratization*

Springing forth from commercialization and international student recruitment is a second issue of democratization. One primary incentive in sending abroad students from the United States is to sow seeds of democracy throughout the world. Conversely, many hope to accomplish this goal through introducing principles of democracy to visiting

international students (Wood, 2003). Is this a pure motive for recruiting students or a type of arm-chair colonialism? Rhee and Sagaria (2004) expressed a contrasting view when their research enabled them “to identify frequently hidden power relationships that can contribute to maintaining and reproducing perceived or actual international student subservience in U.S. higher education” (p. 79). They concluded that the international student flows from Third World nations amounted to imperialism on the part of the United States and led to what is commonly referred to as ‘brain drain’ (Dassin, 2005; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004), a phenomenon that occurs when foreign students from developing countries stay in the United States after completing their education rather than returning home to contribute to the improvement of their nation’s infrastructure. As a result of their analysis, Rhee and Sagaria identified “three themes of U.S. imperialism that correspond with critical perspectives on globalization: international students as capital, international students as subjugated Others, and imperialism as self-identity” (p. 91). The authors concluded that the themes “construct international students as a bad U.S. public investment, as diligent migrant workers, and as persons with diminished individual identity” (p. 91), although they admitted that “many international students in the U.S. do return to their countries to become part of the political, economic, and intellectual elite—thus neutralizing the imperialist position” (p. 91).

In the context of economic, political, and security matters, Dassin (2005) introduced a similar concern when she asked the question:

Does U.S. ‘brain gain’—which U.S. educators and business leaders are so avidly protecting by defending the nation’s ability to attract and retain foreign students—

inadvertently contribute to the ‘brain drain’ experienced by some sending countries, particularly those in developing countries? (p. 22)

She argued that if U.S.-educated persons from developing countries do not return to their countries to help solve economic and social issues, “the world’s poorest countries are trapped in unending cycles of deprivation” (p. 22), conditions—ripe for widespread discontent and political extremism—in which terrorists thrive. Dassin suggested that the United States should work with governments and other organizations “to ensure that ‘brain drain’ turns into ‘brain circulation’ with benefits for both sending and receiving countries” (p. 25). In other words, to effect lasting changes in Third World countries through the education of their citizens on U.S. soil, these international students should not be viewed as pawns in a political chess game nor as trophies for U.S. institutions and corporations to use for their own purposes, especially in scientific and technological research.

### *Competition*

A third issue related to the funding quagmire in higher education is an ensuing level of competition, both for domestic and international students. As Couturier (2005) noted:

Now all types of institutions—public and private, two year and four year, nonprofit and for-profit—are vying for the same pool of students, public funding, research grants, and prestige. In the process, they are creating a fierce competition that is slowly chipping away at higher education’s commitment to serving public needs. (p. 87)

Unlike in other competitive markets, while institutions of higher learning “compete for the tuition dollars. . . . there have been no ‘tuition wars’ evidencing competitive pricing in this industry” (Rhoades & Slaughter, 1997, p. 14), leaving students and parents powerless

to contest rising tuition costs. As Denman (2005) observed, university modes of operation have transformed from “collegial decision-making to a kind of corporate management. The university that has become a quasi-marketplace is now competition-driven” in its quest for greater enrollments (p. 5). Kirp (2003) also linked competition for students with increased tuition:

During the past decade or so, there have been dramatic changes in the way schools calculate how much of “discount” from the tuition “sticker price” to offer, and to whom—discounts that are more familiarly known as financial aid. . . .

Many colleges started increasing the number of merit-based scholarships as bait to attract students they otherwise couldn’t hope to enroll. These days, the admissions office is expected to recruit students with strong academic credentials in order to help their school move up in the *U.S. News* sweepstakes. (pp. 20-21)

Not only are institutions competing for the best and brightest, but they also compete for those who are best able to pay the rising cost of higher education. Ironically, when institutions offer certain amenities to entice potential students in this target group, they fuel the cost of education for everyone (American, 2004).

Likewise, competition for international students has intensified, echoed by the headline: “Cost and competition force colleges to hunt more aggressively for international students” (McMurtrie, 2005). Some of the competition in attracting international students originates from recently established institutions within the students’ native countries, as educational advancement at home diminishes the need for students to travel abroad for a high quality education (Armstrong, 2004). Therefore, with a decline in international student enrollments since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, public

institutions of higher learning have increasingly focused on recruiting, especially through overseas fairs and personal contact with students in foreign high schools (McMurtrie, 2005). This competitive thrust leads to various methods of recruitment, some ethical and some not, with unscrupulous behaviors on the part of both domestic institutions and overseas recruiting agencies (Marginson, 2002).

### *Students as Consumers*

A fourth issue spawned by commercialization and competitive marketization in higher education is the concept that students are viewed not as learners but as consumers or customers (Birnbaum, 2001; Grayson, 2003a; Grayson, 2003b; Henkel, 1997; Kopp & Rosetti, 2005; Simon, 2001; TESL-EJ Forum, 2004). As Gottfried (2002) argued, “Professors see themselves, or are urged by administrators to do so, as purveyors of customer service while academic management routinely refers to students and their parents as consumers or customers” (p. 53). Scott (1999) offered the viewpoint that “educators, confident in the importance of education and of their expertise in the field, should insist on the language of ‘client’ rather than ‘customer’ and the academic not as a ‘service provider’ but as a professional . . . educator” (p. 201). In his essay “Franchising the University,” Williams (2001) commented on this aspect of viewing students as customers:

Consistent with the ethos of the profit-protocol of the new university, students have been unabashedly reinvented as consumers, as shoppers at the store of education, buying a career-enhancing service. This commodification of students’ interests manifests itself ideologically, in projecting their experience primarily as

a monetary exchange, paying tuition for accreditation necessary to get a professional-managerial class job. (p. 22)

Certainly the same is true regarding international students, who may be viewed not only as consumers of higher education but also as a valuable, even critically essential, source of revenue. In essence, those who advocate the increase of foreign students for the benefit of diversity and democracy use the same rhetoric as the neoliberals who justify consumerism in higher education. They both speak of the economic value foreign students bring to the United States, which demonstrates the view of the student as a commodity. Another perspective borrowed from business, the student as customer and the university as service provider, was countered by Bay and Daniel (2001) when they recommended an “alternative—the student and institution as collaborative partners” (p. 2). Interestingly, Mavondo, Tsarenko, and Gabbott (2004) reported that in a study they conducted to assess student satisfaction with universities, “students clearly indicated they did not consider themselves ‘customers,’ preferring instead to be considered ‘students’” (p. 48).

All of these issues raise ethical concerns about the changing landscape of American colleges and universities. If institutions of higher education are indeed drifting in a sea of capitalism, what will steer them clear of the trappings embedded in that sea? How will these public institutions carry forward the mission of civic preparation for future leaders in our nation? Incorporating an internationalization mission, how will they influence the democratization of other nations? What part does international student recruitment play in the landscape of these institutions? If it is merely an effort to subsidize diminished funding, are university officials acting unethically if they claim

other reasons for supporting international student recruitment? Is this recruitment profit-driven or student-centered? Specifically, what role does the commercial agent play in recruitment and is this recruitment profit-driven or student-centered?

### *Ethical Considerations in International Student Recruitment*

The issue of ethics in international student recruitment initiates within a broader framework of the ethos of the institution. This institutional ethos has and is being widely critiqued as higher education struggles with its identity and its mission at what might be considered a significant juncture in its history. As Wilcox and Ebbs (1992) explained, “insofar as colleges and universities create and disseminate knowledge within a particular society, they are institutions with moral responsibilities to maintain the well-being of that society” (§ 1). In a general sense, then, institutions of higher education are traditionally believed to have moral obligations to the public, but also to the members of society directly under their domain, i.e., students, faculty, and administration. Regarding the role of administrators in upholding ethical principles, Wilcox and Ebbs observed:

Leadership in higher education continues to be under intense pressure to respond to societal issues resulting from trends in demographics and enrollment and economic and social forces that bring both possible disruption and/or opportunity.

The use of values expressed by the mission statement and ethical reflection as resources in decision making can positively affect the institution’s ability to respond to complex decisions about funding and the budget. (§ 5)

Mission statements, codes of conduct or codes of ethics, and other such written guidelines are both the result of much reflective evaluation and the foundation for continuing valuation (Willower & Licata, 1997) in the decision-making processes that



transpire when formulating and implementing institutional policies, both formal and informal.

Of foremost concern to this study is the ethical application of guidelines governing the use of commercial agents in international student recruitment, guidelines that may be articulated through formal contractual agreements incorporating codes of conduct or ethical codes or through informal agreements based on mutual trust and understanding among all parties. Although Carroll (1997) was writing about curriculum, his statement could be generalized to other aspects of higher education, including recruitment policies:

An ethical curriculum [substitute “recruitment policy”] is best constructed in an environment which itself is built upon sound ethical principles reflecting the interests of each of its major stakeholders. An ethical university environment thus sets the stage for dealing specifically with the issue of ethics in the curriculum [substitute “area of recruitment policy”]. (¶ 33)

Therefore, the foundational ethical premises or values upon which institutions of higher education have been established and the assumptions held both by society in general and by stakeholders in particular regarding those premises are key elements in the development of policies governing the use of commercial agents in international student recruitment.

Caldwell and Clapham (2003) elaborated on a concept relative to institutional ethical values:

Just as interpersonal trustworthiness involves a set of personal and ethical duties perceived as owed to another person, organizational trustworthiness incorporates

a related but uniquely different set of duties. . . . At the organizational level, duties require the ability to serve a multitude of stakeholders while balancing each duty within the larger organizational and community setting. (p. 352)

In further discussion of the concept, they defined organizational trustworthiness as “the subjectively perceived point on a continuum at which a group or organization’s behaviors are perceived as complying with the ethical duties considered to be owed to the person or organization who is making the decision to trust” (Caldwell & Clapham, p. 356). While this statement is applicable to all three groups of stakeholders (i.e., institutional recruiting officers, commercial agents, and international students), this study was conducted from the reference point of the international student as the “person who is making the decision to trust.” Kunzman (2003) also raised questions appropriate to the topic of this study when he illustrated the difference between “moral obligation and the broader ethical commitments that inform them” (p. 344) with the example that “the value of responsibility . . . makes sense only within a broader ethical framework that addresses questions such as, ‘For whom am I responsible, and under what circumstances, and why?’” (p. 344). These questions are germane to the study of ethics and its practical applications.

Of particular application to this study is the model “Stakeholder Cultures: A Punctuated Continuum from Self-Regarding to Other-Regarding” (p. 145), developed by Jones, Felps, and Bigley (2007) as the outcome of their investigation into ethical theories, organizational culture, and stakeholder theory. They began their research by examining several ethical theories, identifying “a convergent theme—a concern for the interests of others, as opposed to self-interest” (p. 137). They observed that managers often

experience tension between concern of others and self-concern when “making stakeholder-related decisions” (p. 137), leading the researchers to examine stakeholder culture and its influence in reducing the tension. The essence of their study, then, was summarized in this way:

A great deal of scholarship in moral philosophy and applied ethics is devoted to arguing that people (and organizations) ought to take the interests of others into account in their decision-making processes and behavior. . . . It is not much of an intellectual stretch to say that ethics is about other-regarding, rather than self-regarding, thought and behavior. Our focus is on the extent to which an organizational culture adopts self-interest or rejects it in favor of other-regarding sentiments. (p.138)

Relative to the ethical concerns associated with recruiting through commercial agents, Jones, Felps, and Bigley (2007) noted that “to increase favorable outcomes for themselves, self-interested firms with power over their stakeholders will wield it with impunity” (p. 141). From this researcher’s own experience comes the example of a Vietnamese agent who held hostage a prospective student’s documents until the student’s mother paid an additional \$1000 to the agent. Writing about the other end of the spectrum, Jones, Felps, and Bigley stated that “traditional (other-regarding) morality may require that firms respond to stakeholders with legitimacy, which many stakeholder scholars consider a fundamentally moral phenomenon” (p. 141). Again from this researcher’s personal experience, several Korean students recruited through a commercial agent were provided special services by the agent who made arrangements for their travel, airport pickup, hotel reservations, and car rental. In addition, these students continued to receive

personal attention as, periodically throughout the first semester, the agent inquired about their adjustment to their new surroundings. As “stakeholder culture is grounded in ethics and is based on a continuum of concern for others that runs from self-regarding to other-regarding” (p. 143), and, by implementing the concept that “stakeholder culture . . . focuses only on what matters to . . . stakeholders—whether or not the firm takes their interests into account” (p. 144), this model has been adapted as an ethics-centered framework to guide and inform this study.

### *Summary*

While the goal to internationalize college and university campuses offers many favorable benefits for domestic and international students, as well as for the institutions themselves, underlying ideologies of neoliberalism, globalization, and entrepreneurialism present ethical concerns. Among these concerns are funding shifts, misguided democratization, competition, and the perception of students as customers. These broader concerns funnel down into ethical issues associated with international student recruitment, specifically recruitment through commercial agents—the focus of this study. These ethical considerations, as they revolve around the question of student-centeredness in the recruitment-through-agent process, are explored in this study through an ethics-centered framework.

Chapter One has presented an introduction to the study and the conceptual underpinnings that frame the study. The remainder of Chapter One contains the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the questions guiding the research, the definition of key terms, the significance of the study, a discussion of limitations, and a chapter summary.

### *Statement of the Problem*

Much research has been conducted among international students in recent years to identify factors in destination choice (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2003a; Pyvis & Chapman, 2006; Shanka, Quintal, & Taylor, 2005; Soutar & Turner, 2002), satisfaction with their educational experience (Arambewela & Hall, 2006; Mai, 2005; Mavondo, Tsarenko, & Gabbott, 2004), cultural adjustment and stress factors (Lee & Wesche, 2000; Tomich, McWhirter, & Darcy, 2003; Yen & Stevens, 2004), academic success (Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Roadblocks, 2005; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005), and recruitment practices (Byrd, 1991; Farnsworth, 2005; Gomes & Murphy, 2003; Hindrawan, 2003; McCarthy, 2000; Noronha, 2000; Santovec, 2002; Shah & Laino, 2006; Smith, M. S., 2003). This prolificacy in studies indicates a great interest in international students and illustrates their importance to institutions of higher education. While these studies are valuable in terms of providing information to help institutions improve academic and extracurricular programming, student services, and marketing, additional information is needed for administrators to make informed decisions regarding international recruitment through commercial, third-party agents.

In their quest for effective international student recruitment, many higher education institutions in the United States have begun working with commercial agents in other countries. These agents offer a variety of services to students who may find the application process to be overwhelming. Some agencies provide assistance with all aspects of the process, including collecting applications, transcripts, and other required documents from the student or his or her family; guiding the student through the visa procedures, including payment of fees to multiple U.S. departments and advisement on

protocol for the visa interview; communicating with the institution to ensure that housing, insurance, and other needs are arranged before the student's arrival; preparing the student's travel itinerary; and providing a host of other services to make the process easier for the student. As Stedman (1999) noted, agents can also aid the institution by (a) marketing institutions through local newspaper advertisements written in the local language and providing institutional literature to interested students, (b) advising recruitment officers concerning the academic programs or majors of interest to local students, and (c) making appointments for individual students or groups of students to meet the recruitment officer when he or she visits the agent.

While the stateside institutions benefit in terms of international enrollments, bringing to campuses both ethnic diversity and much-needed revenues, ethical issues may emerge as a result of recruitment policies that prescribe the use of commercial agents. Some agents may misrepresent the institution to the student and his or her family by giving false or exaggerated information about the institution's degree programs, fee structure, living accommodations, and a wide variety of other aspects of concern to the student (Stedman, 2000). Likewise, institutions may eagerly accept unqualified students in order to boost their foreign student enrollments (Stedman), or they may admit students for whom another institution would be more appropriate to the student's social needs, academic goals and interests, or scholastic ability. In some cases, students are led to believe they are being admitted to degree programs that do not exist at the particular institution. Certainly, in such instances, it seems that recruiting practices are profit-driven rather than student-centered. Therefore, in addition to increased revenues, both student

satisfaction with the recruitment process and institutional and agency integrity should be major considerations in the use of commercial agents in international recruitment.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The current corporate university ethos among many U.S. institutions has given rise to various ethical concerns inherent with that ethos. Among these concerns are (a) funding shifts, giving rise to both escalating student tuition fees and research funding from private corporations and government sources that may involve questionable practices and outcomes; (b) political agenda for foreign student recruitment, including democratization and imperialism; (c) domestic and transnational competition for students, particularly foreign students who are able to pay higher rates of tuition and who are able to contribute to research in science and technology; and (d) the perspective of the student as customer, reflecting a philosophical shift in the purpose of higher education and its public mission. These ethical issues both underlie and influence international student recruitment policies and practices, including the use of commercial overseas agents.

In an effort to regulate recruitment, both domestic and foreign, codes of ethics or principles of good practice have been created by professional organizations. For example, the National Association for College Admission Counseling requires its 9,200 members (National, 2005) to agree in the area of promotion and recruitment to follow Mandatory Practices found in the organization's Statement of Principles of Good Practice (National, 2006, p. 3). Likewise, commercial agents, as members of professional organizations such as Korean Overseas Study Association (KOSA), consent to follow ethical guidelines in the advisement of students who are making plans to study overseas. While codes of ethics and principles of good practice are essential guidelines for institutions and organizations,

they are not guaranteed deterrents to unethical practices for the reason that such guidelines or “codes of conduct do not always provide the power or the process for enforcement” (Rezaee, Elmore, & Szendi, 2001, p. 172). Therefore, codes of ethics or other such statements of operating principles are only a marginal step toward ensuring ethical recruitment practices on the part of both commercial agents and recruiting institutions. Instead, the pivotal focus of the recruitment process must be the determination of what is in the best interests of the student.

The purpose of this study is (a) to examine the positive and negative experiences of two groups of stakeholders—students and institutional recruitment officers—in school-initiated commercial agent agreements in international recruitment and (b) to determine if institutional policies endorsing the use of commercial agents are ethically sound.

### *Research Questions*

1. What are the positive and negative experiences of international students who were recruited through school-initiated commercial agent agreements?
2. What are the positive and negative experiences of recruitment officers at institutions that recruit international students through school-initiated commercial agent agreements?
3. In light of the experiences of students and staff in the use of school-initiated commercial agent agreements, what conclusions can be drawn regarding the ethicality of such policies?



4. In what ways are recruitment policies that encourage school-initiated commercial agent agreements profit-driven? Student-centered? Other-regarding? Self-regarding?

#### *Definition of Key Terms*

An understanding of the following key terms is essential to this study. They are defined in this section:

*Academic capitalism.* Rhoades and Slaughter (1997, p. 9) used this label to identify what they perceived as a trend toward the adaptation of big business in higher education.

*Branch campus.* A branch campus is a college or university on foreign soil that was established and is being managed by a parent college or university from its home site (Mazzarol, Soutar, and Seng, 2003).

*Commercial agent.* Sometimes referred to as a third-party agent, a commercial agent is a person or company who provides services to students seeking to study abroad in exchange for a fee from the student and/or a commission from the institution with whom the agent has an agreement.

*Entrepreneurship.* Usually associated with the business world, entrepreneurship is a quality or attitude of risk-taking in order to make a profit. As Fuller (2005) noted, entrepreneurship has been defined as “a catalyst for reconfiguring markets and thereby increasing society’s capacity for wealth production” (p. 29). While the label has a positive connotation in the corporate realm, its use in academics is considered unfavorable by those who are opposed to the view of the university as big business.

*ERASMUS.* The ERASMUS program, established in 1987, is the European Commission initiative for higher education. Its goal is explicit in its full name: European Region Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students. It was incorporated into the SOCRATES program in 1995 (Teichler, 2001).

*Ethical.* For the purposes of this study, ethical was defined as the quality of behavior, attitude, and actions that reflect a concern for the interests of others rather than of self when those interests are conflicting. Rezaee, Elmore, and Szendi (2001) made the following observation that reflects the difficulty in finding a definition meaningful in all situations to all people: “Because of the variety of value systems in a pluralistic society, it is impossible to achieve a consensus of opinion regarding morals and ethics. . . . It is easier to achieve a consensus on appropriate ethical practices” (p.172).

*Globalization.* Rhee and Sagaria (2004) defined globalization as “the cross-national flow of goods, investment, production, and technology” (p. 79), while Altbach (2002) described globalization as “trends in higher education that have cross-national implications [which] include mass higher education; a global marketplace for students, faculty, and highly educated personnel; and the global reach of the new Internet-based technologies, among others” (p. 29).

*International students.* Formerly referred to as ‘foreign’ students, ‘international students’ is the current nomenclature for students who are non-U.S. residents and who are in non-immigrant status while studying in the United States.

*Internationalization.* The term refers to the “specific policies and initiatives of individual academic institutions, systems, or countries that deal with global trends. Examples . . . include policies relating to recruitment of foreign students, collaboration

with academic institutions or systems in other countries, and the establishment of branch campuses abroad” (Altbach, 2002, p. 29). According to Bartell (2003),

Internationalization conveys a variety of understandings, interpretations and applications, anywhere from a minimalist, instrumental and static view, such as securing external funding for study abroad programs, through international exchange of students, conducting research internationally, to a view of internationalization as a complex, all encompassing and policy-driven process, integral to and permeating the life, culture, curriculum and instruction as well as research activities of the university and its members. (p. 46)

*Neoliberalism.* A current ideology with variant applications, one understanding of neoliberalism was addressed by Fowler (2004) when she noted that neoliberals in the U.S. “accept the basic soundness of capitalism, believe government has an important role to play in a modern society, and are deeply concerned about equality issues. . . . To them, the basic problems are a slow growth economy and growing disunity in the United States” (p. 128). A second, more controversial application of the label was presented by Slaughter (1998):

The neo-liberal school sees market forces as impersonal, disembodied, and inexorable, as supplanting national economies with a global market. . . . In this model, the private sector is privileged as the engine of competition, and the state is no more than a drag on economic growth. (p. 52)

*Other-regarding.* Stemming from ethical theory, other-regarding is the term used by Jones, Felps, and Bigley (2007) to indicate concern for others over self-interest, particularly in the context of business firms and their stakeholders. As the authors noted,

“Stakeholder culture is grounded in ethics and is based on a continuum of concern for others that runs from self-regarding to other-regarding” (p. 143).

*Profit-centered.* In this study, profit-centered is somewhat synonymous with self-regarding or self-interest, especially in the context of higher education’s image as a corporate entity and students as a commodity. Specific to this study is the distinction between profit-centeredness as the end result of international student recruitment as opposed to student-centeredness as the outcome of recruitment practices.

*School-initiated commercial agent agreement.* When an institution agrees to certain terms of compensation, usually in monetary form, in exchange for the recruitment of international students, a written contract (initiated by the school) is usually signed between the commercial agent and the institution. Some agreements are not formalized, however, and consist of “oral understandings” (Stedman, 1999, p. 37). While students are recruited through school-initiated agreements between institutions and commercial agents, agents can also help place students in study programs without agreements or compensation from the receiving institution.

*Self-regarding.* Stemming from ethical theory, self-regarding is the term used by Jones, Felps, and Bigley (2007) to indicate self-interest over concern for others, particularly in the context of business firms and their stakeholders. As the authors noted, “Stakeholder culture is grounded in ethics and is based on a continuum of concern for others that runs from self-regarding to other-regarding” (p. 143).

*SOCRATES.* Established in 1995 in the European Union, the SOCRATES program carried on the goals of ERASMUS, one of which was to increase mobility and

cooperation throughout education in Europe. The second phase was implemented in 2000, with some 29 countries eligible to participate in the program (Teichler, 2001).

*Student-centered.* In this study, student-centered, also expressed as ‘other-regarding’ (Jones, Felps, and Bigley, 2007), represents the perspective that in education the student’s best interests should take precedent over the benefits—or profit—the student might bring to the institution. Student-centeredness is closely aligned with learner-centeredness, a pedagogical philosophy that the individual student’s needs and interests should be the focus of the educational experience.

#### *Significance of the Study*

As colleges and universities in the United States strive to maintain global preeminence in higher education, increasingly they are faced with economic, political, social, and ethical obstacles. Various ideologies underlie governmental and institutional changes that seem to be reshaping the mission and policies, as well as the public perception, of higher education (Bok, 2003; Giroux & Myrsiades, 2001; Slaughter, 1998). Meanwhile, globalization influences trends in higher education to internationalize its campuses, yet increased visa restrictions and rising tuition costs have begun to discourage international students from pursuing studies in the United States (Altbach & Bassett, 2004; Institute, 2003; Lochhead, 2005). International students bring numerous benefits to both institutions and communities throughout the nation, including intellectual and technical knowledge and skills for research in science and technology, diversity and its far-reaching effects of cultural enrichment and enlarged worldview for American students (Fung-Surya, 2001), friendship and understanding that paves the way for future peace between nations, and significant economic input (Peterson, et al, 1999), not only in terms

of tuition and other educational expenses, but for local and national economies as international students spend money for food, entertainment, travel, and other products. The benefits to international students are likewise great: the opportunity for a high-quality education, academic freedom, moderately priced travel and entertainment, meeting and studying with people from other cultures, as well as attaining English proficiency and experiencing independence from parents (Mavondo, Tsarenko, & Gabbott, 2004).

While the United States is still the top destination choice of international students in terms of sheer numbers (Marginson, 2007; U.S., 2005), other countries are actively vying for the market (Basile, 2005; Marginson, 2002; Varughese, 2005). In addition, the domestic educational opportunities are becoming stronger in many countries that had previously sent their brightest students to the United States (Cheung, 2003), and both the United States and other countries have established branch campuses on foreign soil (Angelo, 2005). Thus, many students who would have looked to the United States as the best choice for advanced studies are now staying closer to home to earn their degrees (Hira, 1999). Indeed, recruitment of international students has become increasingly competitive over the last few years (Rees, 1999), and that trend will likely continue as educational opportunities in other countries increase in both quantity and quality.

Effective recruitment, then, should play a vital role in attracting international students to American colleges and universities. However, many institutions have limited, if any, strategic plans for international recruitment (Magaya, 2004). Some institutional recruiters participate in educational fairs in other countries (Lee, 2000), but the cost is often prohibitive and the results minimal. Other institutions market internationally

through the Internet, taking advantage of instant exposure to large numbers of students through both institutional and commercial websites (Johnson & Printz, 2000).

Disadvantages exist with this approach, however, in countries where Internet use is limited and expensive and technology is not up-to-date. The other major drawback with Internet marketing is the lack of personal communication, face-to-face, between student and university representative. As Hossler (1999) pointed out in his discussion of guiding principles in recruitment, “the more [higher education] can be personalized during the recruitment process, the more effective the marketing efforts are likely to be” (p. 20). Of course, institutions cannot afford to send representatives abroad to meet with every potential student. Instead, commercial agents in the students’ home countries can represent the institution and its programs to students. For this reason, increasing numbers of institutions are entering into agreements, either written or verbal, with commercial third-party agents to send students to their campuses.

While the practice is becoming more popular, using commercial agents has long had a reputation as an unethical means of recruiting students (Stedman, 1999). This study addresses both the underlying ethical issues that higher education is facing today and the specific ethical issues related to international student recruitment through commercial agents. By examining pertinent documents from institutions and commercial agents, including codes of conduct, principles of good practice, and marketing materials, and by analyzing the experiences of both institutional recruiters and international students, the positive and negative aspects of this issue have been illuminated. As Morris (2003) so aptly stated:

Having the knowledge and skills to undertake research enables people to challenge but also to work effectively with initiatives and practices that are increasingly required of them. Such knowledge and skill can therefore improve the practices within the sector [higher education] but also make a difference to the people at the centre of the sector's work: the learners. (p. xx)

For this reason—to make a difference to the learners (i.e., international students)—this study was conducted to ask the questions: Is the use of commercial agents in international student recruitment ethical? Is the practice student-centered or profit-driven? Is it other-regarding or self-regarding?

#### *Limitations*

1. This study is limited because the researcher recruits students for an intensive English program at a public institution of higher education; therefore, other institutions may not cooperate fully or may respond with reservation to interview questions because they may view the researcher as a competitor.
2. The study is limited because some institutions may not distinguish which international students have used commercial agents to apply for admission. Those institutions that pay commissions to agents should have records of payment, but institutions that have no agreement with agents do not likely keep track of who sends the students' application materials. Therefore, it may be difficult to identify international students who have used an agent.
3. The study is limited because many institutions do not have strategic plans for recruitment of international students nor do they have formal policies for recruiting international students. In addition, the practice of using commercial



agents for recruitment has been perceived as either unethical or difficult to establish because of bureaucratic governing of such practices and policies.

4. The study is limited because there are many alternatives for recruitment of international students, and, unless an institution has a lengthy history of using commercial agents, the number of students recruited through commercial agents at the time of this study will be limited, even if the number of international students on a particular campus is significant.
5. This study is limited geographically due to its focus on the institutions from only one Midwestern state.

#### *Summary*

As public funding for higher education institutions continues to diminish, administrators seek other streams of revenue to offset budgetary cutbacks. One source of revenue that does not drain local resources is income from international students (Rees, 1999). Since this source of income is widely acknowledged, institutions may find themselves competing for international students (Mavondo, Tsarenko, & Gabbott, 2004), especially as foreign student enrollments have begun to decline in recent years. Some colleges and universities have become aggressive in their recruiting efforts and have thus adopted policies to allow their admissions officers to work with commercial agents to ensure placement of higher numbers of international students on their campuses (Stedman, 1999).

Several ethical issues are embedded in the situation leading to these policies and in the policies themselves. These issues involve commercialization in higher education, democratization, competition, and the view of students as customers. On the positive side,

institutions desiring to improve their position financially may take strides to improve the quality of their academic programming, their student services, and their public appearance in order to attract the best and the brightest of the international student pool (Arambewela, Hall, & Zuhair, 2005).

To further enhance their position in the international recruitment arena, many institutions have developed recruiting policies that allow the use of commercial agents. Not all recruitment is accomplished ethically; some institutions make promises they cannot fulfill or present “artificially inflated expectations of university services through their promotional material and overseas agency networks (Arambewela, Hall, & Zuhair, 2005), while some agents misrepresent the institutions or overcharge the students for services the agents provide. As Stedman (1999) pointed out, “most agents have an interest in doing a reputable job of . . . advising the student competently. . . . Some, however, may really be running a travel agency and offer advising merely to get prospective travelers into the travel office” (p. 37). As more and more institutions consider the recruitment of international students to be a major concern for the future, the study of recruitment practices or policies governing the use of commercial agents is clearly of importance to administrators who want to promote ethical recruitment practices in the best interest of the students.

To examine the ethical considerations in the use of commercial agents, a qualitative, multi-case study will be conducted. Chapter Two, the Review of the Literature, begins with a broad look at the history of higher education and more narrowly, the history of international students in the United States. Themes of ethical concerns are woven throughout these sections, including institutional missions in higher education,

higher education's role in knowledge creation and dissemination, higher education's civic mission, and the introduction of international student recruitment to higher education in the U.S. Other sources presented in Chapter Two focus on international student recruitment, including factors influencing institutional choices and strategies resulting in successful recruitment, all leading up to the focal topic of using commercial agents to recruit. This section also includes a review of the literature concerning ethical standards and codes of conduct, of specific relevance to this study.

Chapter Three articulates the research design and an extensive rationale for the methodology, while Chapter Four reports the research findings and presents the qualitative data. Chapter Five provides a summary of the study and suggests ideas for further research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### *Introduction*

Over the brief span of United States history, changes have occurred in higher education's mission, in its perceived value in terms of both personal and public benefit, and in its funding sources. In order to understand how these changes have influenced international student recruitment policies and, concurrently, stimulated ethical issues relative to these policies, a broad survey of the history of higher education is essential. Included in the historical overview, of course, are events that have led to the current viewpoint toward international education and subsequent recruitment policies.

#### *History of Higher Education in the United States*

In reviewing the history of higher education in the United States, the journey does not begin with the birth of a nation. Indeed, American colleges and universities hale from a long, rich heritage that parallels the development of Western civilization. In fact, while the establishment of the Western university as we know it today is most often traced to the early Greeks, Axelrod (2002) recognized an earlier influence in the Middle East and Far East. Centuries prior to fifth-century philosophers Socrates and Plato, organized systems of education were present in the "Fertile Crescent" (p. 9) among the Ancient Egyptians, Sumerians, and Hebrews, as well as in India with the Brahmins and in ancient China, where "intellectual life flourished" (pp. 9-10). As Denman (2005) observed, one of the earliest institutions of learning in India was the fifth-century BCE Nalanda, serving 10,000 students, while in China, the first-century BCE establishments of learning were based on Confucian ethics. While these ancient societies contributed to the foundation of

higher learning from an historical perspective, it is the seeds of Greek and Roman philosophy that have borne fruit of liberal education in today's Western institutions. For example, Plato's students "sought to live ethically and philosophically by devoting themselves to the exploration of ideas" in hopes of becoming "fully formed and morally sound citizens" (p. 11). Likewise, Isocrates held the view that "higher learning should serve the causes of effective citizenship and strong leadership, which would be facilitated by the study of the classical arts and culture" (p. 12). As Axelrod observed, "in its earliest incarnation, liberal education appeared to have a number of goals: the cultivation of moral character, intellectual balance and breadth, and commitment to the public good" (p. 13). These same goals are observable today in the written missions of colleges and universities throughout the United States.

#### *Institutional Missions in Higher Education*

In his analysis of institutional mission, Scott (2006) described the chronological development of six chief missions in the history of higher education: (a) the teaching mission of the European medieval university; (b) the administrative mission of universities in the Middle Ages; (c) humanism and "*nationalization* (service to the government of the nation-state)" in the early modern universities of Europe and Latin America; (d) "democratization (service to the individual of the nation-state)" in 19th century American universities; (e) "the *research* mission and academic freedom" in 19th century German universities; and (f) "*public service* (service to the public of the nation-state)" in 20th century American universities (pp. 5-6). Scott continued with the observation that the next apparent mission of the postmodern university will be "*internationalization* (service to the body of nation-states)" as a result of globalization (p.

6). Certainly, as societies worldwide become increasingly interlinked, the mission of institutions of higher education will likewise need to keep pace (Godbey & Turlington, 2002).

For two hundred years after the establishment in 1636 of Harvard, the first American college, higher education's "principal focus was on the instructional mission, with a curriculum based in the study of rhetoric, grammar, mathematics, and classical languages" (Bogue & Aper, 2000, p. 19). The research mission was added in the nineteenth century as the result of German influence on American educators and the founding of Johns Hopkins University (Bogue & Aper). At the same time, the establishment of land grant institutions (state universities) resulted from the Morrill Land Grant Acts of 1862 and 1892 (Reaping, 1998). With a focus on applied sciences and agriculture, a third mission of extension services was consequently added to the previously established missions of instruction and research. Bogue and Aper noted:

Many would argue that while the instructional and research missions are ideas transported from England and Germany respectively, the public service mission of higher education is uniquely American in its origins, intents, and content. Modern state universities operate a range of public services that include not only the application of knowledge for the improvement of agriculture, but also for manufacturing and industry, government and public service, and health care. (p. 20)

Under the umbrella of public service mission, these "democratic purposes of education were reinforced in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, influenced significantly by John Dewey's classic 1916 book, *Democracy and Education*," which offered the view that

education should be supported because it “plays a central moral role in the nation’s well-being” (Reaping, 1998, p. 7). In 1947, following World War II, the initial report of the first President’s Commission on Higher Education addressed the democratic goals of both greater access to general education (two-year and four-year programs), vocational, graduate, and professional programs, and education for the purposes of solving “social problems” and administering “public affairs” (Bogue & Aper, p. 23). Bogue and Aper characterized the focus of higher education during the second half of the twentieth century as “enhancement of access and educational justice” (p. 27), aspects of priority in accomplishing the public service mission of the university through the promotion of democracy.

#### *Higher Education’s Role in Knowledge Creation and Dissemination*

From the ancient civilizations’ efforts to create an educated, morally sound citizenry to philosophical debates concerning the nature of ideas to attempts at proliferating religious doctrine, higher learning has continued to evolve. The advent of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century “facilitated the dissemination of knowledge in unprecedented forms” (Axelrod, 2002, p. 17), which, although significant beyond human conception at the time, can now be recognized as the embryonic catalyst of the current information age. This information age has grown exponentially since the mid-19th century when the university’s role was, as defined by Denman (2005), to serve as “a territorial display of civilisation-building with a bias towards advancing society-at-large through knowledge distribution” (p. 4). Denman further noted:

The liberalisation of free trade and the shift of emphasis from *élite* to mass education which followed may have furthered a wave of conviction that

knowledge production could provide greater economic security and standards for all and, perhaps in a self-serving way, ensure hopeful prospects of a healthier, more prosperous nation. It is this latter circumstance that appears to have created a competition for power and prestige among universities. (p. 4)

Thus, modern universities have become agents to transform society through their contributions to knowledge creation and dissemination while, at the same time, they are transformed by societal demands for ever-increasing knowledge advancement.

Knowledge creation or production came into greater prominence beginning in the middle of the 20th century, as the United States initiated scientific research on a large scale, with research universities being seen as the primary resource for knowledge creation and technical advancement. Increasingly, the demand for knowledge has been insatiable as the United States has gained momentum in the areas of military technology, medical discoveries, economic advancement, policy development in both foreign and domestic affairs, development of the space program, and the invention of numerous technological wonders. Although private corporations and laboratories have contributed somewhat to the knowledge society, “the responsibility for generating ‘new’ knowledge remains . . . the domain of leading research universities” (Aronowitz, 2000, p. 41). The role of higher education in the dissemination of knowledge is not without ethical dynamics, however, especially when universities or individual academics forge commercial partnerships “in which knowledge is traded off for money [which] implies that ‘knowledge’ can be bundled up into neat packages and a precise monetary value can be attached to them” (Newson, 1998, ¶ 28), raising the question: “Who will then ‘own’ the knowledge that is produced?” (Newson, 1998, ¶ 28).



### *Revisiting Higher Education's Civic Mission*

As higher education's focus has evolved congruently with the explosion of the knowledge era, questions arise concerning the mission of the university. Ryan and Heim (1997) favorably supported the establishment of partnerships between universities and industry, viewing such relationships as evidence of the university's mission to provide "service to society" (p. 42). From their perspective, the mission was to "undertake creative and curiosity-driven research, to provide for the formal education needs of future workers, to transfer technology and knowledge to agricultural and mechanical industries, and to update the skills of the workforce" (p. 42). Partnerships with local communities, small industries, corporations, and government are thus a natural progression in fulfilling the service aspect of the university's mission.

Critics of such partnerships, however, have voiced their concerns that while the "fusing of universities with industry is represented as an integral part of the development of the 'knowledge economy'" (Stilwell, 2003, p. 52), these partnerships may lead to conflicting interests and to competitiveness among faculty members who, through financial incentives, may be pressured to "switch research work to fields where 'commercial relevance' is rewarded" (p. 53). Also, some critics have expressed concern that within the realm of values, this compromised position of dominance in the knowledge era has led to a departure from the central essence of universities as "value-laden institutions" who "now seem to wish to be regarded as technically contrived service organizations that willingly accept whatever values their key stakeholders—notably, the government and industry—seek to impose" (Scott, 2004, p. 439). From an opposite perspective, however, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) drew a parallel between knowledge

creation and value clarification when they defined knowledge as “justified true belief” (p. 86), demonstrating a core aspiration related to the traditional view of higher education:

It may be argued that colleges and universities have a special and important obligation to provoke students to engage and evaluate their moral thinking and values for the simple reason that colleges and universities contribute to the critique of conventional thought and value. (Bogue & Aper, 2000, p. 31)

Thus, even with the imposition of corporate pressures and privatization of funding in the arena of higher education, while the fundamental, traditional missions of the university may have been distorted, they have not been destroyed.

Kantanen (2005) sought to define the civic mission or the “third role” (p. 2) of the contemporary research university, naming research and teaching as the first two roles: “The duty of universities is to promote free research, scientific and artistic culture, to provide teaching based upon research, and to raise the youth to serve the nation and humanity” (p. 5). Kantanen suggested that in order to achieve the civic mission, universities should employ a stakeholder model of “mutual interdependency of the community and the university” (p. 12) to avoid exploitation in relationships with the community. Following such a model might well be beneficial, given the viewpoint held by some scholars that higher education has become the object of neoliberalism (Cheng, Ng, & Mok, 2002; Giroux, 2001). Giroux explained the danger this trend poses to higher education and, consequently, to democracy:

As the obligations of citizenship are narrowly defined through the imperatives of consumption and the dynamics of the marketplace, commercial space replaces noncommodified public spheres and the first casualty is a language of social and

political responsibility capable of defending those vital institutions that expand the rights and services central to a meaningful democracy. This is especially true with respect to the current debate over the purpose of higher education. (p. 1)

The introduction of the business culture into education has proven to be a cause of concern, as demonstrated by the observations of Knight Abowitz and Boyles (2000): “Businesses involved in education ‘partnerships’ are often seeking to make public schools work in their own interests, rather than in the interests of a broader public good” (p. 135). While this reference was made to the encroachment of business into public education, it is likewise a concern in higher education, as Scott (2004) noted that “the traditional organizational culture of universities is increasingly contaminated by the growing power and influence of business culture” (p. 439). As part of the organizational culture in higher education, Fuller (2005) saw a “worrisome tendency for universities to turn to business—both its theories and its practitioners—for management guidance. The main problem with this strategy is that business entrepreneurs are typically much better selling particular goods than selling entire organizations” (p. 40). Moreover, as Barnett (2005) defined entrepreneurialism in terms of risk-taking, he argued that “ultimately, what is at stake is ‘mission risk,’ in which the university lays on the line its image reputation, and positioning” (p. 53). Indeed, the ideology and practice of entrepreneurship in the bastions of higher learning have left some scholars to question higher education’s changing ethos, as illustrated by Giroux’s (2001) remark: “The new corporate university appears to be indifferent to ideas, forms of learning, and modes of research that lack commercial value” (p. 5).

Not all scholars, however, hold such a dismal view of the university's ethical and functional status today. Fuller (2005) postulated the idea that "universities manufacture knowledge as a public good," explaining that "research 'creates' (i.e. concentrates) social capital, which is then 'destroyed' (i.e. distributed) through teaching" (abstract, p. 27). Fuller also distinguished between entrepreneurship demonstrated by faculty "marketing their knowledge . . . to specific clients in the public and private sector . . . [which] can be destructive to the university's integrity" and the entrepreneurship associated with the university's selling of itself as "an entity that insists on the integration of research and teaching and engages in the regular redistribution of funds [i.e., knowledge] from wealthier to poorer parts of the campus to enable collective inquiry to move apace as a unified front" (p. 40). In the second context, the entrepreneurial university seeks not only to improve on what it does best—that is, research and teaching—but it also demonstrates the two components are not exclusive (Fuller), and, therefore, the importance of both must be recognized and promoted equally within the university and to the public.

In her effort to define the civic role in higher education, Wellman (1999) acknowledged not only research and teaching, but the third mission of public service: "The fact remains that higher education is the one endeavor that brings together teaching and credentialing functions with knowledge creation and preservation, alongside expected service to communities and the public. Consequently it performs a unique civic role" (p. 8). Wellman strongly urged the development of assessment and accountability policies to encourage institutions to recognize the significance of their civic roles and to keep their service to the public in the public view. As she explained, "the potential exists that those aspects of higher education's role that have yet to be objectified—in particular,

the responsibility to educate students to be effective citizens and to serve the public interest—will erode further to be replaced by more utilitarian measures” (p. 10), such as post-graduation employment rates.

Ehrlich (2000), likewise, expressed concern that civic engagement is waning, even among college graduates. As he noted, “Campuses should not be expected to promote a single type of civic or political engagement, but they should prepare their graduates to become engaged citizens who provide the time, attention, understanding, and action to further collective civic goals” (§ 11). Carlson and Fleisher (2002) agreed: “Ideally, colleges and universities should be a community of learners. Such a community has one mission: to extend students’ ability to reason and enable them to exercise the responsibilities of citizenship” (p. 1103). They voiced their concerns, however, that the “ideal community of learners is quickly disappearing, and falling prey to the pressure of workplace preparation” (p. 1104).

Seeking to meet the utilitarian or pragmatic demands of the public, higher education has diversified to become all things to all people, offering lifelong education programs for senior citizens, online degree programs to accommodate working students, and professional programs in medicine, law, education, business, technology, and a host of other disciplines. In one sense, redefining higher education in this way is not only a response to a changing society’s needs and demands, but it is also the means to developing effective citizens who can contribute to society as a result of knowledge and skills gained through the educational experience. On the other hand, the marketing of higher education and its corporate persona have detracted from its image of serving the public interest for the sake of the public good. The cyclical aspect to this dilemma

demonstrates a paradox: the public expects higher education to fulfill the needs of all members of society, yet when higher education adapts to those needs and, concurrently, to the persona of today's society, critics accuse higher education of operating from a framework of capitalism, not from a framework of civic good. Without strong support from the public, including legislative initiatives to implement adequate funding for higher education, colleges and universities will be forced to rely increasingly upon private and corporate funding sources and student fees, including international student fees, to maintain the level of academic programs and other offerings that have distinguished U.S. institutions of higher education. Indeed, the United States has long enjoyed a prominent reputation among the nations of the world in regard to its colleges and universities, serving as a magnet for international students worldwide.

#### *History of International Students in the United States*

From the establishment of the first university on its soil, the United States has attracted foreign students. In fact, one of Harvard University's early objectives was to include students from overseas. As Schulken (1968) observed, rather than attend Oxford or Cambridge in Great Britain, the sons of Puritan families in England were sent to Harvard to keep them from "temptation to lewdness" (p. 7). During the colonial period, U.S. institutions "appear to have solicited the admission of students from England and the British West Indies, as well as other parts of the world" (Schulken, p. 13). During the 1800's, Asian students were sent to the United States by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and other American foundations helped students from China, Hawaii, and Japan come to the United States for higher education. After 1868, many Japanese students were funded by their government to study in the U.S.,

while in 1871, the Chinese Imperial government sent 120 students here (Schulken). According to Schulken, this first phase of international student recruitment resulted largely from missionary efforts.

The second phase, taking place in the early 20th century, could be contributed to a philanthropic mission rather than a religious mission: “The foreign student was beginning to be regarded as a source of good will and international understanding rather than a potential recruit for the Christian Army. . . . There was a growing conviction that the only real answer to world peace lay in the widespread interchange of people and ideas throughout the world” (Schulken, 1968, p. 122), a premise still held a century later by many who promote internationalization on U.S. campuses as part of the cross-cultural and transnational educational efforts worldwide. During this phase, the Institute of International Education (IIE) was established by the Carnegie Foundation. Today the IIE is a strong voice for international education, serving now, as it did in its inception, to attract international students to U.S. shores and to promote study abroad to American students. Among the valuable contributions made by IIE is the annual Open Doors report, a collection and analysis of data pertaining to student flows both to and from the United States. In addition to the Carnegie Foundation, several other nonprofit organizations during the 1920’s and 1930’s were instrumental in promoting international education and giving assistance to overseas students coming to the United States. The list includes the International Education Board of the Rockefeller Foundation, responsible for the creation of International Houses for foreign students studying in New York, California, and Illinois; the Ford Foundation; and a host of other nonprofit organizations established to assist specific groups of students from abroad (James, 1992).

The third phase of international student management identified by Schulken (1968) focused on increased government involvement in international education. The impetus for this new involvement was the public's attitude following World War II that cross-cultural and transnational understanding would bring about peace throughout the world (James, 1992). This attitude was instrumental in establishing the post-war Fulbright Commission Scholarships, funded by the sale of war supplies to foreign governments, and other scholarships funded by the United States Congress, all of which aided the cause for international education. Established in 1961 under the Mutual Educational and Cultural Exchange Act, the Agency for International Development was instrumental in helping thousands of overseas students come to the United States, while the International Education Act of 1966 was the source of funding for foreign students (James).

*International Student Recruitment: Global Perspective or Exploitation?*

The following decades witnessed an enormous influx of foreign students because of healthy economies in their home countries and advancing educational systems in Third World nations (Dunnett, 2000). At the same time self-funded international student enrollments were increasing, domestic enrollments were declining and tuition costs were rising; thus, U.S. institutions began aggressively pursuing foreign student recruitment as a means of generating revenues to offset the shortfall of American student enrollments: "The goal of internationalizing U.S. higher education by 'importing' foreign students was part of a larger vision articulated by some educators who called on colleges and universities to overcome their provincialism and adopt a global perspective" (Dunnett, p. 5).



Some scholars, however, have criticized this phenomenon, equating the recruitment of foreign students to exploitation and labeling the activity as “imperialism,” defined by Rhee & Sagaria (2004) as “an asymmetrical relationship of interdependence between First and Third World societies, characterized in part by unequal cultural and intellectual exchanges” (p. 81). In their critical discourse analysis of articles from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Rhee and Sagaria identified three imperialist themes, one of which they labeled “international students as capital” (p. 82). The researchers based the theme on statements from the *Chronicle* that referred to international students as “export economy” and international alumni as “important sources of capital gifts” (p. 84). Denman (2005), likewise, voiced concerns that the university, in becoming “more and more a business” (p. 5), is endeavoring to “take advantage of increased economic opportunities,” particularly in the context of “international exchange of students and scholars” (p. 6). Others have voiced the opinion that the United States has taken advantage of the global market in, among other areas, education (Altbach, 2002), which Wade (2003) argued “may well undermine political support for universal access to social services in developing countries and facilitate upper-class citizens’ ‘exit’ from their nations” (p. 84), often referred to as “brain drain” (Dassin, 2005, p.22).

Even though foreign students have been an increasingly integral part of the higher education landscape throughout its history, their presence on American campuses has not been a topic of wide-spread concern in the journals of higher education. Perhaps one reason for a lack of research in this area is the fact that university administrators have taken for granted the popularity of U.S. education and assumed that international students would continue to come to our colleges and universities in increasingly higher numbers

(Dunnett, 2000, p. 5). Now, as a result of the September 11, 2001 terrorist events on U.S. soil, tightened visa regulations and increased visa fees have caused the status quo for foreign student enrollments to begin to wane. Consequently, higher education officials have noticed a negative impact on both their research programs and their revenues. While the literature is scant, such primary international education organizations as NAFSA, the Institute of International Education (IIE), and the American Association of Intensive English Programs (AAIEP) are active in collecting and reporting data for the benefit of university officials who must understand the issues and create effective policies to address those issues. While these large organizations have a definite global perspective as they monitor student flows, international economic and political situations, and U.S. and other countries' national policies affecting international education, administrators and recruiting personnel would be well-advised to look at certain manageable factors that influence the recruitment of international students.

#### *Factors Influencing Institutional Choices*

As Soutar and Turner (2002) pointed out, "One of the key pieces of information that would assist a university's marketing effort is an understanding of what determines a student's university preference" (abstract). Although their study was conducted among Australian high school students, similar application could be made with international students. Soutar and Turner used "a form of conjoint analysis, known as ACA" to explore the importance of ten specific attributes "to school-leavers' [high school graduates'] choice of university" (§ 13). The attributes were presented to the students in various formats, including a seven-point scale used to rate types of universities, a request to consider each attribute individually in choosing between universities, a preference scale

for combined attributes, and a set of hypothetical schools from which to choose. To determine the preferences of international students in choosing a university, a similar study could be conducted with a set of target attributes.

Another study examined the influence of family on a student's choice of international education. Pimpa (2003b) identified five familial influences among Thai students: "finance, information, expectation, competition, and persuasion" (¶ 11) and found that "financial influence and expectation . . . are the strongest influencing factors of family" (¶ 41). When he discovered that the educational level of the student affected the way in which the student's decisions were influenced by his or her family, Pimpa recommended that "the types of marketing strategy used to create and support the demand for international education . . . should be considered carefully" in order to appeal to students at differing levels of education (¶ 45).

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) also explored the reasons international students elected to study overseas and the process by which they chose a particular university. In their study, they described a "'push-pull' model of international education flows" (¶ 3) in which the "push" factors originate from the student's native environment and the "pull" factors, designed to attract the student, stem from the host country. Using questionnaires and focus groups, data were collected over a four-year period in four countries to determine why students chose to study overseas and why they chose particular schools. Mazzarol and Soutar concluded that because recent trends indicate "a significant upgrading of the local supply-side of education at all levels" (¶ 38), the "ability of a host country and its institutions to continue to attract substantial numbers of foreign students

will increasingly depend on the ‘pull’ factors” (¶ 39), including quality of reputation and “word-of-mouth-referrals” (¶ 39).

Another factor that may influence the choice of study destinations by international students is the institution’s capability to assist students in cultural adjustment and transition. Since these factors affect achievement and retention, international students’ successful adaptation is a key quality on which universities can capitalize in their recruitment efforts (Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Tomich, McWhirter, & Darcy, 2003). As Santovec (2002) pointed out, many international students are attracted to schools which offer a nurturing environment provided by host families, as well as a small campus and low crime rate. If international students feel safe and comfortable where they study and live, their adjustment to a new culture will likely take less time and be less traumatic. Those institutions that offer both quality academic programs and excellent support services for the international student community can expect enrollment increases as a result of the ‘word-of-mouth’ phenomenon:

American higher education institutions that take international students for granted, as ‘cash cows,’ do so at their peril. Formerly, the international student grapevine widely circulated information on campus in a matter of days. As the Internet means virtually instantaneous communication, weak programs and services for international students could be known worldwide in hours, if not minutes. To successfully recruit international students, U.S. colleges and universities need well-run, international programs with ethical, professional staff. (Peterson, et al, 1999, p. 69)

Although their research focused primarily on current trends of twinning programs and branch campuses in foreign countries, Mazzarol, Soutar, and Seng (2003) noted that in order to attract foreign students to overseas schools (e.g., U.S. universities), “such institutions are likely to have leading edge centres of research and teaching, which cannot be easily duplicated internationally” (§ 36). In other words, American institutions of higher education must offer programs that are unique, as well as of high-quality, in order to appeal to international students who are a highly desired commodity in today’s competitive educational market.

In addition to the outstanding reputation of American university academic programs, especially in technology, medical research, and the sciences, the abundance of colleges and universities is appealing to students from countries in which the opportunities for higher learning are quite limited. For example, in China, as in many other countries, students are required to achieve a certain score on national exams to qualify for admission to a university. If they do not achieve scores in the top percentage of their peers, they often have no option to study at home. While many of these Chinese students are second-tiered in their own country’s educational system, they are quite capable of succeeding in U.S. colleges and universities. Although China’s rising middle class is evidence of a strengthening economy, some students who are academically qualified for admission to U.S. institutions cannot afford the out-of-state tuition they are required to pay. For this reason, some universities offer merit-based scholarships that allow international students to pay in-state tuition rates. Other institutions have implemented assistance programs through which international students can borrow

money from U.S. banks at rates comparable to loan programs for American students (Dalton, 1999).

In addition to outstanding academic programs, support services, and financial assistance or fee reductions, U.S. colleges and universities might look to the developing consortia (e.g., the ERASMUS and SOCRATES programs) in the European Union for other factors that attract international students. With a borderless Europe, students are able to travel more easily and take advantage of certain outreach programs that allow students from less prosperous member countries to earn degrees at prestigious universities. European students who might have come to the United States for their study abroad experience can travel more easily to other European Union destinations than to the United States because of U.S. visa restrictions and finances. European universities are capitalizing on the opportunity to attract both European and non-European students:

The significance of the ERASMUS/SOCRATES model may lie more in its extra-European impact in two ways: First, the evolution into *Erasmus Mundus* will compete to bring global student talent to Europe; and second, the EU model may serve as a model for educational collaboration and integration in other regions.

(Basile, 2005, p. 39)

The fact that degree programs in several countries in the European Union are offered with English as the language of instruction has “made the EU, overnight, highly competitive for international students worldwide who seek higher education in English. And they market that” (V. Johnson, 2005). In addition, Finland, France, Japan, Singapore, Germany, and Poland have begun marketing their programs, including intensive English programs, in an attempt to attract international students who, in former times, might have

only considered studying in the United States (V. Johnson). Moreover, Asian and Middle Eastern nations have welcomed universities from the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and other nations, to establish branch campuses. Again, students who might have chosen to travel abroad to study are now enrolled at home in foreign-supported programs, often from prestigious institutions of higher education. While the branch campus program may or may not be as rigorous as the home institution's programs, certainly other benefits of studying abroad are sorely missing from the student's educational experience. Therefore, U.S. institutions need to address those benefits in their recruiting efforts to continue to draw international students to their campuses.

#### *Strategies Resulting in Successful Recruitment*

Considering the fact that foreign students have more educational options today, it is clear that American institutions must develop policies that advance forward-thinking strategies for recruiting international students. According to Veloutsou, Lewis, and Paton (2004), "Universities are currently under considerable pressure to recruit students from a wide range of backgrounds and at the same time improve retention rates for these students" (¶ 31). Obviously, the desire to recruit international students has not diminished since September 11, 2001, yet the task has become much more difficult because of heightened visa restrictions and the lack of a national policy to promote U.S. higher education overseas (Bollag, 2004), both of which have served to benefit other nations who are competing with the United States in international student recruitment. As Basile (2005) observed, for example, Australia's "national policies combine aggressive marketing, government institutional support, and direct student support" (p. 36), yet the

United States has no such policy in place. Therefore, in the absence of a national policy, it is imperative that individual institutions develop plans to effectively promote their programs among potential international students.

Following an introduction to the topic of international student recruitment (Rogers, 2000), Noronha (2000) addressed the need for institutions to develop a strategic plan with two primary goals: articulating long-term goals and establishing budget priorities. She further explained the need to evaluate internal and external factors through assessment, to define the institutional mission and goals, to determine “key performance indicators” (p. 36), “objectives and action plan” (p. 37), and “resources, needs, and expenditures” (p. 37) associated with the recruitment plan.

Once the strategic plan is in place, the specific activities associated with the plan must be implemented, and greater success is likely if the actions are based on research. Gomes and Murphy (2003) conducted a study on the use of the Internet to market programs to international students. Using questionnaires to solicit student responses and conducting interviews with marketing personnel from nine educational institutions, the authors determined that more than half of the students used the Internet to help them choose a study destination overseas (§ 50). Also, more than 80 percent of the students who responded to the questionnaire reported that the “institution’s email response [to their e-mail enquiries] influenced their choice of institution” (§ 37). Gomes and Murphy also suggested that since parents usually influence their children’s choices, especially due to financial considerations, institutions should develop “e-business strategies to target parents” by providing information in a dedicated section of the Website for parents (§ 51).



The concept of marketing to target groups was also presented by DesJardins (2002). In his study, he emphasized the importance of the timeframe between admission and enrollment, with special attention to those students who have been admitted but have not committed fully to attending the institution. To identify and market to these potential students, DesJardins suggested using a “segmentation strategy” (p. 532) by which students are “segmented into groups to whom specific messages are targeted” (p. 532), allowing recruiters to eliminate those groups or segments that are designated as less likely to enroll. In this way, recruiting efforts are more cost-effective and more productive.

Also concerned with financial aspects, Cheng, Ng, and Mok (2002) proposed a framework for analyzing education policy from an economic perspective. They observed that “education policy and reform need to deal with the issues of the internal and external economic effectiveness of the education system” (¶ 70), and they suggested that their framework “takes into account the demand and supply of education, the education system structure, the economic effects and consequences and their interrelations” (¶ 71). In her application of marketing theory to international student recruitment, Byrd (1991) discussed the need to “devise strategies to bridge the gap between the two [seller and buyer]” (p. 5) while responding to challenges unique to overseas recruitment, such as legal issues, communication needs, adequate information and research, time and transportation considerations, and differing values (p. 5).

Some would argue that considering the economics at stake in maintaining a premiere position in international education, it would behoove institutions to develop recruitment policies in response to such external factors as increased competition from

other English-speaking countries and compounded visa issues. At the same time, recruitment policies would, through increased international student enrollments, result in opportunities for educational enrichment for American students as they experience interactions with students from other cultures.

### *Using Agents to Recruit*

While commercial agents are widely used by international students in search of an appropriate program and by host institutions in search of potential students, the literature concerning these practices is quite limited. In the context of international student recruitment, Stedman (2000) described resources and recruitment networks, including on-campus recruitment teams, alumni contacts, overseas resources, advisers, and guidance counselors, and commercial recruiters and agents. It is quite prevalent in some parts of the world, particularly in East Asia, for students to depend heavily upon agents to guide them through the selection and application processes. To illustrate how strong an impact agents make on students, Pimpa (2003a), in his research on factors influencing Thai students' educational decisions, concluded that "informational and persuasion influence from agents has a stronger impact than informational and persuasion influence from peers" (p. 185).

In addition to the strong influence that agents exert over students' educational choices, at least in some parts of the world, employing their services can be beneficial to the host institution. Since extensive traveling to a variety of other nations for the purposes of recruiting is cost-prohibitive, using agents to promote academic programs saves the institution considerable money, and, consequently, helps the institution maintain a

healthier balance in terms of diversity in its international student population (Stedman, 1999).

Heaney (2000) briefly addressed the ethical issues that can arise when an agent misrepresents the host institution or when he or she “assumes too much authority while trying to assist the student” (p. 15), resulting in misinformation or false information being given to the student. Unscrupulous agents have soiled the reputation for their profession, as far as some administrators are concerned, resulting in refusal of many institutions to secure the services of commercial agents for recruitment of international students. On the other hand, institutions may also act unethically in their relationships with commercial agents by misrepresenting their degree programs, not providing promised services to recruited students, or not honoring other conditions of contractual or spoken agreements with agents. In each of these situations, the student is the ultimate victim of unethical practices, whether on the part of the agent or the institution. For this reason, a written contractual agreement based on consensual codes of conduct or formal ethical codes is vital to the working relationship between the educational institution and the commercial agent and essential for honoring the best interests of the student.

#### *Ethical Standards and Codes of Conduct*

Hallak and Poisson (2005), in their study of ethics and corruption in education, noted that “adherence to ethical standards and to codes of conduct can greatly contribute to the establishment of a more favourable educational environment, thus directly influencing the quality of education” (p. 9). While their study concerned teacher codes in Bangladesh, their observations could also apply to student recruitment practices in which adherence to ethical codes plays an important role and may ultimately affect the student’s

educational experience. Hallak and Poisson outlined the following steps taken to implement the codes: (a) clearly define the aims of the codes; (b) widely distribute the codes; (c) establish both social and professional controls for implementing the codes; (d) share the responsibilities among the different stakeholders involved in monitoring the codes; and (e) train the personnel. Hallak and Poisson suggested that ethical codes are more successful if they are established through a participatory process involving the principal parties. In the case of recruitment agreements with commercial agents, both the agents and the institutions could be involved in establishing the code of conduct or contractual agreement so that both parties have full understanding of the ethical aspects of the agreement and of the expectations each party holds for adherence to those mutually agreed upon standards.

Codes of conduct or codes of ethics are controversial for a number of reasons. In an interview with Galagan (1998), Peter Drucker remarked, “Leadership has to be grounded in responsibility. It has to be grounded in a Constitution. It has to be grounded in accountability” (p. 25). This “Constitution” could be equated to a code of conduct or ethical code, as well as to a formal operational guideline. The crux of Drucker’s statement lies in the need for accountability. However, if the underlying premise for an ethical code lacks strong moral substance, the ramifications of adherence, or lack of adherence, to the code may not be clear (Schley, 2002). Another shortcoming in the application of ethical codes of conduct is that, in many cases, enforcement occurs only when it is advantageous or convenient or, in some instances, not at all (Schley). As Schley pointed out, “ethical codes are only as valid as the practices of the CEOs and other corporate executives who promulgate them” (p. 255). While his remarks were

focused on corporate officers, the same observation could be made in a business relationship between recruitment officers and commercial recruiting agents. Schley speculated that ethical codes are disregarded or not selectively followed because of the current “world-view that denies the interconnectedness of persons, the existence of an overarching order, and even the moral and ethical relevance of actions at all” (p. 257). As a result, he concluded that “modern ethics must rely largely in external forces, designed to coerce or compel good behavior, as opposed to appealing to internal motivations which inspire goodness” (p. 257).

Symptomatic of the current state of ethics in business are certain philosophical tenets that guide some of the leading voices in corporate America. In her discussion of the moral challenges business leaders face, Nash (1990) described the “enlightened self-interest model of business ethics . . . that . . . solves the moral dilemmas of management through a complex calculation of how helping others helps oneself” (p. 58). It is from this self-interest perspective that “the overriding moral calculus for the corporation is its own return” (p. 59), an idea also expressed by economist Milton Friedman when he argued that “profit seeking is ethical and diverting shareholders money into charity and other non-profit activities is unethical” (Sudhir & Murphy, 2001, p. 198). Likewise, Harvard Business Professor Theodore Levitt (1991) wrote, “Honest greed—whether for money, acclaim, or conquest—is not axiomatically an oxymoron. It makes a certain useful contribution to getting the world’s work done” (p. 38). Nash, however, noted that “many business leaders, recognizing the moral frailty that unbridled self-interest invites, reject a me-first or even company-first approach to problem solving in favor of a stronger emphasis on ‘the other guy’” (p. 96), citing the cultivation of “a service attitude . . . [as]

the ignition key to this orientation” (p. 100). As Nash explained, the service element is closely tied to relationship-building and, thus, to ethical considerations:

The ethical implications of this [service] attitude are significant. Because relationships are ongoing and procedural in focus, one tends to be more aware of the long-term perspective. It becomes easier to draw on values that support not just the short-term sale, but also the long-term well-being of both parties. These include honesty, empathy, caring, respect, trustworthiness, fairness, and developing the competency to deliver on one’s stated or implied promises in the marketplace. (p. 110)

Although such qualities cannot be legislated or enforced through codes of ethics, they can be reflected in corporate policies, principles of practice, and other such operating guides. In fact, some scholars have argued that the development and implementation of an ethics code is essential to maintaining ethical practices in businesses or other organizations. In one investigation of the use of codes of conduct in colleges and universities, over 70 percent of the respondents reported their institutions had codes of conduct or ethics policies (Rezaee, Elmore, & Szendi, 2001, p. 175).

Reynolds and Smith (1990) stressed the need for ethical guidelines in higher education:

Precisely because the academic profession wields such enormous power in a postindustrial information society, it is appropriate for us to explore an ethic of responsibility, and a statement of principles of responsibility that can guide the choices of individuals and institutions in higher education. . . . The codes [of ethics] are an attempt to bring deliberative and sober judgment to bear on those

areas of professional practice in which ethical dilemmas are most likely to arise.  
(p. 33)

Certainly, U.S. universities that seek the services of commercial recruiting agents would be wise to develop a code of conduct by which both parties would operate. However, writing an ethical code is not enough to ensure freedom from unethical actions or fraudulent practices; individuals responsible for making decisions must also have a personal code of ethics that agrees with the corporate or institutional code. Otherwise, the code may be selectively implemented, or perhaps not implemented at all, because “codes of conduct do not always provide the power or the process for enforcement” (Rezaee, Elmore, & Szendi, 2001, p. 172). As Rezaee, Elmore, and Szendi (2001) noted, “Because of the variety of value systems in a pluralistic society, it is impossible to achieve a consensus of opinion regarding morals and ethics” (p. 172). The issue of differing value systems, of course, has the potential for even greater repercussions in working relationships between people from different cultures. However, the authors continued on a more optimistic note when they concluded that “it is easier to achieve a consensus on appropriate ethical practices” (p.172) than to agree on morals and ethics.

### *Summary*

Chapter Two has presented a review of the literature to serve as a foundation for the study, highlighting relevant research that informs the topic of this study but also establishing areas of interest that have not been explored fully. The chapter began with a broad view of the history of higher education in the United States, with special attention given to various missions of higher education and higher education’s role in knowledge creation and dissemination. This section was followed by a summary of the history of

international students in the United States, leading into international student recruitment. Factors influencing institutional choice, from the student's perspective, and effective recruiting strategies, from the institution's perspective, were topics explored in the literature. These topics were followed by a review of the literature, limited as it is, concerning the use of commercial agents in recruiting. This section led into a lengthy examination of the literature regarding codes of ethics or conduct.

One theme emerging in the literature reviewed in this chapter was the presence of two operational ideologies at opposite ends of the spectrum: higher education existing to promote the civic good vs. higher education as big business. This theme plays out in the specific issue of recruiting international students through commercial third-party agents: Is this practice student-centered or profit-driven? Does the end justify the means? Or have the means become the end? Is this type of recruitment other-regarding or self-regarding?

The questions emanating from the literature review helped drive the research design and methodology described in Chapter Three. Included in that chapter are the purpose and overview of the study; the research questions; an explanation of the research strategy rationale; descriptions of the research methods, participants, and the data collection and instrumentation; and discussions of the data analyses, the credibility and consistency of the study, and the researcher's biases and assumptions. Chapter Four will report the research findings and present the qualitative data. Chapter Five will provide a summary of the study and suggest ideas for further research.



CHAPTER THREE  
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

*Introduction*

As institutions of higher education face continuing fiscal issues, including funding reductions from state and federal government and rising costs of campus upkeep, technology maintenance, and cost of living indexes, administrators increasingly seek funding sources to avoid massive tuition hikes. These sources include not only partnerships with private corporations, but also revenues from international student fees, usually equivalent to out-of-state tuition prices which are often twice the cost of in-state tuition. While advocates for international education extol the virtues of foreign student enrollments, such as social benefits of increased diversity and expanded cultural awareness, political benefits from opportunities to demonstrate democracy firsthand, and scientific and technological benefits from international student contributions to research in these areas, questions arise concerning the ideologies influencing each of these areas. Of particular concern to this study are ethical issues related to the recruitment of international students, specifically recruitment through commercial, third-party agents.

In this chapter, the purpose and overview of the study, the research questions, the research methods, the study design, and the procedures are presented. The rationale for the methods used in the study is discussed, as are the limitations of the study. The population for the study is defined, and the methods of data collection and data analysis are stated in terms of appropriate qualitative analyses. In addition, the credibility and consistency of the study, as well as the researcher's biases and assumptions, are discussed.

### *Purpose and Overview of the Study*

The focus of this inquiry is to uncover and examine ethical issues embedded in the practice of utilizing commercial agents to recruit international students. Unethical practices may occur on the part of the agent as well as on the part of the institution. On the other hand, both agents and institutions may contribute to the student's satisfactory experience by matching the student with an institution appropriate to his or her needs and interests, providing accurate information and special services, and conducting on-going evaluation of the placement after the student's arrival on campus. This study, therefore, explores the implications of both ethical and unethical recruiting practices that may impact both student satisfaction and institutional reputation.

The purpose of this study is (a) to examine the positive and negative experiences of students and institutional staff involved in school-initiated commercial agent agreements in international recruitment and (b) to determine if institutional policies endorsing the use of commercial agents are ethically sound and centered on the student's best interests.

### *Research Questions*

1. What are the positive and negative experiences of international students who were recruited through school-initiated commercial agent agreements?
2. What are the positive and negative experiences of recruitment officers at institutions that recruit international students through school-initiated commercial agent agreements?

3. In light of the experiences of students and staff in the use of school-initiated commercial agent agreements, what conclusions can be drawn regarding the ethicality of such policies?
4. In what ways are recruitment policies that encourage school-initiated commercial agent agreements profit-driven? Student-centered? Other-regarding? Self-regarding?

#### *Rationale for Research Strategy*

In order to better understand the ethical considerations in the utilization of commercial agents for international student recruitment, the researcher implemented multiple case studies involving document analyses, surveys, and semi-structured individual interviews. Yin (2003) described the case study as a research strategy with the following defining features:

A case study is an empirical inquiry that (a) investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when (b) the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. The case study inquiry (a) copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points, and as one result (b) relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion, and as another result (c) benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis. (pp. 13-14)

In her description of the case study, Merriam (1998) observed, “the single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case. . . .

[The case] is a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries. I can ‘fence in’ what I am going to study” (p. 27).

Lewis (2003) offered additional insight into the nature of case studies when she described

the primary defining features of a case study as being multiplicity of perspectives which are rooted in a specific context. . . . Those multiple perspectives may come from multiple data collection methods, but they may also derive from multiple accounts—collected using a single method from people with different perspectives on what is being observed. (p. 52)

Likewise, the notion of multiple perspectives was expressed in the recognition of multiple types of triangulation in qualitative research, including: (a) data triangulation, in which multiple sources of data are used in an investigation; (b) theory triangulation, in which various theories inform a study; (c) researcher or investigator triangulation, in which multiple researchers are involved in the investigation; and (d) methodological triangulation, in which a variety of methods are employed to collect data (Denzin, 1978; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Patton, 1987). In this study, data triangulation resulted when data were collected from three perspectives: international students, institutional recruiting staff, and commercial agents. Methodological triangulation was achieved through the implementation of document analysis, surveys, and interviews.

In her discussion of case study approaches to research, D. M. Johnson (1992) offered the following description:

Case-study methodology is flexible and is formulated to suit the purpose of the study. It can vary along a number of dimensions. . . . [Case studies] are usually

primarily *naturalistic*, relying on the collection of naturally occurring data. In addition, however, various procedures may be used to elicit data. Case studies are usually *descriptive* in that they describe phenomena, or they may go beyond description to contextual or cultural interpretation. (p. 83)

Johnson also observed that the purpose of the case study is “to understand the complexity and dynamic nature of [a] particular entity, and to discover systematic connections among experiences, behaviors, and relevant features of the context” (p. 84). A similar view was also expressed by Nunan (1992): “Unlike the experimenter, who manipulates variables to determine their causal significance, or the surveyor, who asks standardized questions of large, representative samples of individuals, the case study researcher typically observes the characteristics of an individual unit” (p. 77). In summary, Nunan offered this simple definition: “A case is a single instance of a class of objects or entities, and a case study is the investigation of that single instance in the context in which it occurs” (p. 79).

Stake (2005) further distinguished three types of case study, which extend from specific to broad in their focus: intrinsic case study of a specific case alone, instrumental study to bring understanding to an issue, and multiple or collective case study “to investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition” (p. 445). Stake explained:

[Multiple case study] is instrumental study extended to several cases. Individual cases in the collection may or may not be known in advance to manifest some common characteristic. They may be similar or dissimilar; with redundancy and variety each important. They are chosen because it is believed that understanding

them will lead to better understanding, and perhaps better theorizing, about a larger collection of cases. (pp. 445-446)

In order to explore adequately the research questions in this study, the multiple case study strategy was chosen. Following is a discussion of the components of the investigation, i.e., the data sources and methods of collection.

### *Research Methodology*

In an effort to explore the ethical implications of international student recruitment through commercial third-party agents, the researcher determined that an examination of pertinent documents might yield information regarding the underlying philosophies and operational practices as stated formally in recruitment policies and guidelines; printed materials from commercial agencies; and codes of ethics, codes of conduct, and principles of good practices from professional organizations of which commercial agents and/or institutions are members. A second method of research used in the study, a survey, was used to collect data from multiple sources, with the intent of providing a broader view of the usage of commercial agents by colleges and universities across the state. A third method of garnering insight into the problem under study was the use of semi-structured individual interviews with primary stakeholders, i.e., international students recruited through commercial agents and institutional recruiting officers. The researcher sought to ascertain from the experiences of these stakeholders the ethical implications of institutional policies or practices supporting the use of commercial agents. By developing emerging themes or patterns, the researcher hoped to identify these policies or practices as student-centered or profit-driven, indicating the possibility of differing ideologies underlying the policies and practices. These three research methods—document analysis,

surveys, and interviews—constituted methodology triangulation to substantiate the findings. A discussion of each of these methods follows.

### *Document Analysis*

One of the data sources commonly utilized in case studies is written documents (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003), also referred to as artifacts (Hatch, 2002; Hodder, 2003), “mute evidence” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003. p. 155) or “unobtrusive data” (Hatch, p. 116). According to Yin, “the most important use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources” (p. 87). Likewise, Hatch noted:

[Documents] are nonreactive. They can tell their own story independent of the interpretations of participants, and they can be gathered without disturbing the natural flow of human activity. This makes them an especially useful point from which to make comparisons with data from other sources such as . . . interviewing. (p. 119)

In addition, documents can be used as the basis for certain interview questions, serving to “invite and stimulate participant reflection and interpretation” (Hatch, p. 120), or as a means to “establish history and context in which to ground findings generated from other data” (p.120). Prior (2004) advised researchers to “look at the documentation, not merely for its content but more at how it is produced, how it functions in episodes of daily interaction, and how, exactly, it circulates” (p. 388). While implementing all of these steps may be outside the scope of this study, certainly Prior’s advice to determine how written documents are used in authentic contexts is a valuable and reasonable directive appropriate to this research. In addition, Hodder (2003) advised that documents “can be

understood only as what they are—a form of artifact produced under certain material conditions . . . embedded within social and ideological systems” (p. 157), a statement of interest as this study has addressed the conflicting ideologies driving international recruitment.

The following documents were analyzed in light of their contribution to this study: (a) formal agreements or contracts between institutions and commercial agents; (b) institutional recruiting policies; (c) commercial agents’ inventories of services and related documents; (d) written codes of ethics or principles of good practices to which commercial agents subscribe; and (e) written codes of ethics or principles of good practices to which institutions subscribe. Data collected from these documents served to provide information from which interview and survey questions were derived, to corroborate evidence gleaned from interviews and surveys, and to provide both context and meaning in the data analysis stage of the study. As much of the document analysis in this study involved ethical codes, Hatch’s (2002) observation that “documents are powerful indicators of the value systems operating within institutions” (p.115) was worth noting. Indeed, observation (or the lack thereof) of ethical codes subscribed to by institutions may reveal underlying ideologies that influence institutional practices.

### *Surveys*

Survey research has a long history, beginning in the late 1800’s in London when Charles Booth undertook a study of the city’s economic and social conditions (Fontana & Frey, 2005). Other researchers followed suit, and by the mid-1900’s, opinion polls, market research, and a variety of other uses of the survey were common. In fact, as Fontana and Frey reported, “the methodological dominance of survey research continued



unabated throughout the 1970's, 1980's, and 1990's" (p. 701), especially in the field of sociology.

As Hancock and Algozzine (2006) observed, surveys and questionnaires "created by the researcher often provide a powerful means by which to collect information pertaining to the researcher's questions" (p. 52), especially because these instruments can be carefully crafted to extract data specific to the study. Cohen and Manion (1994) further described the role of surveys to "gather data at a particular point in time with the intention of describing the nature of existing conditions, or identifying standards against which existing conditions can be compared, or determining the relationships that exist between specific events" (p. 83), showing the complexity and usefulness of this method of data collection.

O'Leary (2004) presented several varieties of surveys: (a) the descriptive survey, designed to obtain demographic information, personal information, or information regarding attitudes and opinions; (b) the explanatory survey, which "attempts to build more complex understandings and goes beyond description . . . in an attempt to determine cause and effect" (p. 153); (c) the census, whose function is to survey all people in a specified population; (d) the cross-sectional survey, which involves a sample to represent the target population; (e) the trend survey, conducted periodically with similar groups of respondents to assess changes over time; (f) the panel study, conducted with the same group of respondents on more than one occasion to assess changes over time; (g) the face-to-face survey, which allows for non-verbal cues and trust-building but lacks anonymity; (h) the telephone survey, which offers wide-spread participation but is not

well-received by many potential respondents; and (i) the self-administered survey, which offers anonymity and wide coverage but often yields low response rates (pp. 153-154).

In this study, the self-administered descriptive survey, “Recruiting Officer Questionnaire” (see Appendix B), was implemented in an electronic format, using a commercial program, SurveyMonkey. The questionnaire was comprised of six short-answer questions and five open-ended questions requesting descriptions of policies, practices, and experiences. While Cohen and Manion (1994) warned that open-ended questions were not recommended for surveys because of the time and effort required of the respondent, the researcher included some questions in this category to elicit experiential data that would not otherwise have been presented. In this regard, the self-administered descriptive survey corresponded more closely to the individual interviews conducted with institutional recruiting personnel.

### *Interviews*

Interviews are often categorized on a continuum from formal or structured, in which the interviewer uses a set of pre-determined questions, not deviating from the format or content of those questions, to informal or unstructured interviews, in which information is gathered in conversational style, with questions arising from the dialogue itself rather than from a pre-determined set of queries (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Hatch, 2002; Merriam, 1998; Nunan, 1992). Hatch (2002) described the semi-structured interview, located midway on this continuum:

Although researchers come to the interview with guiding questions, they are open to following the leads of informants and probing into areas that arise during

interview interactions. They are in-depth in that they are designed to go deeply into the understandings of the informants. (p. 94)

As Arthur and Nazroo (2003) pointed out, various scholars have used differing definitions to label the types of interviews (i.e., formal, informal, structured, semi-structured, unstructured, in-depth, non-standardized). This researcher has chosen to apply Hatch's definition of the semi-structured interview in this study.

O'Leary (2004) further defined the interview as "a method of data collection that involves researchers asking respondents basically *open-ended* questions" (p. 162), distinguishing interviews from surveys or questionnaires. He also observed that interviewing is much more complex than simply asking questions and recording answers; rather, as in all oral and aural communication processes, the interaction between interviewer and interviewee involves room for misinterpretation:

Questions move from the mind to the lips of the interviewer, before moving to the ears of an interviewee, who filters the question through mental processes, before articulating any answers. The interviewer must then hear what has been said, and use their [*sic*] own mental processes to take in and interpret meaning. From forming ideas to the articulation of those ideas, from hearing others to making sense of what they are saying, the question and answer . . . process is rife with the potential for miscommunication. (p. 162)

Nonetheless, "interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways in which we try to understand our fellow humans" (Fontana & Frey, 2005, pp. 697-698); thus, the interview is one of the primary methods of data collection employed in case studies.

Due to its popularity not only as a research method but also in everyday experiences (e.g., television talk shows and shopping mall surveys), interviewing has also come under scrutiny by modern-day theorists. Fontana and Frey (2005) argued that “interviewing . . . is inextricably and unavoidable historically, politically, and contextually bound” (p. 695), and that “this boundedness refutes the whole tradition of the interview of gathering objective data to be used neutrally for scientific purposes” (p. 695). Nunan (1992) likewise questioned the neutrality issue when he observed that “even in an unstructured relationship, the interviewer has much more power than the interviewee. The inequitable relationship . . . will affect the content of the interview as well as the language which is used” (p.150). In addition, Fontana and Frey (2003) reported: “A growing number of scholars . . . feel that most of traditional in-depth interviewing is unethical. . . . The techniques and tactics of interviewing, they say, are really ways of manipulating the respondents while treating them as objects or numbers rather than individual human beings” (p. 90).

Rapley (2004), on the other hand, countered the current trends to perhaps overanalyze the interview phenomenon, focusing instead on the social interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee as they “collaborate in producing retrospective (and prospective) accounts or versions of their past (or future) actions, experiences, feelings and thoughts” (p. 16). His advice to researchers, then, is to avoid taking an interviewee’s words out of context and to understand that an interviewee’s words constitute one way to approach a topic, while other interviewees’ words may reflect other ways to approach the same topic. In other words, researchers must be careful not to make assertions or generalize based on a single speech exchange, demonstrating

the appropriateness of data and methodology triangulation in case study research. Another important guideline for the interviewer is to remember that “the goal is to understand the situation under investigation primarily from the participants’ and not the researcher’s perspective. This is called the *emic*, or insider’s perspective, as opposed to the *etic*, or outsider’s perspective” (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 8). In his discussion of this differentiation in perspective, Mestenhauser (2003) perceived the etic vantage point from outside the culture as promoting the distinction between ‘us’ [the interviewers] and ‘them’ [the interviewees], while the emic perspective from within the culture diminishes the ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ perception. In this sense, the emic perspective relates to the concept of ‘other-regarding’ and the ethical attitude and action of considering the best interests of others.

In this study, the researcher conducted (a) semi-structured interviews with institutional recruiting officers to elicit positive and negative experiences as the result of initiating commercial agent agreements and (b) semi-structured interviews with international students to elicit positive and negative experiences related to their recruitment through institution-initiated commercial agent agreements. While the researcher was able to approach the interviews with the recruiting officers from an inside or emic perspective because of her professional background, achieving an emic perspective was more difficult when interviewing the international students whose cultural backgrounds were obviously quite different from that of the researcher. Nonetheless, the researcher attempted to reduce the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ through the use of empathetic listening and non-judgmental interactions during the

interviews. These interviews, coupled with the survey and data analysis, offered a variety of perspectives on the research topic.

### *Participants*

Vital to the effectiveness of the case study is the selection of participants who can best inform the study through the sharing of their experiences and the input of their varied perspectives. As Merriam explained, “most commonly . . . [in case studies], purposeful sampling . . . is used to select the sample within the case, just as it is used to select the case itself” (pp. 65-66). In this study, three categories of participants were purposefully selected because of their unique experiences with the topic of the study.

In the first category, survey recipients were purposefully selected from 26 colleges and universities, both private and public, located in a Midwestern state. All of the institutions selected listed international student enrollments in 2005 of 50 or more (Institute, 2006). Although their job titles varied from institution to institution, all of the survey participants were selected because they were responsible to some degree for international student admissions and/or recruitment. While some of the survey items were designed to obtain quantifiable data, the salient questions were open-ended queries about aspects of the research topic that the respondents were asked to address experientially.

Participants in the second category were selected from respondents to an initial request soliciting participation in the study. The request was sent electronically to international admissions offices on the campuses of both private and public colleges and universities in the same Midwestern state in which the survey was conducted. Two respondents readily agreed to participate in the study, one from a four-year public state university located in a rural area of the state and the other from a four-year private liberal

arts university located in an urban setting. In 2005-06, the public university's international student enrollment was 197, while the private university's international student enrollment was 106 (Institute, 2006). Both of the respondents were responsible for international student recruitment and both work with commercial agents to recruit students to their campuses. These two participants, representing their respective institutions, participated in individual, semi-structured interviews.

The participants in the third category, international students, were selected through a type of snowball sampling (O'Leary, 2004). The participants were selected for this study by the two international student recruiters described in the previous category. All of these students had been recruited through a commercial agent with whom the institution had a contractual agreement. The students had lived in the United States for at least three months and were reasonably proficient in the English language. A total of twelve student interviews were conducted, with four students from one university and eight students from the second university taking part in individual, semi-structured interviews on their respective campuses.

#### *Case Study Protocol*

As Lewis (2003) stated, "Any research study raises ethical considerations. . . . The fact that [qualitative research] raises issues that are not always anticipated mean[s] that ethical considerations have a particular resonance in qualitative research studies" (p. 66). For this reason, approval of the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of both institutions whose students and recruiting personnel were participants in the study. Approval for the study was also secured from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Ethical considerations also guided the assurance of confidentiality. Initial contact with institutional personnel contained assurance of confidentiality both for participants and for the institutions. Likewise, the introduction to the survey contained a statement that in the study, no reference would be made to personal or institutional identity, and by using a commercial survey program through which the respondents received and returned the survey, anonymity was achieved for all respondents and the institutions they represented. In recording, analyzing, and reporting data from the interviews, care was given to insure confidentiality of the participants by not attributing comments to identified or identifiable participants. Prior to the scheduled interviews, participants selected for the interviews received a letter of introduction from the researcher (see Appendix A), stating the purpose and guidelines of the study; a copy of the interview guide (see Appendix B); and a letter of informed consent (see Appendix C).

The interview schedule at each of the two sites was structured to allow two hours per interview, with a total of five interviews at one location and nine interviews at the second location. The letter of informed consent was also read and the informed consent form was signed by each participant at the beginning of the interview. In addition, each participant was asked permission for the researcher to record the interview session on audio tape for greater accuracy in recording the content of the interview. The tapes from each interview were transcribed verbatim and each participant received a copy of the transcript from his or her individual interview to assess the accuracy of the transcription. The interview guide contained some short-answer introductory questions, but the majority of the questions were open-ended to encourage reflective answers, openness in sharing experiences, and in-depth responses. In addition to recording the interviews on



audio tape, the researcher took some field notes of observations she made during the interview (see Appendix D). Field notes, audio tapes, and transcripts were placed under the supervision of the researcher in a locked cabinet where they will remain for three years after the completion of the study. At that time, these items will be destroyed.

While the documents analyzed for this study were, for the most part, available to the public, copies of contractual agreements between institutions and commercial agents were also treated with confidentiality. Professional organizations' conduct codes and principles of good practices were identified with the organizations in the study because of their availability for view in the public domain.

While the measures taken to insure protection of anonymity or confidentiality for the participants are essential ingredients in qualitative research, they also serve to protect the researcher and to validate the research itself. As Yin (2003) observed, "The protocol is a major way of increasing the *reliability* of case study research and is intended to guide the investigator in carrying out the data collection" (p. 67). Thus, the protocol designed for this study served to protect the participants and the researcher, increase the reliability of the research, and guide the study as the data were collected.

#### *Data Collection and Instrumentation*

The multiple case study design was chosen for this study in order to access a variety of perspectives through multiple data collection methods. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) described the case study design as a funnel:

The start of the study is the wide end: the researchers scout for possible places and people that might be the subject or the source of data, find the location they think they want to study, and then cast a wide net trying to judge the feasibility of

the site or data source for their purposes. . . . In time, they make specific decisions on what aspect of the setting, subject, or data source they will study. Their work develops a focus. The data-collection and research activities narrow to sites, subjects, materials, topics, and themes. From broad exploratory beginnings they move to more directed data collection and analysis. (p. 62)

Using the funnel analogy as a model for discussion of the design, the following section presents the data collection steps and instruments used in this study.

*Initial contact.* As mentioned in the earlier description of the participants, the first step in the collection of data was to contact possible participants for the study. Once the participants identified themselves by positively responding to the request, they were again contacted with more information about the study and specific details regarding the method of data collection in which they would be involved. Their role was to be twofold: to serve as a source for data via face-to-face interviews and to select students from their campus to likewise participate in face-to-face interviews. They were also asked to contribute documents for analysis, another source of data to inform the study. The requested documents were printed materials from commercial agents with whom they had contractual agreements and copies of the contractual agreements used by their institutions and signed by the agents. These documents, in addition to information from the agents' websites, supplied data that were used to corroborate data collected from the interviews and from the surveys.

*Surveys.* While surveys are often used for exploratory purposes as a preliminary to other data collection methods, this study implemented the survey to obtain experiential data that would, again, corroborate with data collected through document analysis and

interviews. O’Leary (2004) defined the word ‘survey’ as “information gathered by asking a range of individuals the same questions related to their characteristics, attributes, how they live, or their opinions” (p. 152). In this study, the survey instrument included some quantifiable items, which served to establish the extent to which the respondents were presently or previously engaged in recruitment practices involving commercial agents. However, the survey’s primary focus was, through open-ended questions, to query institutional recruiters about their institution’s position on the use of commercial agents for international student recruitment and to elicit the respondent’s knowledge of experiences, both positive and negative, relative to recruitment through commercial agents. This type of instrument, an explanatory survey, was described by O’Leary (2004): “These surveys go beyond description (although they do gather descriptive data) and attempt to establish why things might be the way they are. . . . An explanatory survey attempts to build more complex understandings” (p. 153).

The survey, a self-administered questionnaire (see Appendix B), was subjected to experts’ review to check for clarity, ease of completion, and absence of ambiguity. The survey was then sent electronically through a commercial survey program to 26 college and university admissions or recruiting officers who had been purposefully selected for this study. The electronic delivery of the survey enhanced the immediacy of the request for response while providing a means to respond with minimal effort and time. In addition, the commercial program, SurveyMonkey, allowed for complete anonymity for the respondents.

*Document analysis.* In addition to the agent contractual agreements and agent handbook obtained from the two recruiting officers who were selected for interviews,

documents obtained as part of the researcher's job and documents collected from organizational websites served as data sources. These documents included promotional materials previously obtained from overseas agents as well as promotional materials printed from the websites of various commercial agencies. In addition, the following codes of conduct and principles of good practice were analyzed to help inform the study and to support the data collected through the survey and the interviews: Korean Overseas Study Association's (KOSA) *Code of Ethics*, Japan Association of Overseas Studies' (JAOS) *Guidelines*, NAFSA's *Guidelines for Ethical Practices in International Student Recruitment*, NAFSA's *Principles of Ethical Practices in Overseas Education Advising*, and NAFSA's *Principles of Good Practice for the Recruitment and Admissions of International Students*.

*Interviews with international students.* Face-to-face individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with four international students at one site and eight at the second site. These students had each been recruited through a commercial agent with whom the institution had a formal agreement. In order to assess student satisfaction with the recruitment experience, interview questions asked of the students were designed to elicit information regarding the recruitment and application processes and experiences related to pre-arrival information and expectations. The interview questions provided the following subsets: what factors influenced them to choose the specific institution at which they were currently studying, how they initially received information about the institution, what information they did and did not have before arrival, the amount of communication with the host institution, and how they secured the commercial agent. The students were also asked to describe any positive experiences and any negative

experiences they may have had as a result of being recruited through the agent. The researcher recorded the interviews on audio tape and transcribed the tapes for content analysis.

*Interviews with institutional recruiting personnel.* Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two university personnel in charge of international recruitment at their respective institutions. The interview guide consisted of introductory short-answer questions to establish a context for the focus of the research data being collected. The remainder of the interview consisted of open-ended questions about their experiences working with commercial agents. These questions were presented in the following subsets: when the university first began to work with commercial agents and how many students annually are recruited through agents, what type of agreement (formal or informal, written or verbal) the institution uses with commercial agents and how they are paid, what positive outcomes they have experienced in working with commercial agents, what negative issues they have experienced working with commercial agents, and what attitudes regarding the ethicality of using commercial agents they have observed among their administrators and colleagues. The interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed for content analysis.

While collecting the data through the methods described in this section, the researcher endeavored to remain cognizant of the constructs framing this study: ethical practices in recruiting result in greater student satisfaction (student-centeredness); ethical practices influence institutional reputation as it is linked to student satisfaction; and ethical practices reflect a concern for others (student-centeredness/other-regarding) rather than a concern for self (self-regarding). These themes were foundational in developing

the content of both the survey questions and interview guides, as well as in selecting documents for analysis.

### *Data Analyses*

As Rapley (2004) observed, “analysis *is always an ongoing process*” (p. 26), beginning with the first seed of the research idea and continuing through the reporting process itself. In fact, he extended the idea of analysis as an ongoing process “in the sense of ‘producing knowledge’ about a specific topic” (p. 27), validating a concept of learning proposed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995):

It is widely agreed that learning consists of two kinds of activity. The first kind of learning is obtaining know-how in order to solve specific problems based upon existing premises. The second kind of learning is establishing new premises (i.e., paradigms, schemata, mental models, or perspectives) to override the existing ones. (p. 44)

As future researchers examine the data analyses and reported findings of another researcher’s work, their analyses lead to new premises that lead to new investigations that lead to new knowledge. This concept of data analysis demonstrates the iterative nature of qualitative research, as the researcher analyzes data, reflects on the analysis, rethinks the topic under investigation, reshapes the investigation (when feasible), collects more data, analyzes the new data, compares the analyses, observes patterns or recurring themes, and continues ad infinitum.

In multiple case studies, Eisenhardt (2001) recommended “within-case analysis” (p. 540), which substantiates the notion of ongoing analysis. Within-case analysis allows the researcher to “cope early in the analysis process with the often enormous volume of

data” (p. 540), usually accomplished by writing up detailed descriptions of the data for each case. “This process allows the unique patterns of each case to emerge before investigators push to generalize patterns across cases. In addition, it gives investigators a rich familiarity with each case which, in turn, accelerates cross-case comparison” (Eisenhardt, p. 540).

Another manner of coping with the quantity of data mined in qualitative studies is to view the analytical process in two stages; “the first requires managing the data and the second involves making sense of the evidence through descriptive or explanatory accounts” (Ritchie, Spencer, & O’Connor, 2003, p. 219). Data management is accomplished through the use of a “‘thematic framework’ . . . used to classify and organize data according to key themes, concepts and emergent categories” (p. 220). The second stage, making sense of the data, is dependent to some degree, on the methods used in the data management process, “but it is more dependent on the analyst and the rigour, clarity and creativity of her or his conceptual thinking” (pp. 219-220). In this study, both stages were implemented in the analyses of data collected through document analysis, survey responses, and interviews.

#### *Document Analysis*

Analysis of certain documents pertinent to this study occurred throughout the research process, as the researcher examined the documents for data that would inform the study and corroborate the data collected through surveys and interviews. The documents were first categorized according to their purpose: (a) agents’ inventories of services and promotional materials from printed sources and websites, (b) agent contractual agreements from the two institutions participating in the study, and (c) codes

of ethics and principles of good practice, from both professional agent organizations and NAFSA: Association of International Educators. O’Leary (2004) suggested interviewing the documents, “treating each document as a respondent who can provide you with information relevant to your inquiry. . . . ‘Ask’ each question, and highlight the passages in the document that provide the answer” (p. 180). The data presented in the passages then can be coded or indexed according to themes. The documents in this study were ‘interviewed’ for content related to the ethical considerations addressed in this study, especially as pertaining to issues affecting student satisfaction and institutional reputation. Data from the three categories were compared to determine commonalities and discrepancies within the content of the documents.

#### *Survey Analysis*

The survey used in this study was sent electronically through SurveyMonkey to 26 selected colleges and universities in a Midwestern state. The first items were short-answer questions, followed by six open-ended questions. A descriptive analysis was used to establish frequency patterns and percentages revealed in the data collected from the short-answer questions. The results of this analysis served to verify the importance of the study and, thereby, to validate the findings.

Responses to the open-ended questions were categorized according to themes, including rationale for institutional positions on the use of commercial agents in international student recruitment; positive experiences associated with the use of commercial agents; negative experiences associated with the use of commercial agents; and experiences of students at the institution who used commercial agents with which the



institution had no agreement. These themes were observed in relationship to themes which emerged from the document analyses and interview analyses.

### *Interview Analysis*

Both interviews with university recruiting officials and interviews with international students yielded considerable data that were examined through an ethics-based framework based on the “Stakeholder Cultures” model developed by Jones, Felps, and Bigley (2007) and utilizing a continuum from “Self-Regarding” to “Other-Regarding” (p. 145). Transcripts of the interviews with university personnel were analyzed to identify perceptions and experiential insights related to the ethicality of recruiting through commercial agents. Transcripts of the student interviews were analyzed to determine what factors contributed to the successful recruitment of international students, including reasons for choice of specific institutions, efficacy of pre-arrival communication between students and host institutions, and student use of and satisfaction with commercial agents. The data were examined using content analysis and categorized through a process of open coding to identify themes, followed by axial coding to identify linkages with themes emerging from the other data sources.

### Credibility and Consistency

Credibility and consistency are essential goals in any research. O’Leary (2004) explained that research must be perceived as credible in order to “have the potential to create new knowledge” (p. 56). Credibility “is demonstrated by indicators such as reliability, validity, authenticity, neutrality, [and] auditability” (p. 56). The first two of these indicators are addressed in the following discussion.

Simply stated, reliability is measured by the study's capacity for replication of its findings (Merriam, 1998; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Wiersma, 2000), yet "because qualitative research occurs in the natural setting, it is extremely difficult to replicate studies" (Wiersma, p. 211). For this reason, some qualitative researchers prefer to judge whether the study's findings are consistent, confirmable, dependable, and trustworthy (Ritchie & Lewis). In this study, reliability was ensured through consistent application of the theoretical framework, data triangulation, detailed reporting of the data collection process, and findings consistent with the data (Merriam).

Validity is the other salient indicator of credibility in a study. Two types of validity are associated with the credibility of studies: internal and external. The first type "relies on the logical analysis of the results, as the researcher develops the description of phenomenon under study. . . . Attention to detail is important to doing the research well" (Wiersma, 2000, p. 211). The second type "is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations" (Merriam, 1998, p. 207), commonly referred to as "generalizability" (p. 207). Again, the concepts of external validity and generalizability are often difficult to apply to qualitative studies. However, as Wiersma explained, in qualitative studies, "external validity is more concerned with the comparability of and the translatability of the research. *Comparability* refers to the extent to which adequate theoretical constructs and research procedures are used so that other researchers can understand the results" (pp. 211-212). In this study, the researcher used well-defined theoretical constructs to frame the study, as well as multiple, well-defined methods of data collection (i.e., triangulation) to ensure comparability.

In his discussion of “knowledge transfer from researcher to reader” (p. 455), Stake (2005) pointed out: “Conceptually for the reader, the new case cannot be but some variation of cases already known. A new case without commonality cannot be understood, yet a new case without distinction will not be noticed” (p. 455). The commonality referred to is that quality which links previous research with new research and, in some cases, is associated with generalizability, one of the notable outcomes of external validity. As Wiersma (2000) noted, “Case study research . . . often is done without attempting to broad or even limited generalization, but readers of the research may find applications to other situations” (p. 212). Through rich description of the data collection and analysis processes and effective synthesis of the findings, the researcher ensured translatability in this study. Thus, credibility and consistency, key ingredients in the strength of this study, have been addressed.

#### *Researcher’s Biases and Assumptions*

In their discussion of problems in the use of interviews in research, Cohen and Manion (1994) argued that one way validity can be improved is by eliminating or reducing bias associated with the interviewer. Several sources of bias directly associated with the interviewer include

the attitudes and opinions of the interviewer; a tendency for the interviewer to see the respondent in her own image; a tendency for the interviewer to seek answers that support her preconceived notions; [and] misperceptions on the part of the interviewer of what the respondent is saying. (pp. 281-282)

While this discussion was centered on interviewing, these biases can negatively impact a study from several perspectives. Studies which focus on values, ethics, and other

subjective topics are easily beset by researcher bias. Therefore, it was imperative that this researcher approach the study from a non-judgmental perspective. While personal experiences and beliefs would dictate leanings toward the “other-regarding” end of the continuum in the model used to frame the study, the researcher endeavored to collect the data with no preconceived idea as to the outcome of the research.

In terms of misperceiving the data, particularly the data collected during interviews with the students who were non-native speakers of English, the researcher took precautions by recording all interviews, transcribing them accurately, and sending copies of the transcripts to the participants for verification and, when needed, clarification. In addition, Fraenkel and Wallen (2003) related researcher biases to validity and reliability of the study:

All researchers have certain biases. Accordingly, different researchers see some things more clearly than others. Qualitative researchers use a number of techniques, therefore, to check their perceptions in order to ensure that they are not being misinformed—that they are, in effect, seeing (and hearing) what they think they are. (p. 463)

One of these techniques, the use of multiple instruments for collecting data, otherwise known as triangulation, was implemented in this study. Other techniques used by this researcher included recording personal thoughts during the interviews, describing the context in which data were collected, and using audiotapes for accuracy (p. 463).

Nonetheless, personal attitudes and beliefs influenced both the choice of topic and the design of the study, as did the personal experiences of the researcher, whose professional role involves international student recruitment. As Stake (2005) so aptly stated, “It may

be the case's own story, but the report will be the researcher's dressing of the case's own story" (p. 456).

### *Summary*

In Chapter Three, the research design and methodology were presented, including a discussion of the purpose and overview of the study, the research questions, an explanation of the research strategy rationale, a description of the research methodology, a description of the participants, an explanation of the case study protocol, a description of the research design, an explanation of the data analyses, a discussion of the study's credibility and consistency, and a discussion of the researcher's biases and assumptions. Chapter Four will report the research findings and present the qualitative data. Chapter Five will provide a summary of the study and suggest ideas for further research.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

#### *Introduction*

As internationalization has become a popular effort across U.S. university campuses (Altbach, 2002; Bartell, 2003; Connell, 2003; Hser, 2005), the benefits of international students are recognized as one of the primary elements influencing this trend (Dalton, 1999; McCloud, 2004; Peterson, et al, 1999). While colleges and universities are endeavoring to strengthen international student enrollments, visa restrictions and increased tuition costs have discouraged some of these students from pursuing higher education in the U.S. (Green, 2002). As a result of other countries' recruiting campaigns, competition for international students has increased, both among nations and among U.S. institutions (Fung-Surya, 2001; McCarthy, 2000). Thus, in an effort to draw international students to U.S. campuses, many institutions have begun to use the services of commercial agents, yet the ethicality of this practice is regarded by numerous administrators as suspect (Heaney, 2000). Unethical practices may occur on the part of the agent as well as on the part of the institution. On the other hand, both agents and institutions may contribute to the student's satisfactory experience by matching the student with an institution appropriate to his or her needs and interests, providing accurate information and special services, and conducting on-going evaluation of the placement after the student's arrival on campus (Stedman, 2000). This study was designed to uncover the layers of this complex issue by examining the experiences of both recruitment officers who use commercial agents and international students who were recruited through agents.

The following research questions guided the study and anchored the data analysis process:

1. What are the positive and negative experiences of international students who were recruited through school-initiated commercial agent agreements?
2. What are the positive and negative experiences of recruitment officers at institutions that recruit international students through school-initiated commercial agent agreements?
3. In light of the experiences of students and staff in the use of school-initiated commercial agent agreements, what conclusions can be drawn regarding the ethicality of such policies?
4. In what ways are recruitment policies that encourage school-initiated commercial agent agreements profit-driven? Student-centered? Other-regarding? Self-regarding?

To explore these questions, the researcher designed a qualitative multi-case study. Interviews were conducted in one state in the Midwest at two principal sites: a small private four-year university and a small regional public four-year university. At each location, semi-structured interviews were conducted with one recruiting officer and four to eight international students who had been recruited through commercial agents. In addition, surveys were sent to 26 institutions in the same Midwestern state in which the interviews were held, and pertinent documents were analyzed.

Conceptual underpinnings for the study included a broad perspective of ethical issues in higher education shaped by the influential ideologies of neoliberalism (Cheng, Ng, & Mok, 2002; Giroux, 2001), globalization (Altbach, 2002; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004),

and entrepreneurialism (Barnett, 2005). These ethical issues were identified with funding shifts (Arnone, 2004; Cheung, 2003; Rhodes & Slaughter, 1997), misguided democratization (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004), competition (Denman, 2005; McMurtrie, 2005), and the perception of students as customers (Birnbaum, 2001; Breneman, 2005; Kopp & Rosetti, 2005; Miller, 2003), all leading to the focus of this study—international student recruitment, specifically recruitment through commercial agents. Ethical considerations, as they revolve around the question of student-centeredness in the recruitment-through-agent process, were explored in this study through an ethics-centered lens.

### Organization of the Chapter

The purpose of this chapter is to present a summary of the data collected through the survey, document analysis, and interviews with institutional personnel and international students. Part I reviews the protocol for the data collection that was accomplished through three methods: the survey, document analysis, and interviews; describes the data analysis process; and explains the coding system. Part II reports the survey results that demonstrate the extent to which commercial agents are used by institutions in one Midwest state. The survey results also corroborate the interview data. In addition, Part II reports the results of the analysis of the following documents: *Guidelines for Ethical Practices in International Student Recruitment* (2006), a training guide produced by NAFSA: Association of International Educators (DOC C1); NAFSA's *Code of Ethics* (DOC C2); NAFSA's *Principles of Good Practice for the Recruitment and Admissions of International Students* (DOC C3); NAFSA's *Principles of Ethical Practice in Overseas Educational Advising* (DOC C4); uhak.com (Korean agency) web pages (DOC D1); World Avenue Co., Ltd., (Japanese agency) brochure (DOC D2);



International Education Exchange Center, Inc. (Japanese agency) brochure (DOC D3); JAOS (Japanese Association of Overseas Study) *Principal Statement and Guidelines of Conduct* (DOC E1); and KOSA (Korean Overseas Study Association) *Code of Ethics* (DOC E2). Part III provides a description of the two case studies, including demographics of the institutions, brief descriptions of the participants, and analysis of each institution's agents' agreement or contract. Part IV analyzes the data and identifies emerging themes.

To assure confidentiality, a coding system was employed in the case studies. The private university was codified as Institution A, with the recruiting officer referred to as ROA and the international students as AS1, AS2, AS3, and AS4. The public university's code name was Institution B, with the recruiting officer referred to as ROB and the international students as BS1, BS2, BS3, BS4, BS5, BS6, BS7, and BS8. Additional codes were created to identify documents (DOC). The survey was implemented electronically with complete anonymity in the responses. Therefore, no coding system was necessary for the discussion of the survey results.

## Part I: Protocol

### *Protocol*

In this multi-case study, three methods of data collection were implemented: document analysis, survey, and interviews. Since multiple interviews were conducted at two institutional sites, Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from each of the institutions prior to interviewing the recruiting officers and international students at those locations. In addition, the protocol for this study was approved by the University of Missouri-Columbia's Institutional Review Board.

### *Document Collection*

At the study's inception, the researcher began the process of document collection. Agent inventories of services and ethical codes from Korean and Japanese agent organizations and from NAFSA were obtained from websites for each respective organization. Agent agreements from both case sites, as well as the agent handbook from Institution B, were collected during the interviews with the recruiting officers at each location. Each of these documents was analyzed and notes recorded on Document Review Forms (see Appendix D).

### *Survey*

The survey was implemented electronically through a commercial company, SurveyMonkey, to 26 private and public colleges and universities in the Midwest state in which the case sites are located. These institutions were selected because they each reported enrolling at least 50 international students during the 2006 academic year, according to the Institute of International Education (IIE) *Open Doors 2006* report (International, 2006). Letters of introduction (see Appendix A) were sent electronically to each international programs coordinator or admissions office to explain the nature of the survey and to request the name and e-mail address of the appropriate person to receive the survey. Telephone calls were made to any of the e-mail recipients who did not reply after a second letter was sent electronically. When contact information had been received for each institution, the survey was sent to all participants. Both in the preliminary letters and in the survey itself, the participants were assured anonymity as the responses received and processed through SurveyMonkey would not be linked to individual participants.

## *Interviews*

Institutions for the case studies were chosen through a selective sampling process. The researcher sent a letter of introduction (see Appendix A) electronically to several institutions that were listed in the IIE *Open Doors 2006* report (International, 2006) as having 50 or more international students. The first two recruiting officers responding positively to the request were selected to participate in the interviews. The researcher also asked the recruiting officers to assist by identifying at least four students who had been recruited through a commercial agent. These students also needed to have sufficient English skills to understand and respond to interview questions. Both recruiting officers sent messages to groups of students meeting the criteria, explaining that the interview would involve questions about their experience working with an agent and asking the students to respond if they were willing to participate. At each site, two students responded immediately, interviews were scheduled, and the interview guide (see Appendix B) and letter of informed consent (see Appendix C) were sent to them. Also at each site, the initial respondents contacted other students who agreed to participate. Those students who responded as a result of this snowball sampling were given the letters of informed consent prior to the interview. All participants in the interviews were also given a letter of informed consent in person, at which time the researcher briefly discussed the contents of the letter and allowed each participant to read it before signing the informed consent form (see Appendix C).

Prior to the interview, the researcher asked a few background questions to build rapport with the respondent and to better understand the context of the participant's responses. Responses to these informal questions were recorded in the field notes section

of the Interview Protocol Form (see Appendix D). Each participant gave permission for the interview to be audio-taped, with the researcher explaining the need for accuracy and clarity. After the tapes were transcribed, each participant received a copy of his or her transcript with a request for the participant to check for accuracy and to add any details that might be missing from the transcript.

### *Process of Analysis*

In this multi-case study, data analysis reflected the iterative nature of qualitative research. In her observation of this phenomenon of on-going analysis throughout the data collection process, Merriam (1998) noted:

Qualitative research is not a linear, step-by-step process. Data collection and analysis is a *simultaneous* activity in qualitative research. . . . Rigor in a qualitative research derives from the researcher's presence, the nature of the interaction between researcher and participants, the triangulation of data, the interpretation of perceptions, and rich, thick description. (p. 151)

Document analysis data, survey results, and interview responses and observations were both systematically recorded and reflectively interwoven during and after the data collection stages. The ethical framework of "other-regarding vs. self-regarding" (Jones, Felps, & Bigley, 2007) and the research questions driving the study were both instrumental in guiding the iterative process of data analysis.

Using the "constant comparison method of data analysis" (Merriam, 1998, p. 179), the researcher identified in the transcripts, survey responses, and documents several recurring ideas and phrases, as well as experiences shared by multiple respondents. Also present were data unique to individual data sources. The recurring elements were coded

as similar units across data sources or they were observed to reinforce concepts within the same data source; the unique elements were coded as exceptions to the norm established in the other sources. These codes were used to group the elements or units of data (Merriam, 1998) into categories relative to the research questions.

Triangulation in the data was achieved through multiple data sources and multiple data methodologies. Data sources included commercial agents (inventories of their services and ethical codes from agent organizations), recruiting officers or international admissions office personnel who participated in the survey, and recruiting officers and international students at each of the two case sites. Both types of triangulation served to enhance reliability and internal validity in this study. Likewise, internal validity was strengthened through member-checking (Merriam, 1998) as respondents were asked to review the transcripts of their interviews for accuracy and to offer clarification if needed.

## Part II: Survey Results and Document Analysis Description

The following section of Chapter Four describes the results of the Recruiting Officer Survey and the analyses of several documents which served to corroborate data obtained through the student and recruiting officer interviews.

### *Survey*

In order to gain a broader perspective regarding the use of commercial agents by institutions in the same state in which the cases were studied, a survey was sent electronically to 26 public and private institutions. Selection of these institutions was based on international student enrollment figures of 50 or more as reported in the Institute of International Education's *Open Doors 2006* report (Institute, 2006). The number of international students on these campuses ranged from 59 to more than 1500. Personnel

responsible for international student recruitment or admissions were identified at each institution through institutional website information or by telephone inquiry. While the job title may vary from institution to institution, for the sake of simplicity, these personnel are referred to in this study as ‘recruiting officers.’ An initial letter of introduction and invitation to participate in the survey was sent via e-mail to one recruiting officer at each of the 26 selected institutions. Of those 26 colleges and universities, 22 completed the survey.

The survey consisted of 11 items: six short-answer questions and five open-ended questions (see Appendix B). Participants were free to skip questions that were not applicable to their situation, resulting in a lower number of responses per question than the number of survey respondents would indicate. Using the commercial electronic survey, SurveyMonkey, allowed the researcher to monitor responses as they were submitted and to assess the response rate. One day before the survey closed a second message was sent to all 26 recruiting officers as a reminder to complete the survey if they had not previously done so. Responses sent to the SurveyMonkey site were completely anonymous unless the respondent gave an identifying reference in his or her answers.

The questions were designed to provide a broader perspective on the importance of the research topic for institutions in the same state from which the case studies were developed. The first question, then, asked if the respondent’s institution works with commercial third-party agents as part of the international recruitment efforts. Of the 22 responses, 10 reported “never,” while the remaining 12 reported varying degrees of frequency in using agents (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Use of Commercial Agents for International Student Recruitment*

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<u>Level of Use</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Percentage of Responses</u>
Frequently	2	9.1%
Occasionally	6	27.3%
Rarely	4	18.2%
Never	10	45.5%

---

*Note.* Total number of responses = 22.

Of those 12 who reported using agents, 6 (50%) responded that the institution pays a commission to the agents (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Frequency with which Institutions Pay Commissions to Agents*

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<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Percentage of Responses</u>
Always	3	18.8%
Frequently	0	0%
Occasionally	3	18.8%
Rarely	0	0%
Never	6	37.5%
N/A	4	25.0%

---

*Note.* Total number of responses =16.

When asked how many students the institution receives per year as the result of recruitment through agents, the responses were as follows: a) three receive 1 to 5

annually, b) two receive 11 to 15 annually, c) one receives 16 to 20 annually, d) three receive 21 to 25 annually, and, e) one reported receiving more than 35 students annually through agents (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Number of Students per Institution Recruited through Agents*

<u>Number of Students</u>	<u>Number of Responses</u>	<u>Percentage of Responses</u>
0	3	23.1%
1-5	3	23.1%
6-10	0	0%
11-15	2	15.4%
16-20	1	7.7%
21-25	3	23.1%
26-35	0	0%
More than 35	1	7.7%

*Note.* Total number of responses =13.

In addition to the data from the short-answer questions, responses to the open-ended questions revealed a wide range of practices and attitudes regarding the use of commercial agents in international student recruitment.

*Power and control.* The agents' agreement or contract initiated by the institution is the primary tool used by institutions to control agent relationships and to ensure conformance to the institution's standards. Of the 13 responses to this question, 6 affirmed their use of formal contracts with commercial agents. One respondent offered a detailed account of the requirements set forth in the contract:



Yes, we sign agreements with agents that are renewable each year. The criteria we use are (a) evidence of three (3) years in operation, (b) references of both current and past students, (c) references of schools and institutions with whom the agent has previously worked, (d) institutional website address, (e) evidence of previous recruitment activity, (f) proof of licensure to work as an international student recruiting agent from the agent's home country, (g) a copy of the international student recruiting agent's mission, goal, and policy statements, (h) a list of services that the international student recruiting agent will perform for the Intensive English Program. In addition, we prefer recruiters to have NAFSA affiliation.

Another respondent wrote: "No, in undergraduate admissions, the agents that we do work with are hired by the students, not the institution. Most of these are hired by students who are international athletes looking for athletic scholarships." A third respondent answered that the institution had no contract and, in fact, did not work with agents: "No. We do not pay commission or offer kickbacks to any recruiter. We have a large student population and could recruit solely by word of mouth." Another survey item queried how long the contracts had been in existence, with answers ranging from one year to 5 to 7 years.

*Informal agreements.* Some institutions work informally with agents with whom they have no written contract, merely an informal agreement. When asked about informal agreements with agents, 12 reported they do not utilize such agreements, while 4 responded positively. One respondent wrote:

I am not sure if this deserves to be called such, but the only agreement we have with our agents is that they honor our policies (we send them recruiting materials,

and updates on policies, updates on cost changes, etc.). We will also let them know what we are looking for in terms of quality of students, and the amounts of scholarships that we are able to offer. The informal agreement is that they convey all the information correctly to the students, respectful to our policies.

Another respondent answered, “Yes. We guarantee admission and housing for our contacts, as long as the students meet our minimum standards. If they meet our scholarship standards, they will also be guaranteed scholarship money.”

*Accountability and trust.* Another theme that was present in the survey responses was that of accountability and trust. When asked to share any positive experience or outcome the participant might have observed in recruiting through commercial agents, one respondent wrote about the relationship of trust established with the agents:

Once a trust is built between us and them, we have had many great students come through our program and continue into the university. We meet regularly at NAFSA and when we go to their countries. We also invite them to our university, though they often can’t make it.

Among the 12 participants who responded to a question about negative experiences with commercial agents, one vehemently opposed to using commercial agents indicated a lack of trust in agents:

We do not use commercial agents. I am not in favor of commercial agents. The potential for abuse and fraud is too great leading to the same types of concerns the [sic] surround the for-profit proprietary schools in the U.S. (Such as dubious recruitment methods and poor assessment and placement.)

Another respondent mentioned negative experiences with agents who “pressure to waive application fees, admit unqualified applicants and be involved in ethically questionable practices.” One respondent wrote: “Students are sometimes over sold and offered things that we cannot do. In these cases, we will no longer work with that recruiter [agent].”

The distrust of agents or “fear of unscrupulous agents,” as one participant said, was a prevalent reason for not using commercial agents. One respondent wrote, “There is a great amount of distrust with agents,” while another participant explained, “Quality assurance and ethical practices are very important in this field. We have simply seen too many commercial agents engaging in questionable practices to feel comfortable using them.” Yet another example of distrust of agents came in this response:

Our admission office has prevented the use of agents—except informal ones and general commercial services such as IES and Petersons and Hobsons. They were directed by the president to change that policy. Primary reason for non-support: recruiting inappropriate students, corrupt brokers in some countries, and NAFSA & AACRAO ethical position statements of good practices.

One last response likewise voiced distrust of agents:

I would personally not use an agent due to the unknowing nature of it. I can see that there may be some benefits to having a representative overseas, however we have been successful in the recruitment of international students without agents. Agents, to me, represent themselves first and foremost and not the institution.

*Information flow and accuracy.* Comments regarding information flow and accuracy also surfaced in the survey responses. For example, pointing out a positive outcome of recruiting through commercial agents, one respondent noted, “Students are

well informed about the University and our academic programs. They also tend to get visas quicker and easier than stand alone students.” Another commented: “Students have found out about the university that would not have otherwise.” Other respondents, on the other hand, complained that some agents send students who are under-prepared and/or uninformed or misinformed about such things as academic programs, the admission process, and the visa process. Another negative experience was reported in this statement: “If a student chooses to work with an agent, it is sometimes difficult to develop a personal relationship with the student or have access to them. It becomes difficult working with a ‘middle man.’” Another respondent had positive and negative experiences with students who had used agents with whom the institution had no agreement:

Some commercial agents make sure their students are well informed. They seem to study our website and offer the best advice available to our students. Others seem to be fly by night recruiters that don’t help their students at all.

One respondent reported a couple of negative incidents involving students who had come through their own agent, one with whom the institution had no agreement:

Yes, in one case the students were not well advised or prepared at all. The students just showed up at our airport without letting us know they were coming and so we had no housing or courses arranged for them. They were also advised to just use us to get a visa and then transfer out to a community college after the first semester because it would be cheaper.

*Financial and recruitment issues.* Several responses to survey questions centered on financial and recruitment issues. For example, when asked to share any negative experiences or outcomes from recruitment through agents, one respondent commented on

the money that is wasted when students do not receive admission to the university:

“Students pay a ‘finder’s fee’ to some agents who are then unable to get them into our university. (Either through delay in getting documents to us or because the student ends up not qualifying.)” Other negative experiences included “incomplete insight into student’s financial situation, [and] delays in receiving documents.” Another respondent noted that he or she had received students who had come through an agent with whom the institution had no agreement, commenting that “the students were highly overcharged!” by their agent.

Another participant offered this response:

We have received 2 or 3 applicants from an agent with whom we have no agreement. The real problem was that I don’t think the agent made the student realize just how expensive it is to live and study in the U.S. in addition to the fact that our University does not offer full scholarships and/or free room and board.

The last two survey questions focused on the institutions’ administrative position on international recruitment in general and recruitment through commercial agents in particular. When asked if they received encouragement or pressure from the administration to increase the number of international students at their institutions, 19 respondents offered several reasons the administration encouraged increased international enrollments. Other respondents reported reasons for not increasing international enrollments.

*Recruiting benefit of diversity.* One reason administrators want more international students on their campuses is for increased diversity. In fact, six of the respondents

reported diversity as a primary reason they were encouraged to increase international enrollments, as evidenced in this response:

Yes, to add to the cultural diversity of the campus community. To expose domestic students to diverse cultural, social, political, religious viewpoints from international students and scholars to prepare domestic students for a global society. To meet the needs of research and teaching at the graduate level.

Another participant wrote, “For those of us working in international – we also like to believe that international students bring a great deal of diversity and educational opportunities to our campuses.” Other respondents mentioned expanding international programs, increasing overall enrollments or offsetting a declining number of domestic students, creating new relationships with international institutions, and benefiting economically. When asked to share any positive experience or outcome the participant might have observed in recruiting through commercial agents, participants responded with such comments as “enrolling students”; “publicity of our school”; and “increased enrollment, better students, increased retention rates.”

*Financial benefits.* Financial benefits were also mentioned as a reason to increase international student enrollments. For example, when responding to the question about encouragement or pressure from the administration to increase international student numbers, one participant wrote: “Absolutely. It is the most likely source for new tuition income, pending the legislature putting a cap on tuition. Quote from supervisor.” And another participant voiced an even stronger statement of the rationale for increasing international enrollments:

Of course . . . there is [encouragement to increase the number of international students] at most institutions. The purpose is enrollment and money. Universities are businesses and need to increase the client base – as domestic high school numbers will decrease in coming years, the focus is toward international.

*No interest in recruiting.* From an opposite point of view, the notion of not increasing the number of international students also surfaced. In fact, there were several no's, as reflected in these answers: “No. We have grown pretty quickly and are now beginning to lower our total international student population numbers”; “No, I feel it is quite the opposite, which I am trying to change”; and “No, not at this time. We are at a point where we simply need to remain at the current level of 10% International Student Enrollment.” The last question, directed to those institutions that do not use commercial agents, queried the administration's position on using agents. One respondent wrote:

Though there is no specific policy, the institution prefers to utilize existing departments with responsibilities of international recruitment, admission and retention. Other stakeholders are also engaged, including the International Center, Asian Affair Center, Alumni Association, etc.

Another participant responded: “At this time, this University prefers to recruit international students by using currently employed staff. There is no budget for using agents.”

*Summary.* In summary, the survey data indicated that 55.5% of the institutions participating in the survey work with commercial agents as part of their international student recruitment efforts. As indicated in the responses to certain questions, some of those institutions which do not work with agents have no need to increase international

student enrollments, while others view the use of agents as unethical, risky, or not aligned with institutional policy. Of those participants who do work with agents, 50% reported paying commissions to those agents with whom they have an agreement. Interestingly, most of the respondents who reported using formal agent agreements indicated the agreements were initially developed within the past five years, a timeframe corresponding with the increase in visa restrictions and denials after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Also noted in some of the responses were references to recruitment guidelines from the educational association NAFSA. These guidelines are included in the documents discussed in the following section.

#### *Document Analysis*

Another method of data collection, document analysis, was utilized to inform the study concerning agents' agreements and handbooks, commercial agent brochures and web pages outlining their services and other information, a training manual and ethical codes created by NAFSA: Association of International Educators, and ethical codes from professional agent organizations in Asia. While these documents addressed differing aspects of the study, they contributed data important to the research questions. The agent contracts and agents' handbook are discussed as part of the case studies described in Part III of Chapter Four. An analysis of the balance of the documents follows.

*Guidelines for Ethical Practices in International Student Recruitment* (2006) is a training guide produced by NAFSA: Association of International Educators (DOC C1). It includes chapters on ethical practices in recruiting for university admissions, in community colleges, for intensive English programs, and in short-term programs; working with commercial partners; and guidance for overseas advisors and overseas



recruiting and counseling agencies. The chapter “Guidance for Overseas Recruiting and Counseling Agencies” contains some useful advice from the perspective of the agent. All of the chapters begin with information and advice, followed by case studies and hands-on exercises. This document is based primarily on NAFSA’s *Code of Ethics*.

*NAFSA Code of Ethics* (DOC C2) presents the foundational guidelines for members of NAFSA: Association of International Educators. The introduction states:

NAFSA members represent a wide variety of institutions, disciplines, and services. This Code of Ethics that proposes to set standards for the professional preparation and conduct of all NAFSA members must accommodate that diversity as well as emphasize common ethical practices. The Code sets forth rules for ethical conduct applicable to all NAFSA members. It does not provide a set of rules that prescribe how members should act in all situations. Specific applications of the Code must take into account the context in which it is being considered.

The *Code of Ethics* is divided into sections addressing NAFSA member responsibilities; professional preparation and development; relationships with student, scholars, and others; professional relationships; administering programs; and making public statements.

*NAFSA’s Principles of Good Practice for the Recruitment and Admissions of International Students* (DOC C3), revised in 2002, “outlines the characteristics of an effective international admissions office, and offers guidelines of professional practice that are based on the common experience of successful international admission programs at educational institutions in the United States” (DOC C3). The document describes such aspects of the international admissions office as commitment to student services; institutional mission, policies, and standards; communication with prospective students;

international student recruitment; record-keeping and document-issuing practices; evaluation of foreign educational documents; coordination with other offices; requirements of the immigration-regulating branches of the federal government; staff training and professional development; provision of resources; assessment of admission policy and processing; and commitment to the goals of international education and exchange.

*NAFSA's Principles of Ethical Practice in Overseas Educational Advising* (DOC C4), revised in 2001, was written for non-profit overseas educational advisors, such as those who serve in U.S. government-funded EducationUSA offices. While these educational advisors are not commercial agents, many of the principles are applicable to commercial agents, as well. The 18 principles cover a wide range of topics, including providing information on education opportunities in the U.S.; ensuring promotional materials are from accredited institutions only; demonstrating cross-cultural sensitivity; responding to all inquires fairly; refraining from giving names of advisees to third parties (universities, for example); encouraging advisees to make a realistic assessment of their educational goals; providing professional services to educational institutions and recruiters; and understanding ethical recruiting and placement practices.

The Uhak.com web document (DOC D1) was chosen as representative of a full-service Korean agency. Incorporated in 1981, Uhak.com is a professional organization offering a free counseling service that “provides students with a profile of the country they have chosen, including educational systems, living conditions, and cultural characteristics” (DOC D1). The company also assists with “preparation and translation of required documents, application procedures for admission and visa issuance, expenditure

estimates and travel arrangements” (DOC D1). In addition, Uhak.com offers the following services: pre-departure orientations, seminars and lectures, placement service, ongoing support services for students overseas, publications, and free distributions of brochures and applications from educational institutions. The document also lists services available to their “partner schools which are interested in the Korean Market” (DOC D1), including market surveys, recruitment of students, advertising, seminar arrangements, counselor’s meetings, translation and printing, and travel arrangements. The Internet document also contains the company profile, company history, a listing of memberships (including NAFSA), honors and awards, organization flow chart, and a plethora of information for Korean students (translated on this site into English) and institutions who want to recruit in Korea. The document even provides information about the Korean educational system and Korean culture to help educational recruiters better understand Korean students—a student-centered approach to marketing.

World Avenue Co., Ltd., brochure (DOC D2) is a six-page marketing piece for a Japanese company (studying abroad agency) established in 1995. The brochure contains the company’s objectives, company summary, mission statement, service description (which is written in general terms of connecting their clients with various types of schools), market analysis, target market (“education and activities seeker”), strategy and implementation, names of the management team, keys to mutual success, and proposal for the selected education provider. The document, poorly translated into English, lacks specific descriptions of services and other details. The last three pages of the document present a request to advertise in the World Avenue Brochure and an advertising contract.

International Education Exchange Center, Inc. brochure (DOC D3) is a dual-language, well-designed four-page advertising piece from another Japanese agency. The brochure states: “With comprehensive counseling and reasonable agency processing, we have made studying abroad much more feasible than before, helping individuals realize their dream of learning abroad with ease.” Another statement mentions information they provide: “We always check up on the latest information as to the contents of the curriculum, faculty standards, rapport with students and introduce choice schools that are up to our criteria.” The brochure also advertises the company’s publication, a studying abroad magazine available at major bookstores across Japan, and its companion Internet version through which the agency can “instantly provide firsthand information on schools as well as free counseling without prior reservations.” In addition to providing information and counseling on study-abroad and the publication, the company offers agency services for travel insurance.

*JAOS* (Japanese Association of Overseas Study) *Principal Statement* and *Guidelines of Conduct* (DOC E1), is the code of conduct for JAOS, “a standards-setting consortium of Japanese counseling agencies established in 1991 as a model” (DOC C1, p. 35). The *Principal Statement* is a three-part basis for the rules that follow in the *Guideline of Conduct*. These guidelines are organized under the following headings: information required on pamphlets, fees (application, tuition, refunds), contracts, standard for selecting host organization and types of accommodations, and others (troubleshooting, pre-departure orientation, travel insurance, emergency contact, etc.).

*KOSA* (Korean Overseas Study Association) *Code of Ethics* (DOC E2), an online document from the KOSA website, begins with the statement:

KOSA is dedicated to provide high quality of service to clients wishing to study abroad, to induce fair competition among the members, to foster sound growth of study abroad business and further to improve the social status of its members. In order to achieve such goals the members of KOSA present the Code of Ethics and pledge to fulfill the obligation and responsibility stipulated therein.

In addition to the seven items in the Code of Ethics, the document contains the Agency Agreement, a contract containing seven articles including an inventory of services to be provided the client (student), obligations of the client, exemption of responsibility of KOSA, cancellation of agreement, termination agreement and return of fees, continuation or expiration of services, and modification of agreement. This document offers insight into the agency side of the relationship, especially as it outlines the agency's responsibilities, services, and procedures in the recruitment process.

*Summary.* The documents analyzed in this study could be categorized in three groups: (a) agents' agreements (contracts) and handbooks from the case study sites; (b) ethical codes and guidelines for members of two categories of professional associations, international educators and commercial agents; and (c) marketing materials from commercial agents. Data from these documents enriched the study in varying degrees. The agents' agreements and handbook from the institutions, as well as the ethical codes and guidelines, served to corroborate data from the interviews and, to some extent, the survey. Marketing materials from agencies gave some insight into the services provided to students as seen from the agent's perspective. However, the translations into English detracted from the content, and in one case, may have obscured the meaning of some of the text. Overall, the documents functioned in this study by providing data supportive of

the themes that emerged from the survey and interview data: power and control, information flow and accuracy, financial and recruiting benefits, and accountability and trust.

### Part III: Description of the Cases

Located in different areas in the same Midwest state, two institutions of higher education, Institution A and Institution B, were selected through a purposeful sampling process. These institutions each participate in international student recruitment and actively utilize commercial agents on a regular basis. The institutional staff personnel who work directly with agents are referred to in this study as recruiting officers, although they actually hold other institutional titles. The recruiting officers, codified as ROA and ROB, according to their respective institutions, assisted the researcher in recruiting participants for the student interviews from among international students who had been recruited through commercial agents. Snowball sampling also occurred as students recruited other international students on their campus who met the criteria of having been recruited through an agent and having English proficiency. The case studies are organized around the two sites, Institution A and Institution B.

#### *Institution A*

Located in an urban area, Institution A is a small private four-year university offering both undergraduate and graduate degree programs. The campus is situated close to the center of the mid-sized city, with some public transportation accessible to students. Other two-year and four-year institutions are in close proximity, contributing to an atmosphere of general acceptance for college students in the community. However, the area demographics show a lack of diversity outside these campuses. Because of the

existing lack of diversity in the community, coupled with limited name recognition outside the U.S., Institution A has recognized a need to recruit international students to its campus. Current enrollment figures reflect approximately 100 international students from 40 countries. The total number of undergraduate full-time students enrolled at Institution A is 1580, with an additional 2000 evening and graduate students. One important feature in Institution A's efforts to attract international students is a scholarship program that rewards high proficiency test scores, both for English proficiency and college board exams (i.e., SAT and ACT), as well as high school grade point averages.

Responsible for recruitment of international students at Institution A, Recruiting Officer A (ROA) has worked in her current position for four years. Previously she taught classes in English as a Second Language (ESL) and has worked in international education for more than ten years. Adorned with artifacts and objects d'art from around the world, her office reflects the international-intercultural nature of her work and her interests. Her job requires multiple overseas recruitment trips annually to participate in agents fairs and to meet face-to-face with agents in their facilities. Working with one organization that arranges overseas educational fairs, ROA reported, "They've taken me to Korea and Japan and then last year, they added China. We were recognized by the U.S. Commerce in Shanghai as being a President's "E" Award for Excellence in Exports of Students and there were fifteen universities that were nominated and four were chosen . . . and [Institute A] was one." A good communicator with an obvious affinity toward international students, ROA commented that she enjoys her job immensely.

Four international students were interviewed at Institution A. The first student, AS1, is a 19-year-old female from China. She arrived at Institution A in January 2007 to

begin undergraduate studies in Communications. An only child, she is a confident, articulate speaker. At the end of the interview, she hurried off to meet a friend who had stopped to greet her while we were talking. The second student, AS2, came to Institution A in January 2007 from Nepal. She is the youngest of five daughters who were raised by their mother after their father died thirteen years ago. One sister is studying in Europe, but AS2 chose to study in the U.S. because “only two countries [U.S. and U.K.] are considered to be good in education. But, U.K., it’s like, really, really costly.” AS2 shared that her goal is to earn her bachelor’s and master’s degrees and return to Nepal to make it a “little America.” Her inquisitive, vivacious personality contributed to the richness of data collected during the interview. The third student, AS3, was recruited by AS1 to participate in the study. She is a 19-year-old Japanese female who first came to the U.S. in the seventh grade when she spent Christmas in California as part of a special culture program. She returned as an exchange student to spend her junior year of high school in Tucson, Arizona. These opportunities aided her English proficiency and stimulated her interest in pursuing her degree in Elementary Education in the United States. In her second semester at Institution A, she likes the university but was disappointed that there were fifteen Japanese students on campus. She would have preferred fewer so that she would be forced to use her English more often outside the classroom. The fourth student, AS4, was recruited by AS2 to participate in the interview. A 19-year-old female, she is currently in her second semester at Institution A, majoring in Business. An only child who grew up in southern China, she spoke of her parents’ sacrifice to send her to the U.S. for her education.



In addition to the interviews with ROA and each of the students, data were obtained by analyzing Institution A's agents' agreement (DOC A). Although Institution A had been working with agents since the mid-1980's, ROA could not "find a formal agreement in the office" of the former recruiting officer. Therefore, she developed the current agreement, modeling it after a similar document used by another recruiting officer she met on an overseas recruiting trip. The other recruiting officer shared the contract with ROA, who "made the tweaks of how it would fit [Institution A]." ROA reported, "I use the formal contract as the basis to get us started" in a working relationship with agents. The agents' agreement contains the mission statement of the university, identifies the parties represented in the agreement, outlines the responsibilities of the agent (referred to as "Educational Advisor" in the contract), describes the application and acceptance process, outlines the responsibilities of Institution A, explains the commission payment procedure, discusses the terms of the agreement, identifies the independent contractor relationship between the agent and the university, states the indemnity characteristics, and requires official signatures of the various responsible parties.

### *Institution B*

The second case site, Institution B, is a state-assisted four-year regional university located in a small rural community. Institution B offers undergraduate and graduate degrees, Specialist in Education degrees, and one- and two-year certificate programs. Its strong athletic programs are an attraction for international as well as domestic students, but its boast of being the first comprehensive electronic campus in the nation attracts international students interested in computer science and other fields of information technology. Of its approximate 6400 students, Institution B is host to some 200

international students, the majority of whom, according to Recruiting Officer B (ROB), were recruited through commercial agents: “I would say that we would receive at least 65 to 75% of our students through agents and that’s mainly through Asia,” especially India. The fact that Institution B relies heavily on recruitment through agents is evidenced in the fact that it has entered into 600 contracts with agents in about 60 countries. ROB commented, “They reflect national numbers—India, China, Korea, Japan—are the bulk of those 600. Many, many come from one city in India. . . . Now, 600 is what we have contracts with, functional agents is a much, much lower number. . . . Of those 600 only about 40 agents are active or have sent us a student.” Nonetheless, Institution B is obviously committed to the use of commercial agents in their recruitment practices.

The interview with Recruiting Officer B (ROB) took place in his office, one of a complex of offices serving both international and multi-cultural programs. Located on the main floor of the Student Union, the offices are central to the campus and readily accessible to students. Visible from the Student Union and from the main road leading into the campus is a walkway lined with flags representing every international student’s home country. These flags serve as a welcoming symbol and convey the message that international students are important to the university, a fact that is obvious from the efforts made to recruit them and the level of commitment to follow up with international students after their arrival on campus. The researcher observed a relaxed, “open door” attitude among the staff and student employees, as well as with the recruiting officer himself. His role has evolved somewhat over the five years of his tenure with Institution B. Initially charged with both Study Away programs (exchange programs in which American students go abroad to study) and international student recruitment and services,

he now directs only the areas involving international students, having added the intensive English program to his responsibilities. ROB exhibited a balanced blend of business savvy and caring concern for the students he recruits and with whom he interacts on a day-to-day basis.

The students interviewed at Institution B fall into four country-of-origin groups. The first individual, BS1, is a 22-year-old female from Bulgaria. She has been at Institution B for four years on an academic scholarship and will graduate this summer with a bachelor's degree in Computer Science. She has worked on campus, first in the Food Court and then in Computer Services, to supplement her scholarship. After graduation, she plans to obtain Optional Professional Training (OPT) approval to work for a U.S. company for one year to gain experience in her field before returning home. Students BS2, BS3, and BS4 are Koreans who came to Institution B through the same agent. Student BS2 is a 19-year-old male who first attended the intensive English program (IEP) before beginning undergraduate studies last semester. When asked when he first considered studying in the United States, he answered, "Actually in Korea they have a big test, of course I took the test and I wasn't that good so my father recommend for me to go to the United States this university, so I just agreed about that." The second Korean in this group, BS3, is a 19-year-old female majoring in Marketing. She studied for two months in the IEP at Institution B prior to beginning her academic program. Because her uncle lives in New York City, she had wanted to attend high school in the United States, but her parents thought she was too young. She decided at that time to go to an American university when she graduated from high school. The third Korean student, BS4, is also a 19-year-old female who spent two months in the IEP before

beginning her undergraduate studies in Zoology. Her decision to study in the U.S. was the result of a belief that English proficiency is vital to her future success: “In Korea if you want to get a better job like high quality things, we need to be able to speak English well and knowledge about English. The first purpose to come here was to learn English and get a degree from here.” Although she has many friends in Australia and Canada, BS3 thought “America is better than other places. I want to learn the American accent.” Both BS3 and BS4 have 19-year-old siblings studying in Korean universities.

The fifth student interviewed (BS5) is a 21-year-old Japanese male. He has been at Institution B for almost three years, having spent the first two months in the IEP before beginning undergraduate studies in Business Management with a minor in Coaching. He enjoys soccer, but since Institution B has no men’s soccer program, BS5 works with the women’s soccer team. When he was a child, his father’s work brought the family to the U.S., where he spent a couple of years living in the South. That experience, coupled with his desire to learn English, led him to apply for college in the United States.

The remaining three students interviewed at Institution B were recruited by the same agent and are all graduate students in Computer Science. BS6 is a 25-year-old male from India who came to Institution B in August 2005. While he was earning his bachelor’s degree in India, his friends told him that “having an international degree would be great to add to the engineering degree so that you can get paid more. . . . A United States degree is considered more heavily in India as compared to London or any other European or Australian degrees.” The second student in this group from India, BS7, is a 23-year-old male. He is currently in his second semester of graduate school, pursuing a master’s degree in Applied Computer Science. He chose to study in the United States

because “this is the first English speaking country” and friends had told him about Institution B’s strong Computer Science department. The third student in the group from India, BS8, is a 23-year-old female who began her master’s degree in Computer Science in August 2006. Her older sister is studying to be licensed as a medical doctor in the United States, while her younger sister is in medical school in India.

In addition to the data gleaned from the recruiting officer and the eight international students interviewed on-site at Institution B, three pertinent documents integral to the case site were analyzed: the agent contract, the agent handbook, and the conditional agreement. As ROB explained, the current agent contract, a formal agreement between Institution B and the agent, was modified about four years ago after some issues with the old contract had arisen:

We’d had some issues with agents that we thought were a little less than ethical about what they were telling students prior to arrival and so we’re dealing with false expectations and some things. So we sat down and we looked at that. It was a problem-based solution so I think a lot of it was—here’s what’s happening, how can we best make the contract reflect the nature of what we want to have in the agreement and so it does have an ethical code of standards. It also outlines what the agent may or may not do as far as charging students and collecting tuition, and so it’s pretty specific as well. It’s only a two-page contract, right, but it’s pretty specific.

The agent contract begins with its own mission statement expressing the goal of Institution B to “increase the presence and diversity of international students on its campus” (DOC B1). The document then lists the responsibilities of the agent, followed

by the responsibilities of the institution, and outlines the conditions of the agreement. Only one official signature is required from each of the parties.

As ROB pointed out, the contract is only two pages, but in addition to the contract, “it was also understood that there needs to be a heightened communication from our end to them [the agents] about what was the correct procedure and policy and what they should or should not do.” Much of this “heightened communication” is found in the agent handbook (DOC B2), which consists of a detailed description of the general agent responsibilities, information about charges and commission payments, contact information to facilitate communication between the agent and the institution, and an invitation to visit the Institution B campus. Again, the document is brief but direct and clear in its statements, often illustrated by concise examples.

The third document (DOC B3) from this case site is the conditional agreement. ROB created this document to use in situations in which the agent is unknown to him and the relationship needs to be tested. The conditional agreement is often used with new agents from specific countries or areas in which Institution B wants to recruit:

Let’s say we get an agency from Nigeria that says we’d like to work with you. We then send them out a contract that says send us three students and you can send them one at a time, you can send them all at once, we’ll survey them, ask them about how your services are, find out if you’re doing a good job, and then we will send a conditional contract for you once the third one has been surveyed. So if they send us three right off the bat, we’ll survey them all right away and they’ll start getting commissions right away and we’ll send them a real contract at that

time. So it's sort of a way not just to turn off any and all comers because I think that sets us up in a place where you can't get new people and new energy.

The first paragraph of the conditional agreement ends with the promise, "I will uphold the nature of the agreement in the best interest of our students" (DOC B3). The rest of the document provides space for specific agency information and agent contact information and outlines the agreement terms. As ROB pointed out, one of the terms clearly states that the agent will receive no compensation until he or she has sent three students to Institution B. The agent's initials are required beside each term listed in the agreement, and the agreement must be signed by both the agent and ROB, representing the institution. All three of these documents provided a glimpse into the policies and procedures Institution B follows when using commercial agents for international recruitment.

#### Part IV: Compendium of Findings

Guided by the research questions, data collected from the two cases, Institution A and Institution B, were analyzed individually and coded for recurring themes. Then comparisons of the two cases were made, including comparison of the agent agreements, the way in which the recruiting officers approached the question of ethical codes and other questions, and responses of the students to various questions. Themes related to the first two research questions emerged from the data collected from the interviews and surveys, which results served to corroborate the case analyses.

##### *Themes from Student Interviews*

In order to better understand the ethicality of recruiting through commercial agents, international students at the two case sites were asked to share their experiences related to that phenomenon. The student interview guide (see Appendix B) was designed

to query students concerning their positive and negative experiences in the recruitment-through-agent process. In addition to the student interviews, one question on the institutional survey (see Appendix B) related to student experiences.

#### *Institution A Student Interviews*

The four international students interviewed at Institution A gave varying answers to the questions related to both positive and negative experiences with the recruitment-through-agent process, yet several themes were woven throughout each respondent's story. These themes included services provided by the agent, information flow, information accuracy, urgency, and scholarship purchase.

*Application services.* All four participants expressed satisfaction with certain services provided by the agent: introducing the school or schools to the student, explaining what documents were needed for the application process, collecting the documents and translating them into English, "posting" the application materials to the school, making the visa interview for the student, and advising the students on how to act and what to say during the visa interview. This last service is especially important in certain countries where students have a low success rate in obtaining student visas. AS4 described this function of the agent who helped her:

The only thing I remember they [the agent] can help me is they do a training for my applying visa, cause for Chinese people to get a visa is very, very hard, so they help me, like, they kind of set up a situation and they supposed to be the officer and they ask me the questions and teach me how to answer these questions, what kind of questions probably they will ask. And you need to know why they ask you this and why usually they reject the people. Usually maybe they want to



immigrate here, so according to this you need to answer all that kind of stuff is to prove you are not gonna immigrate here. You just want to study here. So, as long as you know what they are looking for, you will get the visa.

Likewise, AS2 reported: “He [the agent] told that the interviewer in the embassy, what kind of thing to have in the mind, like you know, how they want people to be, how to be like, confident, how to keep on smiling every time. . . . What to do and what not to do.”

AS3 mentioned that her agent told her the consular officer would “say things like I want to stay in the United States forever and I would have to tell them that you [I] want to go back after you [I] graduate.” AS1 also mentioned that her agent helped her prepare for the visa interview.

*Extended services.* Two of the students at Institution A mentioned extended service after arriving at the university. AS1 reported that “when I came here, after one week, he [the agent] also called my mom to ask her how I felt about it [the university].” She even stated that she came to view the agent not as a “company, but also a friend.” In the case of AS3, continued service was provided through a second agency, based in the U.S., that her parents “hired” to check on her periodically: “They just call me once in a while and ask me how I am doing.” The Japanese agency she initially worked with also provides on-going service of translating her grades and letters into Japanese for her parents who do not read English.

*Information flow.* Another recurring theme in the Institution A student interview responses was information flow, the way in which information was transmitted to them. All four students reported that in the initial stages of the selection and application process, any information they received from the university came through their agent. AS1

described the flow of information in this way: “Basically, he [the agent] just ask us to give the document and he translate it. And he feed back the Institution A information to us [she and her family].” Then after the agent mailed her the admission letter and I-20, he gave her contact information for the recruiting officer and another student:

I contact with [ROA] and she’s really helpful and she replied with e-mail really, really, really fast. So, I feel so like their attitude toward new student is really good. And I contacted one Chinese girl who went here, through the same agency, because the agency officer asked meet online and so that’s why I know someone here and I ask her some basic questions.

AS2’s experience was somewhat similar in that the agent was the source of information from Institution A, but the student found this arrangement to be very frustrating:

He [the agent] used to contact them and when they answer, he tell me. That’s where he blocked so many informations. If I had chance to talk with people here, then it would be, it would have been a different thing here. I would have done something else. I, I would have choices.

Only after she received her visa did the agent tell her, “Okay, this person is coming to pick you up from the airport and this is the person who we have to go and meet.” Prior to receiving the visa, the agent had only given her Institution A’s website information, but AS2 explained that Internet access is extremely limited in her country. Therefore, many students in Nepal depend on agents as their source of information throughout the selection and application processes. Neither AS3 nor AS4 had pre-arrival contact with Institution A. AS3’s agent initially gave her website information for five or six universities from which she chose Institution A. She was satisfied that all the information

she received came through her agent. AS4 also found information on the Internet, but her experience with her agent was quite different:

I searched by myself. They [the agency personnel] know nothing about this university. No, cause that agent works through the agent here, in America. They have twin company, like there's one mother company and then they have branches of like a small companies work to send Chinese people and all the application goes to that university and that company—that mother company—and that company agent will set up, like, kind of application where it should go and they will do that. [The agent in China sent everything to] American [company].

*Information accuracy.* Related to information flow was a third theme of accuracy—and adequacy—of information. While AS2 was satisfied that the information she received from her agent was accurate, the other three students' experiences were not as positive. AS1 was told that the university was a small but good Midwestern university with very few Chinese students. She also knew about the tuition costs but was not told anything about living expenses. This lack of information created stress for her, a feeling she expressed in this way: "I basically know nothing. I feel really nervous and frightened, actually." She also stated that although she was told that Institution A was located in a small city, she was not prepared for the lack of available transportation: "I didn't know that transportation here is really inconvenient. . . . I didn't know I can't go anywhere without a car. And the bus system is really under-developed, I think."

AS2 found that her agent also did not communicate information to her at times. For example, the agent did not inform her about the progress of her applications to

several universities. She explained the impact of not having the information about the admission status from the other schools:

He [the agent] could not guarantee I'd hear from other universities. . . . I came to know that at the end of December, and that was really late for my semester and I could not even lose my six months, so I had to do whatever he told. In the beginning, he didn't say things clearly. . . . He gives so many false things that we could not find the true things and the false things he was saying and, yeah, the time just went by . . . and you know, I had no other options than to choose this particular university.

While she has found her overall experience of coming to the United States to be positive, her assessment of the agent experience was fairly negative, primarily due to the inaccurate information he gave her, especially concerning her academic major:

And this university, it does not match my major, as well. I was wanting to major in Biotechnology and he told that, "Yes, we have Biotechnology here." But after I'm here, I found that no, there's not. It's only Biology. The whole, you know, messy thing. And I'm still mad at him. (AS2)

In addition, AS2 felt that her agent misled her regarding the cost of tuition:

He didn't tell properly about the fees, about the—what do you say that? Tuition fees. He told me something else about the tuition fees. . . . he didn't tell the exact amount. And yeah, and because of that I am having problem to now. And I have to order money from home because I brought a particular, I had a particular amount with me . . . but now it's like it's kind of headache for money, yeah.

While the information AS4 received was accurate, for the most part, she related one problematic incident that has caused her much distress:

I really get mad about this company, application stuff is one side and apply scholarship is . . . another agent. . . . Once they get scholarship for you, you need to pay twice, to buy the scholarship. Because they think if you get scholarship, it's actually easier for you to get a visa. . . . But the thing is [about the] scholarship, they lied. . . . Yeah, like they said how hard they apply the scholarship, how hard we did, but after I came here I know all the applications to apply for [Institution A], they automatically get scholarship consider your academic. So, I mean, even [if] I am the worst one, I still get \$500.

*Urgency.* A fourth theme running through the interview responses from students at Institution A was the sense of urgency the students expressed. While AS3 did not mention time, the other three were concerned with the expeditious processing of their applications. AS1 first planned to study in Australia “because I have no problem getting the Australian visa . . . but they say . . . I have to wait for half more years. So, if I choose a agency to go to United States, I don't need to wait and I can come here last of January.” Most agencies she contacted told her she would have to wait several months for an admission, but she finally found an agent in Shanghai that told her, “If you hurry up, like, and doing every information, like give us all the documents we need, in the shortest of time, then we can send you to Institution A in January.” Several times throughout the interview, AS1 mentioned how fast the agent processed the application. To her, it was worth the extra expense to use an agent in another city [Shanghai] instead of one in her own city: “First, I thought it was expensive, because if I chose [hometown] agency, I can

choose to apply like five more schools with the same prices. But, later I don't think it's expensive because I can't go here that quick without the [agency in Shanghai].”

Likewise, AS2 expressed a feeling of urgency in her comments:

At that time [when she first began working with the agent], I didn't choose this particular university that I'm in; it was not included in that list [of schools she initially chose]. And when I didn't come to the end as well, then applied to this university really fast. And this university, luckily, it sent me an I-20. . . . I didn't even want to lose one semester. . . . So he directed me to choose or to be in one college. Not directly, but like you know, indirectly.

AS4 had dropped out of a Chinese university, an action that voided any hope of furthering her education in China. She had also been denied admission to a school in France due to her lack of French proficiency. For her, time seemed to be running out:

I came here [to the U.S.] because is the easiest way for me, cause the agency promised me, we can get the admission to you in maybe two months, no more than two months I can get the admission in the university, in U.S. university. . . . Because like, I was rejected [a French visa] in February and I don't want to wasting all my time, the best time in my life just staying at home, I need to study.

For each of these three respondents, the speed with which the agent worked to help them obtain admission to a university in the U.S. was of primary importance to the timely completion of their goals.

*Scholarship purchase.* In addition to the themes of services provided by the agent, information flow, accuracy of information, and an urgent sense of time, data unique to the Chinese students were present in the responses. As mentioned earlier, AS4 was both

puzzled and angered by the experience of paying her agent for the application process and paying a second fee for another agency to arrange the scholarship that she actually paid for:

I pay a lot. [Another student] only pay \$200 for all stuff and she got \$2500 scholarship for free, I mean, you don't need to pay extra money for that. But I pay. [My one year scholarship] is only \$2000, that's nothing. And I pay \$5000 [to the second agency] to buy it [the scholarship]. . . . And also they charge me the fee for admission, is \$3000. So, all together I paid \$8000 to study abroad.

When asked what would have happened if she had not paid the agency the extra money for her scholarship, AS4 responded, "If you don't pay them, they won't give you the I-20. They will keep there. . . . If you don't get I-20, you can't apply visa." AS1 reported a similar situation in China with her friend who applied through an agency:

They supplied her a school which is in [another city in the Midwest]. And it's like, some school, some agencies not good, like in China, as they said, "If you give us money . . . and we will for sure get \$5000 per year from that university." Now, 'cause they say that, but actually, it's not true. It's just, I don't know, maybe it's just because that university, they know how to apply the scholarship and when they applied it, it's like \$5000. But they already received more than \$5000. I don't know how to explain the process, but it's kind of cheating. It's like, to confirm you having scholarship and make you feel like you get the scholarship. But it is just because it's not that good school. It's really easy to apply scholarship. And, actually what you paid for the scholarship is your money. The scholarship is actually your money.

*Summary.* Overall, AS1 and AS3 reported satisfaction with the agent experience. AS4 found that it was too expensive, but explained that doing the research to find a university overseas and applying without the help of an agent would be very difficult for Chinese students:

We go to school at 7:30 in the morning and come back at 10:00 [p.m.] every day, We have ten classes per day. . . . There's no extra time for us to think about that [searching for a school overseas]. . . . And they [the parents] couldn't search. So, the only way for us is to find agent, as soon as possible, save their time, just pay much, you pay more for them [to help find a university and process the application].

When asked if she would choose to work through an agent if she were able to go back and start over, AS2 was adamant in her answer:

No, no, I'll never hire agent, never. And I've even e-mailed my friends that do not trust any agent, but I can help. . . . There are so many friends of mine who are wanting to come here. And even they are thinking of hiring an agent. And I told them, No. . . . I can help you here and I can send you the [information]. . . . The main problem there is that we don't have Internet access that much. . . . Had there been Internet access, then these agents, they would not come up with these stupid ideas of like cheating people or not. They would have no way of thinking about that. Internet access is the main problem.

While AS2 did acknowledge the services provided by the agent, she assessed her overall experience as being negative, whereas AS1, AS3, and AS4 were, to various degrees, satisfied with the overall experience with their agents.



### *Institution B Student Interviews*

Responses from the student interviews at Institution B revealed several themes common to all of the participants. These themes included services provided by the agent, information flow, information through student connections, and information accuracy and adequacy.

*Application services.* After trying to apply to another university without the assistance of an agent, BS1 reported that she missed the deadline for scholarships: “Somehow I missed the deadline for the scholarships there because I thought it was part of the application itself. . . . I was scared to apply to another university on my own, so I had to seek help.” The agent she chose “explained to me the process and what do I need. Like the SAT test—he actually made me take the SAT 1 and 2 just because we did not know where I’m going to apply and what kind of score I’m going to get.” Among the other services her agent provided was coaching for the visa interview:

He told me what I need to do and how to go the embassy and get ready for the interview. He also did a mock interview with him because he kind of knows what question they ask and just to see how I respond to that, which helped. . . . Just to relax because I knew English, but I wasn’t comfortable speaking it because we never practiced speaking in high school. He said I will ask you in English so you have to answer in English—it helped.

At the point BS1 was trying to decide between two universities, her agent visited Institution B, called her from the campus to tell her about the university, and suggested that if she wanted to apply, she would need to write Institution B “to authorize him to represent me to the university.” She reported that “when I got the letter from here that

they accepted me and what my scholarship was that actually helped me decide [to choose Institution B over the other two universities].”

All three of the Korean students interviewed at Institution B came through the same agent, so their experiences were rather similar. When asked how the agent helped him, BS2 said the agent

gave me all the information about this school and asked me if I wanted to go to this school, so I just thought every university in the United States is the same.

That’s why I am here now and he introduced me to some Koreans that were in here so that I could talk with them. It made me comfortable.

The agent also “told me about the interview so I felt comfortable. . . . He told me they are going to ask you about this and this, so I can prepare my answers” (BS2). Using the same agent, another Korean, BS3, stated that the agent

helped with all the document things, like I-20. He told me you need this and this stuff to come to here like financial proof document and my high school grade and you need this English document and he tried to make me understand all the English.

BS3 also reported that the agent gave her advice about the visa interview: “He just told me you should have good answers to their questions like, ‘Do you have friends to stay in the United States?’ and I’m supposed to say, ‘Yes,’ or they won’t give me any visa.” Her friend, BS4, had a similar experience with the services provided by the same agent, although she used another company to help with the visa:

He helped me to get I-20. I didn’t even know what I needed to get to come to an American university, so he told me what I need to do to apply and how to get the

student visa. . . . He told me when you need to get the I-20 to get the visa. I got help from him and told me about a company to help get my visa. I used that. They are just for getting a visa. They are not really related to school. . . . They made the appointment for me so I could get interview to get the visa. . . . They helped me buy my plane ticket.

When asked what she considered the most positive part of having someone help her with the process, BS4 remarked: “I feel safe. If I didn’t get help from them, I didn’t know what to do. Like I didn’t know what to do to get visa, to apply to the school.”

BS5 purposefully chose an agent in Japan that “did a minimum service” (BS5).

He explained:

They [his agent] didn’t do a whole bunch like once I came here they don’t do a whole lot of follow-ups and see how I was doing. Some companies have an office at certain universities that they can go to whenever you have trouble after you come here, but those are expensive. I had that figured out, so I thought if I came here I could ask people here.

When asked what services his agent provided, BS5 replied:

They answered a bunch of questions I had. Like how to apply and what to bring and all the basic questions I had they obviously answered for me. They had free English lessons they offered a couple of times. I guess they also had an English School connected to them. And they had an agent company so whenever people go to that agent company they get a free couple times English lessons. They went through all the paperwork, documents, once we decided that I was coming. Once I was set up and ready to go, they do a final guidance thing where we go to the

headquarters which was in Tokyo and went through the final tips, things that I needed.

The agency also made all the travel arrangements for BS5 to travel to the U.S. When asked if he had any negative experience using the agent, BS5 referred again to the services the agent provided:

When I came here I found a couple of students that did it on their own. They e-mailed here and did the paperwork and visa thing by themselves. When I hear that, I think that I could have done it by myself—that I didn't have to spend that money for the agent company, but I don't see that as a negative because I didn't want to do it and mess up and having to do it all over again. I think it was worth paying and relying on the company to do it all and I could focus on the stuff I had to do.

Students BS6, BS7, and BS8 all used the same agent in India, and their experiences with the services he provided were similar. BS6, who had previously applied to four universities on his own, explained: "When I went to get the visa the first time, I got rejected because I wasn't able to answer some of the questions at the embassy." That experience led BS6 to seek the help of an agent. In describing the services the agent provided, BS6 commented:

He gave me all the documents that I needed. He gave me the list I prepared for him and I gave him. After I got the I-20 admission from this college, he informed you are going to do these things from now and I did all those things. He interviewed me how the visa counselor would interview. That helped me a lot. . . . He gave an itinerary like what you are supposed to do after you land there and who are you supposed to meet and all those things.

For the second Indian student, BS7, the most important service the agent provided was helping him prepare for the visa interview. While he mentioned other ways the agent helps, such as researching which university is a good choice for the student, considering his or her test scores and academic background, BS7 also observed:

Apart from that they [the agents] help you in preparing yourself for the interview at the embassy. Getting an admission is a different thing from getting a visa. . . . Getting a visa is important in the sense, like, most of my friends who did not get a visa stayed back in India because they didn't have a visa. They already had the admissions from so many universities, then they didn't get the visa. . . . At the embassy, the interviewer can ask you anything. They even asked me what is the nickname of this state. . . . one of the pieces of language that those guys [the agents] taught me.

The third Indian student, BS8, found the services of her agent to be valuable:

He helped me to get processing the I-20 and like after I get my I-20 he prepared me for the visa interview, what documents I should carry and all those things. After that, he helped me to know about the course, the place, the place where should I live and he introduced people who are staying here and all those things.

In addition to those services, BS8 noted that the agent would

help me whenever I want to post anything. I just go and give those things to him and, like, can you help me posting these things? He would be sending things many separate times, so like, ok, I have this for the university and all those things [because he was helping several students apply to Institution B at the same time].

All of the students interviewed at Institution B were satisfied with the services provided by the agents.

*Information flow.* Information flow was the second theme that emerged from the data collected from student interviews at Institution B. BS1 reported that she did not receive any information directly from the university until shortly before her departure for the U.S. Instead, she said “everything went to his office and I had to pick it up.” Before she left Bulgaria, however, she did receive an e-mail from Institution B telling her who her roommate would be. She was also able to access the Internet and found additional information about the Computer Science program and other facts about the university. Another student, BS5, likewise received information about Institution B from “mainly the website, no brochures, and from the agent basically.” In fact, BS5 did not e-mail with Institution B before he traveled there. He reported: “I had questions, but they [the agency] e-mailed them [Institution B] for me.” When asked if he had enough information about such things as housing, BS5 answered:

No, the only thing I knew was that I would be in the dorm and would have a roommate. I didn't know all the other details about the rules. Once I got accepted here, then they send you all the details. That's when they sent me all the brochures and then I had to figure out all the little stuff, but whenever I was in that searching process I didn't get anything.

BS5 also mentioned that his agent tried to find out how many Japanese students were enrolled at Institution B, but could not find the answer. BS5 explained why he had asked his agent for that information:

It was important because I didn't want to have a whole bunch of Japanese students here. Maybe a couple might have been good because sometimes I want to speak Japanese, but I didn't want it to be like 200 Japanese students, because it would be hard to learn English. The number was pretty important.

*Information through student connections.* The Korean students received information from their agent and from Institution B. BS2 was able to contact Korean students already at the university when his agent gave him their e-mail address: "They had a home page on the website so I signed in on the website." These students answered his questions about the university, making him "feel comfortable" (BS2). Through the agent, BS2 also received information from the university: "I have some pictures of this university and some courses and about clubs and I knew that this university has a soccer club, because I like to play soccer and some Korean Association (KSA) and other international associations." In addition to the information he received through the Korean students and through his agent, BS2 received information directly from the recruiting officer (ROB) in an e-mail message concerning the arrangements for picking him up at the airport. As BS2 commented, "Actually, I'm not that good in English so just he asked me something and I answered."

The second Korean student, BS3, received information about Institution B through the agent, but she also had the advantage of knowing a Korean student who was studying there at the time she applied. In addition, she contacted the international programs office at Institution B and asked for brochures and other printed materials. The third Korean student, BS4, first heard about Institution B through her friend's father. Her own father "wanted to make sure of the safety and the environment to study and he read

things and talked with them and he decided it's nice and safe." When asked if she received information directly from the university before she arrived, she answered: "No, I didn't need to, I guess. I just needed the I-20 things and applications to fill out. Actually my friend helped me a lot [with giving her information]." In her final comments, she offered this opinion:

If he [her agent] does work for this university, I guess he needed more details like the weather, housing, things like that because most things for life I heard from my friends. Here when is cold or hot you needed what. I think details are better to get from students here because they know better about classes, professors. They helped a lot about applying to the school.

The three Indian students' experience with information flow was similar to the experience of the Korean students because they had friends who were currently studying at the school. As BS6 explained, "My senior had already been here one trimester before when I came. . . . and he told me that this is a very good place to study and you don't have any big distraction and you can concentrate on your studies." Likewise, BS7 and BS8 mentioned that they first learned about Institution B from their friends who were already there. BS6 also received information, especially about housing and arrival information, from the recruiting officer (ROB) via e-mail. BS7 received housing information and a brochure for the university with his I-20. He also received a list of residences and a contact list for landlords near the campus. BS8 stated that after she received her I-20, her agent "helped me to know about the course, the place, the place where should I live and he introduce people who are staying here and all those things." In addition, when asked if she had pre-arrival contact with any staff at Institution B, she



remarked, “I just spoke with my director once regarding a course and I got the reply and I was satisfied with that.” She also offered her opinion on the information flow if students choose not to use an agent: “If we use the agent, the communication between the university and you become less. If you apply directly you will communicate more with the university and when you come here, you will know the people and the professors.” It seemed quite obvious that the Indian students had a distinct advantage concerning information flow because they had friends who were current students at Institution B, and those friends were an excellent source of information for them.

*Information accuracy.* The third theme that emerged from the student interviews at Institution B is related to information flow: information accuracy and adequacy. When asked if she considered the information from her agent to be accurate, BS1 responded:

Most of it, yes. The only thing I think that he wasn't quite accurate was about the tuition because when we discussed it he said the first year is going to be the most expensive which is accurate because we had to pay for the dorms and for the food here in the food court. Then he was saying that after a year when we can move off campus we could find on campus job. It did help, but not as much as he said. . . . He said but once you get there you will find a job on campus, you will move off campus eventually and the costs will go down. Well, it wasn't that easy. First of all, I can't move off campus unless I have a year in the dorms, especially if you are under 21. Then the food was very expensive. I did find a job but it wasn't that easy and it wasn't that much pay. That was the only one thing that I felt wasn't clear. What he was saying is that my parents would probably stop helping me after my sophomore year, but it never happened.

While BS1 has been able to work enough to survive financially, one of the students who came through the same agent was not so fortunate. BS1 commented:

The only people I talked to about the agent are the other people I came with because we kind of discussed it. One negative thing they all say is that one of the guys kind of believed the agent that the cost would go down. He was relying on that, but when he figured out that it was going to more than expected he had to drop out of college. He never blamed the guy, but it was kind of negative.

All three of the Korean students interviewed at Institution B felt that the information they received from their agent was accurate. However, they also expressed that the information was not complete. For example, BS2 mentioned being unaware of the housing rule that he was required to live on campus:

When I first came here I wanted to live outside because I felt a little bit uncomfortable with living with American because I couldn't speak English at the time. . . . I wanted to live outside. I had to live on campus for one year. . . . I didn't know that [before arrival].

The second Korean student, BS3, expressed her regret that she did not know more about the major program, deciding major, the university system. I came here because of study and then I started to know how do things go on for education. I just heard about the life, housing. . . . [not that] it was a different experience [in the classroom].

When asked if she thought the information she received was accurate, BS4 remarked:

Yes, I had some surprises. I can't think right now particularly. I didn't have much information before I got here, but I kind of knew about this university from my

friends and [the agent]. It was okay to deal with. . . . So I expect to face everything.

The Japanese student, BS5, noted a few inaccuracies or gaps in the information he received prior to his arrival at Institution B. For example, he said:

The one thing I didn't like about it was that I found that the tuition was more expensive than what the paper said, but I guess it goes up every year. That's what I have been experiencing the last couple of years since I have been here.

*Information adequacy.* Other pieces of information that were not completely accurate concerned statements about the weather and the size of the town in which Institution B is located. BS5 has found the winters to be too cold, although "they said it would not be that bad. It's pretty bad." Also, concerning the size of the town, he stated, "I didn't think that it was going to be this small. I knew it was a small town since it's a pretty big state," but he admitted that now he likes the small town setting.

Despite the fact that the Indian students had friends who were already studying at Institution B, each of them found some inaccuracies in the information they had been given. When asked if the information he received from his agent was accurate, BS6 answered:

Most of the time, like 70% was, the other 30% was not. He did not give me good information about flight changes from one place to another, where I had to lose something because taxi people charged me hugely. . . . He kind of hyped some [information about Institution B]. He told me that [with] the study you will be having in these computer facilities, many people trying to hire you after your master's. I don't find those.

BS7 reported that he had been misinformed about the size of the town in which Institution B is located: “I think he [the agent] said it’s a big city and it’s not, but I like this place though he said it’s a big city. Maybe he doesn’t know about it.” BS8 agreed that the small size of the town was a shock: “The place is so small. Like even if we feel like going out anywhere, there’s nothing except Wal-Mart here.” BS8 was also disappointed that the jobs available to international students were not in abundance, as she had been led to believe by her agent.

*Summary.* Overall, the students who participated in interviews at Institution B expressed satisfaction with their recruitment-through-agent experiences. They appreciated the services provided by the agent, and they thought that the information was usually adequate, and, for the most part, accurate. Most of them agreed that they would recommend their agents to students who are planning to study in the U.S.

#### *Themes from Recruiting Officer Interviews*

The second research question driving this study was designed to elicit experiential data from the perspective of institutional personnel who work with commercial agents to recruit international students to their campuses. First the data from an interview with the recruiting officer (ROA) and the agents’ agreement or contract from Institution A will be analyzed, followed by an analysis of data gathered from an interview with the recruiting officer (ROB) from Institution B. Data from three agent-related documents from Institution B will also be discussed.

#### *Institution A Recruiting Officer Interview*

Four themes emerged from the data collected from an interview with the recruiting officer from Institution A (ROA). In addition to the interview responses, the

agent agreement from Institution A also contained the same themes. These themes were identified as financial and recruiting benefits, information flow, power and control, and accountability and trust.

*Financial benefit.* The first theme of financial and recruiting benefits arose in ROA's discussion of the agent agreement. She recounted the development of the present contract:

I submitted that contract to see if it would be something that we could do and to pay a flat fee rather than a percentage. . . . The advantage was that I thought the school would approve because it was small enough. It was not a huge amount and it was not going to increase every time we had a price increase. A lot of these students actually, you know, they're paying that agent to get them a school, so the agency is already getting a sizable amount of money and for us it's just, kind of just a little extra. And it's the incentive to send them our way rather than somewhere else.

Another source of financial benefit, this time to the student, is the scholarship offered by one of the agencies: "Their agency will give a \$4000 scholarship for the student. And so, they ask that we put down on the I-20 that there's a \$4000 International Merit Award" (ROA). ROA also made another reference to scholarships that Institution A offers international students in her discussion of one agent's refusal to submit all the required test scores: TOEFL or IELTS (English proficiency exams), SAT or ACT (college admission exams), and high school GPA's:

And I said [to the agent], "And you would benefit the student, because we give scholarship on those [test scores and GPA's]. They [the students] could make

some money and you're just wanting to bring them in with no hope of scholarship." Because they don't get it [the scholarship] after they get here.

*Recruiting benefit.* Benefits to the university that ROA discussed included increased numbers of international students as a result of agent agreements, reflected in her statement that "I think it's [the new contract with flat fee compensation] gonna help [Institution A] as far as bringing in students because we've doubled our enrollment last fall from the previous fall." She also noted that working with Chinese agents tends to multiply the number of students from that country: "And then they all have their friends and it's a network. Working with Chinese, if one's here, three more will come." Another benefit of recruiting through overseas agents is the ability to reach students without the expense and time investment of traveling there: "It's the way to go, especially for places if you can't travel to those countries all the time" (ROA). In fact, ROA also reported that some of their partner agents advertise for Institution A on their websites and even advertise in their local newspapers, an added value for the university's recruitment efforts.

*Information flow.* The second theme that emerged from the interview data was information flow, a theme also found in the student interview responses. ROA mentioned the extensive e-mail correspondence that takes place after signing a contract with a new agent, especially as she uses "the formal contract as . . . the basis to get us started." She views every agent as a different entity and essentially works with each agent to customize the agreement to meet the needs of the situation within which he or she is working. In addition to corresponding with new agents, ROA also noted that follow-up with potential agents is important: "I send all of them a mass e-mail, just bragging about the school or something new that's happening or an accolade that I can share. . . . The contact really

needs to stay constant, without irritating them. So, once a month [I send a message].”

Information flow from the institution to the student is likewise critical. ROA explained this need to communicate with newly admitted students:

I ask the agent to please give me their [the students’] e-mail because I want to try to make a connection, you know. If you’re only hearing from the agent, you are not getting the personal attention that you need. . . . I think I’ve lost some students because the agent didn’t put anything down for the student. It was everything directly to the agent and I wrote to one of them [an agent] and I said, “I’ve lost these students because you didn’t give me their e-mail” so that I could become closer to them so that they understand what’s going on. They need that feeding.

ROA continued, “If we’re going to go to all this trouble, let’s let me try to help them be convinced that this will be a good place.”

*Power and control.* Related to the issue of information flow is the third theme: power and control. When discussing the challenge of corresponding with students, ROA explained the power struggle that occurs when the agent wants to control the information flow:

They [the agents] seem to be so protective as if I’m gonna take it [the power] away. Usually if I e-mail the student, I . . . copy the agent. . . . Lots of times I will send an e-mail to the student through the agent. . . . I say, “Please forward this on,” and the agent will write back and say, “I did that for you.” And then when I don’t hear from them [the student] I have to believe it didn’t go forward.

The theme of power and control also surfaced in regard to how the contract protects Institution A:

This agreement is per student and if that student has actually paid and cannot drop out of school and take any money. . . . Once that student is in and there's not going to be any refund to the student, if they dropped, that's when we'll stay, "It's time to pay [the agent's commission]." So, it's just very safe [for the university].

(ROA)

The notion of safety, an outcome of institutional control, was also noted in the admission process:

Once you have one [an agent] and they've gone through the [application] process the first time and they realize that everything that I'm asking of them is the same thing I would ask of the student . . . not like they are getting special privileges. . . . There's not going to be any immediate answer, "Yes, we'll take the student." They have to submit everything just the same way a student would. . . . I think we're pretty safe.

Another comment related to power and control was made by ROA when she discussed the requirement that agents submit official copies of transcripts, bank statements, and other application materials:

We don't want copies of things. We want official copies. We don't want just something that they fax to us. . . . There is a place in [the contract] that we talk about if we find that you are sending us fraudulent documents, that it is our discretion to stop the agreement.

Institution A maintains power or control in the relationship with agents through their agents' agreement, enforcing the guidelines as needed. For example, ROA related this experience with an Indian agent:



I had to have a [English] proficiency score and he [the agent] kept insisting that, “No, no, he can take that when he gets there.” And so, there was a lot of arguing by e-mail. And I finally just said, “You know what? I’m packing up your things and I’m sending them back to you. Maybe your students can go somewhere else. I don’t want these students because you’re not working with me.” And then I got an e-mail from him and he said, “I received the things. I will do better the next time.” Well, we’ll see. I have an agreement with him and he is a legitimate business, but he wanted special favors. . . . We’re not going to have shortcuts. . . . I felt like those students were at risk for failing. . . . He’s [the agent] not telling them, “You’re at risk if you go.”

With the students’ best interests in mind, ROA expressed her determination that she would control the admission process according to the contract, not the agent’s agenda.

*Accountability and trust.* Closely related to the power and control theme is the fourth theme of accountability and trust. One of the safeguards that ROA depends upon when selecting agents with which to partner is to have a profile of the agency. This profile includes the length of time the agency has been in business and proof that “they are recognized by the Commerce Department of their country or by the Ministry of Education . . . something that shows that they are legitimate business in their country” (ROA). ROA related one instance of holding an agent accountable when the agent sent her a student whose English skills did not match her proficiency test scores:

That student brought me a really nice TOEFL [English proficiency test] score and the picture, everything’s right. Well, that student got here and on the very first day she was asking an EAP [English for Academic Purposes] student how to translate

something and I thought, “Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. This is not good. . . . We need to test her.” So, we tested her in the first week. . . . She had been to a Chinese cram school and they can recognize certain things, patterns [in the TOEFL exam]. . . . It definitely was a shock to us. . . . So, the message sent back to the woman [the agent] was she’s [the student] got to go to another place. . . . That student was gonna have to be the “fall guy” so that maybe this woman [the agent] won’t do that again to any, any school.

Concerning accountability and trust, ROA offered this advice:

If you can find the agent and you have a good trust between them [the agent and the student], then you’re gonna bring in a student who is probably going to be qualified . . . and until something comes across that is fraudulent and we say, “Whoa, this is not good,” then I will continue to trust that person.

#### *Institution A Agents’ Agreement*

The four themes emerging from ROA’s interview data—financial and recruiting benefits, information flow, power and control, and accountability and trust—were also found in the agents’ agreement (DOC A) from Institution A. The theme of financial benefits was evident in the section, “Payment to [Agent],” in which the commission amount, payment schedule, and conditions relative to the commission payment are outlined. The theme of information flow emerged in the section, “Responsibilities of [Agent],” wherein the agent will agree to “provide academically and socially qualified students . . . admission information of [Institution A].” In addition, the section entitled “Application and Acceptance Process” stated that Institution A “has advised the [Agent] in writing of its existing student acceptance standards,” indicating a flow of information

from Institution A to the agent. Also in this section is the statement, “The application shall be accompanied by such other information as required by [Institution A] as part of their application process,” indicating a flow of information from the agent to the institution.

The third theme of power and control is apparent in the outline of agent responsibilities which outnumbered the institution’s responsibilities, indicating Institution A’s position of control in the contract. Other legally binding items in the contract indicate that Institution A controls the agreement. For example, in the “Indemnity” section is the statement, “This agreement shall be governed by and constructed under the laws of the [Midwest State] in the United States of America.” Obviously, the contract itself substantiates Institution A’s position of power in its relationship with the agent. The fourth theme of accountability and trust emerged in the contract’s introductory paragraph: [Institution A] seeks representatives [agents] who represent them accurately and truthfully to prospective students.”

#### *Institution B Recruiting Officer Interview*

The same overarching themes emerged in the data collected from the interview with the recruiting officer (ROB) at Institution B: power and control; information flow and accuracy, including information through campus visits, information flow blocked, and information through student feedback; financial and recruiting benefits; and accountability and trust. These themes, as well as the theme of services, also were present in the data collected from three documents from Institution B: agents’ agreement, agents’ conditional agreement, and handbook for agents.

*Power and control.* The most prominent theme emerging from ROB's interview responses was power and control, particularly in regard to the agents' agreement or contract. Inundated with correspondence from agents who want to sign agreements to recruit for Institution B, he has made the conscious decision to select only those agents who will agree to the terms of the contract he has developed, not one that the agent presents:

I've taken the approach that . . . we select and decide who we work with and they always come and try to make it, "Here's our contract," and I go, "That's great, but we're not signing that. You're signing ours. And there's no negotiation if you want to work with us." I've taken that approach because there's thousands upon thousands of agents and in picking who's good, I'm not going to succumb to other people's contracts, so follow ours.

Not only must they agree to the terms of the contract, but they must also fulfill those terms. If they do not follow the rules of the contract, ROB maintains the power, through the contract itself, to void the agreement:

We've taken a stance that we are the ones that control the contract and that the agents do not. So we take a pretty firm hand if they're not following things the way that we like, then we'll basically cancel the contract, and it's in the contract that we're able to do that at any time with written notice.

Power and control also surfaced when ROB described how commissions are paid to agents.

You know, a lot of agents want the cash right up front, and I look at them and I say, you don't, you won't have a good time with us, we're not going to do that.

They go, “Well, we’re not interested,” and I say, “Thank you very much,” and that really is the end.

Also related to commission payments was ROB’s statement revealing again Institution B’s position of power:

A lot of them [agents] say, you know, “You’re going to give me X amount of money,” and we always have to say, “Well, you can tell us the students you have, we’ll tell you the money.” Again, it’s sort of that constant communication with them about who is driving this agreement.

While he expressed the ability to control commission fees to the agents, ROB also addressed the issue of those things that he found to be outside of his or the institution’s control, such as the fees agents charge students for services they provide:

As far as collecting fees, different countries have different models of what agencies do and how they operate, and we have one contract, so we try to leave that as open. I do not systematically try to find out who collects fees or not. . . . If I just let that market, wherever they are, you know, dictate. If you can charge for a service and someone is willing to pay for it, for better or worse, that’s really how it is, and so I take the laissez-faire approach of “I’m not going to meddle in those things and tell agents not to do that.”

*Information flow and accuracy.* The second theme of information flow emerged from the interview data. ROB mentioned that in addition to a recruitment policy and agents’ contract, information must flow from the institution to the agents: “There needs to be a heightened communication from our end to them about what is the correct procedure and policy and what they should or should not do.” Because Institution B has contracts

with some 600 agents, ROB faces a challenge in providing up-to-date information for the agents to pass on to the students. The solution to this dilemma was to create electronic versions of informational pieces:

We have electronic version of things. New agents—we send them the paper and we say, “This is the first and last that you’ll receive” ‘cause we’re spending a lot of money on that. And I created some electronic aids for agents and we send them the link that is sort of a mini-brochure we’re able to update. That’s a private vendor that we’ve brought in to have this really cool four-page brochure, and that’s going out to agents when they say, “Can I have a brochure?” It’s there. It’s a pdf. They can download it, print it, and it comes out as all the pages. . . . I’m not interested in sending out outdated material or that is outdated within a year.

*Information through campus visits.* In addition to supplying information to agents through the Internet, Institution B also endeavors to inform agents by bringing them to the campus for first-hand knowledge of the institution and the admission procedures. This face-to-face communication provides a valuable opportunity for agents to not only receive information but to see the facilities, meet the people with whom they interact and with whom their students will interact, and, consequently, “have a more intimate connection with Institution B” (ROB). During their visit, ROB is able to “talk them through a pretty complicated procedure of application to acceptance and I-20 arrival and what you have to do through the entire process leading up to the student getting here,” giving them the tools to understand the process to better communicate it to the students. As ROB explained, “Our big focus is on pre-arrival information and coordination of what that student does before they get on campus. . . . so the good agents are able to tell the

students exactly what they need to do to get here.” In addition, ROB mentioned he is “working on the communication piece” to share similar information with those agents who are not able to visit the campus.

*Information flow blocked.* While information conveyed through agents’ agreements, the institutional websites, and face-to-face communication leads to positive working relationships between the institution and the agent, ROB expressed frustration in situations in which the agents block the information flow from institution to student:

Even when we contact the students that have gone through an application, we get zero reply, and it’s like I’ve paid someone to do this, so we have no communication with the students. And there’s a lot of problems inherent in that, but that’s one of the other negative issues that when we want to contact the student directly, the agent doesn’t want to because they want to control the flow of information.

In fact, often the agent blocks or filters all communication from the institution to the student until the student receives the visa. At that point, the agent may give contact information to the student so that airport pickup and housing arrangements can be completed.

*Information through student feedback.* After students arrive on campus, a different type of information flow takes place at Institution B. During the orientation week or shortly thereafter, the students are asked to provide information about their experience in the recruiting process. ROB uses the information from their feedback to assess the quality of the agent through whom they were recruited. ROB described this process:

I talk with students when they arrive during orientation and we give them a little bit of a “How did you arrive and how was your . . .”so we have feedback from the students as to whether or not their experience was decent. . . . It gives us the feedback we need. And I talk to the students and I tell them—I try to let them know we’re thankful they’re voicing their concern and asking them how we can do it better. . . . I think that they’re thankful that they have a voice and a say, and I always try to keep them in the loop about what we’ve sort of done or how we’re approaching things [with their agents].

*Financial and recruiting benefits.* The third theme of financial and recruiting benefits could be seen in the interview data. For example, ROB commented on both the financial benefit of commission payments to agents and the institution’s benefit of receiving quality students as a result of using commercial agents for recruitment: “If we’re paying people to send us students, the students they’re sending us are gonna be good ones and ones that are happy and ones that ultimately benefit the agent because they’re the ones that stay and complete.” Of course, retention of good international students is also a benefit to the campus community, not only financially but in terms of the positive outcomes associated with increased diversity.

*Financial benefit to the agent.* The institution benefits financially from international student revenues, but the agent also benefits monetarily, especially when the institution is willing to pay commission throughout the student’s full program of study. ROB explained the long-term financial benefit to the agent in regard to the commission payment policy:



We pay commission for the student's entire program, starting in ESL. And they can matriculate out of ESL into a bachelor's program and we'll pay them [the agent] for the entire amount. If they stay and go on into a master's program, then we do not pay the agent for that student's presence. We figure that we've retained them—that's been our job. So, but for students coming, it can potentially be five, five and a half, years of commission payments. . . . We pay a percentage of the tuition based on credit hours. So, that also increases [as the tuition increases].

*Recruiting benefits.* Another benefit Institution B has realized as a result of using commercial agents is name recognition resulting from agents promoting the university in their country. ROB explained:

We're a small regional Midwestern university that is not a name brand. Even other universities in the state have a name in front of them and some are changing their name to have "University of" . . . but without a name or some sort of notoriety, we become lost in the bookshelves.

Diversity through an international student presence on campus, an additional benefit of using an agent for recruitment, was observed in this remark by ROB:

I think we send out, oh let's say \$35,000 a semester going back to the agents, is money well spent for the 200 students that we have on campus and . . . so you say, "How much are you willing to pay for diversity and an international student population and what are the costs of that?" And I think this is a small cost to have that because we would not naturally have those students on campus [without using agents].

*Accountability and trust.* The fourth theme found in the interview data concerns accountability and trust. ROB expressed the view that having strong partnerships with agents whom he finds to be trustworthy can help Institution B attract good students:

If you have good relationships with the agents, then that means that the quality of advisement that they [students recruited through agents] receive in their own country is better and so you have good students who are arriving rather than students who are coming blind or through other methods.

One of the measures ROB has taken to ensure accountability is the written contract to which agents must adhere. He described one situation in which “it was blatant that he [the agent] . . . was not acting in a manner that we felt was beneficial for the students, and so we retracted the contract and won’t send him another one.” Another example of holding an agent accountable was described by ROB when he was asked about any negative experiences he had encountered with agents:

To summarize, it’s false expectation setting on the behalf of agents to the reality of what the student is going to face at [Institution B]. . . . One case I’m thinking of quite clearly is the agent is making promises such as, “Don’t worry, I’ll talk to them, I know them, and I’ll be able to guarantee you have a job, scholarships, GA position”—all these certain guarantees to get the students to arrive at the campus and nothing will get your contract cancelled faster than those guarantees. And we track that and that’s why I talk with students when they arrive . . . so we have feedback from the students as to whether or not their experience was decent.

ROB summed up the accountability factor in working with agents with these words:

The ethics of working with agents for me has been one that you have to continually monitor and reflect. . . . I want to make sure that whoever we're paying deserves the reimbursement they're getting. . . . We talk with the students and I want to know [about their experience with the agent] and that does impact what we'll do with that agent in the future.

*Institution B Agents' Agreement, Agents' Conditional Agreement, and Agents' Handbook*

An analysis of three documents from Institution B also presented the themes of power and control, information flow, financial and recruiting benefits, and accountability and trust. The agents' agreement demonstrated the themes of power and control, financial benefits, and accountability and trust in the following conditions contained in the document: "This agreement will cease immediately should the agent misrepresent himself, the students involved, or [Institution B]. Clear and willful misrepresentation of [Institution B] will result in forfeiture of fees."

*Power and control.* One of the primary functions of the agents' agreement or contract is to give the institution control over the recruitment process and to establish the principles by which the application and admission processes will be carried out. The theme of power and control was most strongly voiced in one of the conditions in the agreement: "[Institution B] holds sole jurisdiction over its admission requirements including the determination of acceptable documents and students."

*Financial and recruiting benefits.* Illustrations of the financial and recruiting benefit theme were found under the heading of "Responsibilities" where the amount of commission or "placement fee" was discussed, along with a full explanation of the criteria and procedure for payment. The theme of recruiting benefits was also present in

the document's list of responsibilities. Agents are expected to "aid students in the application process" and "assist students with travel arrangements to [the nearest international] airport."

*Accountability and trust.* Concerning student accountability, one of the conditions in the agreement stated: "All students involved in this transaction are subject to all the rules, regulations, and forms of discipline stated in the [Institution B] Academic Catalog, Student Handbook, and Residential Life Handbook."

*Information flow and accuracy.* The theme of information flow ran throughout the document. Under the heading of "Responsibilities," agencies are required to "acquaint potential international students" with the university and its programs, "disclose in writing to prospective students all fees and costs," and forward to the students all information sent by the university. Institution B, on the other hand, is expected to provide adequate information concerning travel arrangements from [the international airport] to the campus and on-campus housing. In addition, Institution B is expected to provide information through student services, including orientation and on-going immigration advisement.

*Conditional agents' agreement.* The second document, the conditional agents' agreement, offered scant data. Among the agreement terms was a statement reflecting the theme of accountability and trust: "This contract is designed to best meet their [students] needs by ensuring the highest quality ethics and advising techniques to match their goals to the best educational option available." The theme of power and control was demonstrated in the statement that the application must be approved by ROB before it can be considered a conditional agreement. Also illustrative of the theme of financial benefit was the term that stipulates the criteria for payment of commission.

*Agents' handbook.* Data from the analysis of the third document, an agents' handbook, revealed the themes of financial and recruiting benefits, information flow and accuracy, and accountability and trust. A section entitled "Financial Aid" demonstrated the theme of financial benefits to students, while another section entitled "International Student and Cultural Diversity" outlined the ways in which the university benefits from hosting international students and the benefits international students experience on the campus of Institution B. The information flow theme was apparent in the discussion of "General Agent Responsibilities" as the document addressed what information the agent was expected to provide students and what information the institution needed from the agent. One statement captured this theme in a concise way: "Agents are considered valuable to [Institution B] when they communicate honestly and frequently with [Institution B's] administrative offices and [ROB]." The theme of accountability and trust was also present in the handbook, as illustrated by this sobering statement: "It is expected that all agents will work with the administration to ensure students are following the application, arrival, and academic requirements as stated. Agents that try to get around the administrative requirements will not be favorably regarded."

#### *Comparing the Case Studies*

Both case studies, Institution A and Institution B, presented data from interviews and document analyses that provided a view of the positive and negative experiences related to recruitment through commercial agents, especially as observed in those aspects of the experiences that were found to be common across both campuses. The themes emerging from the data were also common, to a large extent, to both cases. However, each student and recruiting officer described experiences that were unique to the

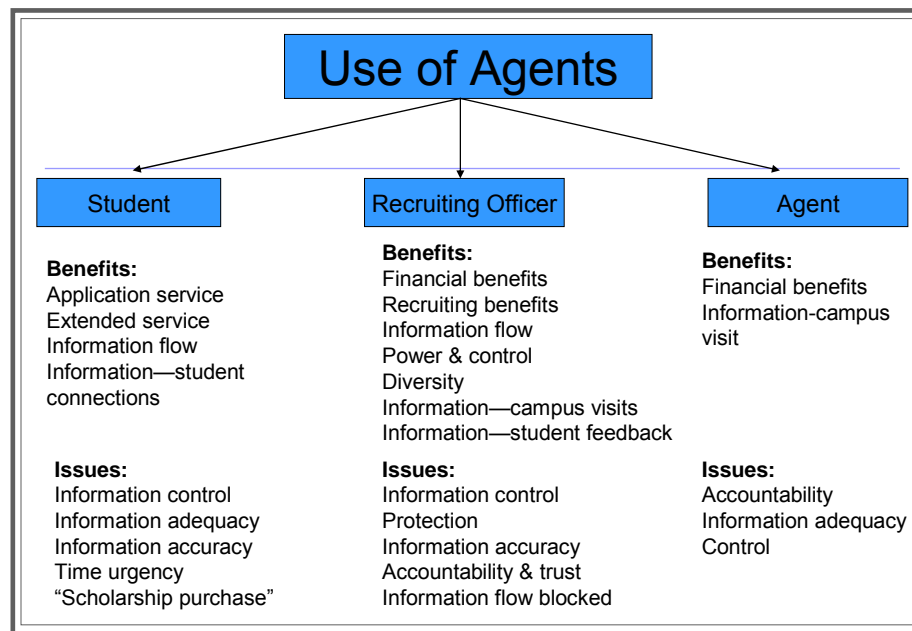
individual. These unique experiences undoubtedly were shaped by each respondent's cultural background, language ability, family situation, and a myriad of other influencing factors, yet their stories served to inform this study in terms of communicating personal reflections on their experiences. Indeed, who can speak about the ethicality of a policy better than those who have experienced it first-hand?

### *Summary*

Presented in Chapter Four were the data collected from document analyses, survey responses from 22 recruiting officers, and interviews with individual recruiting officers and international students at two institutions. Part I reviewed the protocol for the collection of data through the survey, analysis of documents, and interviews; described the data analysis process; and explained the coding system used in the data analysis. The survey results and document analyses were discussed in Part II, followed in Part III by a description of the two case studies, including demographics of the institutions; brief descriptions of the participants; and an analysis of each institution's agents' agreement or contract. Part IV analyzed the data and identified emerging themes which were discussed in a format organized around the case studies.

*Themes.* These themes were generally consistent across the data from students and recruiting officer interviews, as well as from the survey. While the document analysis was not discussed in terms of themes, the data served to corroborate the data from the other two sources: survey responses and interview responses. The emergent themes were power and control, information flow and accuracy, financial and recruiting benefits (including application services), and accountability and trust. Allowing the research questions to guide the analysis and viewing the data through an ethical framework of

“other-regarding vs. self-regarding” (Jones, Felps, & Bigley, 2007) helped to shape the analysis of data as the various themes emerged. Thus, the themes revealed both benefits (i.e., positive experiences or outcomes) and issues (i.e., negative experiences or outcomes) from the perspective of the three stakeholders or parties in the recruitment process: the student, the agent, and the recruiting officer, as illustrated in the following graphic organizer in *Figure 1*.



*Figure 1.* Benefits and issues of using agents from the viewpoint of the student, the recruiting officer, and the agent.

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Chapter Five will present a summary of the findings categorized according to the four research questions guiding the study. Following the summary will be a discussion of the findings in relationship to the review of the literature in Chapter Two and to the conceptual underpinnings of the study. Implications for practice will be discussed in

response to the findings. Finally, limitations of the study and recommendations for future research will be presented.



CHAPTER FIVE  
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

*Introduction*

Higher education has evolved over the past decades into a multi-faceted establishment. While universities often profess a traditional triune mission of teaching, research, and public service (Fuller, 2005; Kantanen, 2005; Wellman, 1999), critics decry what they perceive as the institution's move away from a public service model toward a profit-motivated corporate model (Barnett, 2005; Giroux, 2001; Stilwell, 2003). Shifts in funding sources (Arnone, 2004; Cheung, 2003), an agenda for spreading democracy abroad (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004; Wade, 2003), competition among both international and domestic institutions (Denman, 2005; McMurtrie, 2005), and the perception of students as customers (Birnbaum, 2001; Breneman, 2005; Kopp & Rosetti, 2005; Miller, 2003) all contribute to the perception of the university as big business (Fuller, 2005; Scott, 2004). This image carries a message that the hallowed halls of higher education are no longer open for the business of meeting students' needs and interests but for the purpose of making a profit (Carlson & Fleisher, 2002). Influenced by the pervasive ideologies of globalization (Altbach, 2002; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004, Slaughter, 1998), neoliberalism (Cheng, Ng, & Mok, 2002; Giroux, 2001), and entrepreneurialism (Barnett, 2005; Fuller, 2005), higher education is facing both public criticism and financial distress. In an effort to recover their original mission and to survive the present financial storms, many institutions have turned to internationalization (Bartell, 2003; Connell, 2003; Wood, 2003), a trend that promotes global awareness, diversity, and cultural benefits from

international students on U.S. campuses (Peterson, et al, 1999), but also serves as a source of much-needed revenues.

As the presence of international students has become an increasingly important goal (Kujawa, 2006), recruitment has likewise increased in importance. For this reason, the use of commercial agents is becoming more popular, yet many colleges and universities are skeptical of the ethicality of using third-party commercial agents, especially when a commission fee is required by the agent. Because the literature regarding this topic is scant, this study was conducted (a) to examine the experiences of international students who had been recruited through commercial agents and the experiences of institutional recruitment officers who recruit through commercial agents and (b) to determine if institutional policies endorsing the use of commercial agents are ethically sound. An ethical framework of “other-regarding vs. self-regarding,” adapted from a study by Jones, Felps, and Bigley (2007), was used to guide the research and to examine the findings of this study.

The research design was a qualitative multi-case study. The case studies, located in one state in the Midwest, included a small private four-year university and a small regional public four-year university. At each location, semi-structured interviews were conducted with one recruiting officer and four to eight international students who had been recruited through commercial agents. The two recruiting officers responded to an initial invitation to participate that had been sent electronically to a purposefully selected group of college and university personnel. The criteria for selection included employment in international student recruitment in a college or university in the state chosen for the study and experience in recruiting international students through commercial agents.

Approximately half the students were purposefully selected by the recruiting officers at their institution, while the other half were selected through snowball sampling, as the participating students recruited their friends to participate. The criteria for selection of students for the interviews included the experience of having been recruited through a commercial agent and English proficiency. In addition, surveys were sent to recruiting officers from 26 institutions in the same Midwestern state in which the interviews were held, and pertinent documents were analyzed.

### *Summary of the Findings*

The documents, survey responses, and transcripts from the interviews were analyzed to identify themes relative to the first two research questions designed to glean experiential data for the study. These themes were then viewed through the ethical framework of “other-regarding vs. self-regarding” (Jones, Felps, & Bigley, 2007) to locate the themes within the context of the second two research questions concerned with the ethicality of the issue under study. The most prominent emerging themes were power and control, information flow and accuracy, financial and recruiting benefits (including services), and accountability and trust. These themes will be discussed as they relate to the individual research questions:

1. What are the positive and negative experiences of international students who were recruited through school-initiated commercial agent agreements?
2. What are the positive and negative experiences of recruitment officers at institutions that recruit international students through school-initiated commercial agent agreements?

3. In light of the experiences of students and staff in the use of school-initiated commercial agent agreements, what conclusions can be drawn regarding the ethicality of such policies?
4. In what ways are recruitment policies that encourage school-initiated commercial agent agreements profit-driven? Student-centered? Other-regarding? Self-regarding?

Each question will be addressed through a discussion both of related texts from the review of the literature and of the summary of data from Chapter Four.

*1. What are the positive and negative experiences of international students who were recruited through school-initiated commercial agent agreements?*

While a wide array of situational and cultural influences can cause individuals to respond to or view experiences differently, certain elements in the recruitment-through-agent process result in either positive or negative experiences for students. Emerging from the research data were four themes: power and control, information flow and accuracy, financial and recruiting benefits, and accountability and trust.

*Power and control.* One of the primary determiners of the student's experience is the amount of power or control held by the other stakeholders in the relationship. Pimpa (2003a) suggested, for example, that agents have a powerful influence on the educational choices students make. One example from a student interview illustrates the power her agent held over her regarding her choice of institutions: "In the beginning, he didn't say things clearly. . . . He gives so many false things . . . and the time just went by . . . and you know, I had no other options than to choose this particular university" (AS2). Two other students reported although their agents briefly mentioned other universities, the

students did not feel like they were given other options. Neither student expressed a negative reaction, however, to being directed to only one university because, in the end, they were satisfied with the university.

Jones, Felps, and Bigley (2007) noted that “to increase favorable outcomes for themselves, self-interested firms with power over their stakeholders will wield it with impunity” (p. 141). In this case, if the agent or the institution is protecting its own interests to the detriment of the students, the students may suffer negative experiences as they are caught in the middle of a power struggle between the agent and the institution. On the other hand, if power is in the hands of people who have the students’ best interests in mind, the outcome is one of satisfaction with the recruitment experience.

*Information flow and accuracy.* One of the ways people hold power over other people is through the control of information. Stedman (2000) pointed out that some agents may give false or exaggerated information about degree programs, as was the case with AS2. She was told by her agent that Institution A offered a major in Biotechnology, but upon arrival she discovered there was no such program at that university. She also reported another incident in which a former student at Institution A had been told the school offered a degree in Fashion Design, when in fact, the school did not. The student consequently transferred to another university.

In her discussion of the issue of inaccurate information given students during the recruitment process, Cox (1990) noted:

One of the worst distortions of information for parents and students is the misrepresentation of the real cost of a college education. . . . This incomplete or inaccurate information sometimes influences the parents’ and students’ choice of

a college. . . . Mistakes and misjudgments can leave the family in debt for years.

(p. 89)

Stedman also mentioned fee structures, as well as living accommodations, as topics about which agents may give erroneous information. Several of the students interviewed reported negative experiences with their agents regarding these two topics. For example, AS2 complained that her agent had told her the tuition fees would be lower than they actually were. BS1 reported that her agent had led her to believe that the first year would be expensive, but then she would be able to move off campus and find an on-campus job that would make it affordable for her to study in the U.S. While those things were true, the tuition has increased each year and the on-campus job does not pay enough to make up the difference. Other students reported that they had not been informed they would be required to live on campus the first year, which presented some financial hardship on a couple of students. In addition, one student explained:

When I first came here I wanted to live outside because I felt a little bit uncomfortable with living with an American because I couldn't speak English at the time. . . . I wanted to live outside. I had to live on campus for one year. (BS2)

*Financial and recruiting benefits.* Pimpa (2003a) described overseas agencies as “the ‘one-stop shop’, in which a full-range of information, counseling, application, and visa-processing services are offered to students wishing to study abroad” (p. 180). The students interviewed in this study were, without exception, pleased with the services their agents provided them. These services included presenting information about the institution they are now attending, as well as other institutions, in most cases; guiding the students through the application process by explaining what documents they needed to

submit and, in some cases, translating those documents into English; collecting the application materials and submitting them to the university; helping them schedule the visa interview; coaching them on how to respond to the consular officer's questions during the visa interview; and, at the student's request, making travel arrangements.

While the services may have varied from agent to agent, assistance with the selection and application processes, as well as with preparation for the visa interview, were common to all the students interviewed in this study. Convenience, safety (peace of mind), and saving of time were some of the positive benefits mentioned by the students, and, of course, the most important benefits were admission to a U.S. university and receiving their visas to study here. Because the visa process is expensive, unsuccessful interviews result in subsequent expenses for students who apply again for a visa. Therefore, those agents who gave effective advice about how to respond to questions posed by the consular officer and, in some instances, even conducted mock interviews (BS6), helped the students not only in building confidence but also saved them money they would have spent for multiple visa applications.

*Accountability and trust.* In his discussion of the relationship between a student and his or her agent, Pimpa (2003a) made the following observation:

The search for international education services differs from that for goods and nonprofessional services. The complexity and intangibility of international education services increase the importance for reliable sources of information and referral to professional services. . . . The role of the agent, hence, is not only as an information provider but also as a mentor for prospective students. (p. 181)

As one of the students interviewed for this study explained, even after she received her visa and had bought her airline tickets, she kept in touch with the agent who had helped here:

We still kept on-line communication. So, I asked him some questions and I also expressed kind of my nervous about going to a new environment. And he just said, “Like, don’t be nervous.” Like, he kind of helped me both, like psychologically. . . . And also, it’s not just . . . from company, but also a friend, or like that. . . . So, I feel really satisfied.

Another student reported that he has visited his agent on return trips to his home in Japan, just to stop by and tell her he is doing well. Nash (1990) noted that among the values that serve the interests of both parties in a business relationship are “honesty, empathy, caring, respect, trustworthiness, fairness, and developing the competency to deliver on one’s stated or implied promises in the marketplace” (p. 110). Accountability and trustworthiness are likewise integral factors in the student–agent relationship. The feeling of friendship toward their agents was an indication the students had judged them to be trustworthy.

*2. What are the positive and negative experiences of recruitment officers at institutions that recruit international students through school-initiated commercial agent agreements?*

Although the same themes emerged in the data from the recruiting officer interviews, the themes obviously initiated from a different perspective as the roles of ROA and ROB were quite different from those of the students. The themes are power and



control, information flow and accuracy, financial and recruiting benefits, and accountability and trust.

*Power and control.* Interviews with the recruiting officers ROA and ROB, representing their respective institutions, focused largely on the importance of their agents' agreements (contracts) as a means to control the agent-institution relationship. When the agent followed the guidelines prescribed in the agreement, the experience of working with that agent was usually positive. The agreements and handbook, developed by the institutions, established the boundaries for agents in terms of what they are expected to do and what they are expected not to do. For example, they are expected to present accurate and complete information to students. They are not to guarantee that a student will be admitted before the institution evaluates the application materials (DOC C3). As Schley (2002) noted, "modern ethics must rely largely in external forces, designed to coerce or compel good behavior, as opposed to appealing to internal motivations which inspire goodness" (p. 257). Thus, the contract and handbook serve as that external force to compel good behavior, or in this case, observance of the guidelines outlined in these documents. ROB explained the importance of controlling the agreement or contract: "We've taken a stance that we are the ones that control the contract and that the agents do not. . . . If they're not following things the way that we like, then we'll basically cancel the contract." In other words, the recruiting officers do not tolerate bad experiences with agents; they cancel the contract and dissolve the relationship.

*Information flow and accuracy.* Another aspect of their relationship with agents that can result in positive or negative experiences is the flow and accuracy of information. Again, operating from a position of controlling the relationship, the recruiting officers

advocated for clear and open communication between themselves and the agents and between themselves and the students. According to Gomes and Murphy (2003), more than 80 percent of the respondents in one study reported that the “institution’s e-mail response influenced their choice of institution” (¶ 37). In other words, rapid communication of information is vital to the recruitment process. ROA expressed her understanding of this phenomenon when she recounted telling an agent, “‘I’ve lost these students because you didn’t give me their e-mail’ so that I could become closer to them so that they understand what’s going on. They need that feeding.” Likewise, ROB complained that when agents block the communication between the student and the institution, problems arise. Sometimes the agent is not allowing the contact between institution and student because he or she is holding the I-20 for payment (ROB). Open communication, then, is one of the key factors leading to positive experiences in the institution-agent relationship, primarily because the student benefits from clear, frequent communication.

*Financial and recruiting benefits.* The fact that international students were recruited to their institutions was also a positive result of using commercial agents. ROB mentioned that because Institution B is a small regional university that is not a name brand, it becomes “lost in the bookshelves.” In fact, two of the students from Institution B had never heard of it until their agent suggested they apply for admission there. The other six students had prior knowledge of the university only because they knew someone who studied there. Likewise, the students interviewed at Institution A, an even smaller private school, were first introduced to that university by their agents. Of course, the benefit of recruiting these students was that an increase in international enrollments serves “to add

to the cultural diversity of the campus community; to expose domestic students to diverse cultural, social, political, religious viewpoints from international students and scholars; [and] to prepare domestic students for a global society” (Recruiting Officer Survey).

According to Stedman (1999), using agents saves the institution considerable money that it might have spent on overseas recruiting trips and educational fairs. ROA mentioned attending agents’ fairs where “I meet some new reps [agents] and meet them face to face and see if I like them.” In fact, she said, “I think the most positive thing that I can see out of this is that I don’t have to go to a lot of countries. . . . It’s a frugal way to bring in more students.” Some of the services agents can provide to institutions include (a) distributing their materials to local candidates, (b) advertising the institutions in local newspapers, (c) advising institutions on what academic programs local students are interested in, (d) arranging appointments when institutional representatives visit, and (e) representing the institution locally (Stedman).

Another benefit from recruiting through a variety of agents, as both Institution A and Institution B do, is the opportunity to maintain a healthy balance in terms of diversity in the international student population (Stedman, 1999). ROA indicated that she was interested in having students from a variety of different countries. In fact, when she was considering attending an agents’ fair in China, for example, she said, “I wasn’t even going to go there because I said, ‘I have too many Chinese. . . . I don’t want to overpower this place. . . . And they all have their friends and it’s a network.’” According to Stedman (2000), “Enrolling too many students from one country has disadvantages, and it is prudent to vary the countries of enrollment. Using [agents] may be the most effective

way to diversify” (p. 122), creating a culturally rich environment that many students, both domestic and international, appreciate.

Another benefit that is undoubtedly a positive outcome from using agents is the increase in revenues. International students typically pay out-of-state tuition fees, which are often twice the amount of in-state tuition. According to the *Open Doors 2006* report, international students contributed more than \$13.5 billion to the U.S. economy (Institute, 2006). When he compared the commission fee he paid the agent with the increased enrollments and higher revenues, ROB found the result to be a positive one:

They're [the agents] getting . . . 10 percent of their [the students'] tuition back [which] is a lot less than the tuition differential of our out-of-state and so that doesn't really bother me. . . . How much are you willing to pay for diversity and an international student population and what are the costs of that? And I think this is a small cost to have that because we would not naturally have those students on campus.

*Accountability and trust.* Some of the negative experiences ROA and ROB reported were related to accountability and trust. As mentioned previously, when an agent refuses to adhere to the guidelines set forth in the agents' agreement and handbook, that agent is not considered trustworthy. Peter Drucker, responding in an interview with Galagan (1998), explained that “Leadership [i.e., the agent's function] has to be grounded in responsibility. . . . It has to be grounded in accountability” (p. 25). One of the ways both ROA and ROB test their agents for accountability is to meet with new students shortly after they arrive on campus to ask them about their experience with their agent. ROB explained that if students have a negative experience in the recruitment process, he

collects those responses from the students and continues to monitor that agent's actions to determine if there might be a problem with trustworthiness or if the student could have had misperceptions of the agent's actions or intentions. ROB expressed the positive outcome of working with trustworthy agents in this summary statement: "If you have good relationships with the agents . . . you have good students." Likewise, ROA noted the relationship between trustworthy agents and good students:

If you can find the agent and you have a good trust between them, then you're gonna bring in a student who is probably going to be qualified. . . . and until something comes across that is fraudulent . . . then I will continue to trust that person.

Holding the agent accountable by monitoring their actions and asking students for feedback was vital to both ROA and ROB in terms of ensuring a trustworthy relationship with the agent, yielding positive experiences with long-term results.

*3. In light of the experiences of students and staff in the use of school-initiated commercial agent agreements, what conclusions can be drawn regarding the ethicality of such policies?*

Although the 12 students interviewed for this study reported varying degrees of negative experiences with their agents as they shared what were either unethical or, perhaps, uninformed behaviors, most of the students expressed an overall satisfaction with their respective agents and stated that they would recommend their agent to their friends.

*Power and control.* Some of the students' experiences indicated they had little if any control over various aspects of the recruitment process. AS2, for example, reported

that when she asked her agent for information regarding the status of her applications to other institutions, he failed to accommodate her request until it was too late to gain admission to any university other than Institution A. BS8 related a similar situation her cousin experienced when her agent said he received a rejection letter from the first university she had chosen; however, when she contacted the school on her own, she was told her application was never received. Another illustration of an unethical use of power over the student occurred when BS4's agent held her I-20 until she paid the extra money for her scholarship.

The recruiting officers, of course, were able to control the agent-institution relationship through their contracts. These legally binding documents could be dissolved by either party with written notice, thus ending the agreement between agent and institution. Both ROA and ROB reported that, on rare occasions, they have cancelled contracts when the agent refused to follow the guidelines delineated in the agents' agreement. Therefore, it could be concluded that the recruiting officer's power to control the ethical behavior of the agent is inherent in the contract itself. Overseeing the fulfillment of the contract, however, is not always possible. Schley (2002), in his discussion of ethical codes, observed that in many cases, enforcement occurs only when it is advantageous or convenient. The same could be said of agents' agreements, as is evident in the fact that some students at both Institution A and Institution B reported what they saw as unethical behavior on the part of their agents, yet the institutions still maintain working relationships with these same agents.

*Information flow and accuracy.* Negative experiences most commonly resulted from inaccurate or incomplete information. Inaccurate information, in some cases, was

probably intentional. For example, one student had been told the expenses would decrease after the first year when she could move off campus and find employment, yet the increase in tuition kept her from realizing that promise. Another student was told by her agent that she could choose a certain major, but it was not offered at the university to which he directed her to apply. Other students were not prepared for the smallness of the town, the lack of public transportation, the expense of taxis, the expensive of food, and the steady increase in tuition.

From one perspective, the examples of misinformation or lack of information do not necessarily indicate an unethical action on the part of the agent or the institution. Some misunderstandings occur as the result of language barriers or cultural differences. Yokoyama addressed the concept of cultural differences in *Guidelines for Ethical Practices in International Student Recruitment* (DOC C1): “As much as . . . agents need to be aware of legal and ethical guidelines, agents and overseas recruiting counselors also must inform partnering education institutions . . . what the normative or ‘ethical’ practices are in the culture in which they operate.”

Other misunderstandings about such things as unpredicted tuition increases, as recounted by students BS1 and BS5, may be unavoidable. From another perspective, however, if the misinformation was purposeful, the actions of the agent were unethical. Yet, the wrong actions of the agent do not make the agreement or contract unethical. According to Schley (2002), ethical codes (or, in this case, contractual agreements based on ethical codes) are disregarded because of the current “world view that denies the interconnectedness of persons, the existence of an overarching order, and even the moral and ethical relevance of actions at all” (p. 257). Rezaee, Elmore, and Szendi (2001)

agreed that codes (or contracts) may be ignored because “codes of conduct do not always provide the power or the process for enforcement” (p. 172).

*Financial and recruiting benefits.* From the perspective of the students, several monetary issues came to light in the interviews. While some students reported having a clear understanding of their financial obligations to the institution prior to their arrival on campus, others were surprised by the increases in tuition, higher cost of living than they had expected, and low-paying on-campus jobs. A few students also reported they were unaware of the institution’s requirement that they live on campus for a year, which was more expensive than apartments off campus. ROB also discussed another problem that occurs when a student finds out that his or her agent charges “different prices depending on who the students are.” He admitted, “It is an ethical concern, but we can only control so much.” Another ethical concern related to money was expressed by a participant in the Recruiting Officers Survey: “Students pay a ‘finder’s fee’ to some agents who are then unable to get them into our university, either through delay in getting documents to us or because the student ends up not qualifying.” While these examples do not involve benefits to the student, they exemplify what might be considered unethical incidents that negatively impact students instead of benefiting them.

The recruiting officers both reported negative issues with agents who wanted to circumvent the recruiting process by requesting admissions for students who had not submitted the necessary documents, such as proficiency test scores. Such unethical action on the part of the agent prevents all the parties from enjoying the benefits of recruiting through agents. On the other hand, the recruiting agents found that financial and recruiting benefits were not hampered when agents understood the penalty for not



following the guidelines outlined in the agents' agreement and handbook, as ROB pointed out: "We take a pretty firm hand if they're [the agents] not following things the way that we like then we'll basically cancel the contract."

*Accountability and trust.* Naturally, it would seem that experiences with agents who give either inaccurate or inadequate information would lead to mistrust and dissatisfaction with the agent, yet most of the students reported the experience with their agent to be satisfactory. AS2 was the exception, largely due to the inaccurate information her agent gave her, especially when he told her the university offered the academic program she wanted to pursue, when, in fact, the major was not offered. On the other end of the spectrum, AS1 related that although she never met her agent in person (their communication was mainly through e-mail messages), she had come to think of him as a friend.

The recruiting officers both spoke of measures they have taken to ensure that the agents they use are trustworthy. For example, whenever feasible, they meet the agents face-to-face, either at agents' fairs (ROA) or on their campus (ROB). ROA also described the criteria an agent must meet in order to recruit for Institution A. She requires a profile of agents and proof that their company is either recognized by the Commerce Department of their country or by the Ministry of Higher Education. She wants "something that shows that they are a legitimate business in their country." Both ROA and ROB monitor the agents with whom they work by interviewing the students when they arrive and asking them specific questions about their experience with the agents who recruited them.

*4. In what ways are recruitment policies that encourage school-initiated commercial agent agreements profit-driven? Student-centered? Other-regarding? Self-regarding?*

The question of whether policies are profit-driven or student-centered will be addressed in this section, with dialog surrounding the four themes of power and control, information flow and accuracy, financial and recruiting benefits, and accountability and trust. The question of whether policies are other-regarding or self-regarding will be addressed in the Discussions section of Chapter Five.

*Power and control.* To the extent that institutions have the capacity to control the agent's actions through the agents' agreement or contract, the recruitment-through-agent policy was seen as student-centered. The contract and agent handbook served to guide the application process, stipulate acceptable behaviors and unacceptable behaviors, and, in general, ensure that the student's best interests were considered. However, enforcement of the contract was not always possible, as evidenced by the complaints voiced by some of the students regarding lack of information, inaccurate information, and false information. When the contract is not enforced and agents act unethically toward the student, the policy is not effectively student-centered, even if the contract is.

*Information flow and accuracy.* One of the most important aspects of the recruitment-through-agent process is the flow of accurate and adequate information to the student. Both ROA and ROB mentioned the frustration they encounter when the agent prevented them from contacting the students. One student expressed her angst when she had no communication with the school: "I basically know nothing. I feel really nervous and frightened, actually" (AS1). Later, however, when she received contact information for the recruiting officer, she reported, "I contact with [ROA] and she's really helpful and she replied with e-mail really, really, really fast. So, I feel so, like, their attitude toward

new student is really good.” Obviously, clear communication channels between the student and the institution is a student-centered facet of the recruitment process.

*Financial and recruitment benefits.* Increased revenues are clearly one of the objectives of recruiting international students. One survey response addressed the idea that “it [an increase in international students] is the most likely source for new tuition income, pending the legislature putting a cap on tuition.” Another survey respondent wrote: “The purpose is enrollment and money. Universities are businesses and need to increase the client base – as domestic high school numbers will decrease in coming years, the focus is toward international.” When asked what the attitude of his administration was regarding paying commission to agents, ROB answered:

If you talk to the people who are on the money side of sending the money out, they have questions about how much this is benefiting the university because they see the outlay of dollars. The other side of the coin from our perspective is that our agents bring a fairly steady stream of students to the school.

Students from Institution A and Institution B, however, did not seem to be cognizant of a profit motive for recruitment. A few students mentioned they thought their agent had some connection with the institution that had something to do with money, but they were not disturbed by that fact. What was clear from the interview data, however, was that the students (with the exception of one who was not matched to a university which offered her major) all expressed their satisfaction with their university selection.

*Accountability and trust.* Tied to the theme of power and control, accountability and trust was seen in the measures both ROA and ROB implemented through the content of the contract and the agents’ handbook, through face-to-face meetings with agents,

either on campus or overseas, new student feedback about the recruitment experience, and the determination to “continually monitor and reflect” (ROB). Because students are powerless in the equation of student-agent-institution, the institution must be vigilant to ensure the recruitment process—from the first steps of sending accurate, adequate information to the agent to the collection of data from newly arriving students—is student-centered. The policy itself is not inherently profit-driven or student-centered; rather, the relationship between the parties determines the nature of the policy.

### *Discussion*

While the cases presented in this study serve to establish a fundamental context for discussion, the study is not centered in these particular cases in and of themselves, but rather in the overarching ethical considerations in using commercial agents in international student recruitment. Student and recruiting officer experiences as shared through interviews, data collected from relevant documents, and input from surveyed recruiting officers combine with insights from the review of the literature to create a platform to explore the question of ethicality embedded in this practice.

The ethical framework of this study runs broad and deep, for the landscape of higher education is changing as such political and economic ideologies as neoliberalism (Cheng, Ng, & Mok, 2002; Giroux, 2001), globalization (Altbach, 2002; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004), and entrepreneurialism (Barnett, 2005) bring pressure to colleges and universities to conform to big business (Breneman, 2005; Giroux, 2001; Scott, 1999). Higher education is seen as a commodity to export to other nations (Heyneman, 2003), some of which cannot afford to lose their best and their brightest to study abroad and not return

home because the siren song of the good life is too enticing (Dassin, 2005; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004).

Today institutions of higher learning are facing several pressing issues, all rife with ethical dimensions. These include funding shifts in higher education (Cheung, 2003; Rhoades & Slaughter, 1997), the questionable agenda of democratization (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004), competition for students (Denman, 2005; Kirp, 2003; McMurtrie, 2005), and the concept of students as consumers (Birnbaum, 2001; Cox, 1990; Grayson, 2003a; Kopp & Rosetti, 2005; TESL-EJ Forum, 2004). Each of these issues extends to the topic of international student recruitment, which in many institutions is accomplished through commercial agents. This practice, while becoming more commonplace as competition for international students increases, is still considered by many administrators and international educators to be unethical, as evidenced by several comments to that effect in the Recruiting Officer Survey responses. While this study may not conclusively answer the question to the satisfaction of all involved in international student recruitment, the following discussion should raise the level of understanding of at least some aspects of this controversial topic, and, perhaps, be the catalyst for future reflection and research.

Ethics is an immensely complex topic that has been debated by philosophers, theologians, scientists, and other scholars from the time of Aristotle to the present. While discussion of the various genres of ethics is beyond the scope of this study, an explanation of certain basic concepts serves to address the question of ethicality in the use of agents in international student recruitment. For the purposes of this discussion, ethics is defined as “the principles of conduct governing an individual or a group” (Merriam- Webster Dictionary, 1993, p. 398). In this study, the principles of conduct

governing an individual agent are formally articulated through agents' agreements (contracts) and handbooks, while the principles of conduct governing groups of recruiting officers and groups of agents are formally contained in the ethical codes of the professional organizations of which they are members. Adherence to these principles demonstrates personal ethics on an individual basis and professional ethics in the context of alignment with the group. In addition to the formal principles delineated in a written contract or a code of conduct, personal values and moral viewpoints also shape the principles that guide an individual's behavior and judgment, and this personal ethics as it is shared with other members of a group, may also govern the group's collective decisions and actions.

'Ethical,' another term critical to this discussion, is defined as "involving or expressing moral approval or disapproval" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1993, p. 398). This definition is illustrated in the judgment of those who assume, based on hearsay, that recruiting through agents is unethical, even though they have no first-hand knowledge or experience with the practice. 'Ethical' is also defined as "conforming to accepted professional standards of conduct" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, p. 398), an important function of the agents' agreement or contract, as ROB explained: "We take a pretty firm hand if they're [the agents] not following things the way we like, then we'll basically cancel the contract." In other words, the agent is expected to conform to the standards of conduct established by the institution.

In addition to the definitions of 'ethics' and 'ethical,' two schools of thought regarding ethics are relative to this discussion. From the teleological view, in simple terms, "the rightness or wrongness of actions and rules depends on their consequences.

Actions that yield good consequences are considered to be morally good [ethical]” (Aiken, 2004, p. 15). In other words, the ends justify the means. From another perspective, deontological theories “evaluate the rightness or wrongness of actions according to whether they are expressions of one’s duty or some other a priori principle” (Aiken, p. 17). Thiroux (1986) further explained:

Proponents [of deontological theories of morality] claim that consequences do not, and in fact should not, enter into judging whether actions or people are moral or immoral. Actions are to be judged solely on whether they are right and people solely on whether they are good, based on some other . . . standard or standards of morality. (p. 57)

Jones, Felps, and Bigley (2007) explained the latter view of ethics in the following statement, with terms inserted by the researcher to reflect relevance to the topic of this study:

Striving to uphold universally applicable principles (“What if all companies acted this way?”), behaving according to the Golden Rule, taking obligations seriously, and not acting as if conventional rules apply only to others are also Kantian [deontological] notions that might resonate with the managers [recruiting officers] of broadly moral corporate cultures [higher education institutions], as is the idea that worthy “principles” cannot be discarded simply because potential consequences [loss of revenues and diversity] to the firm [institution] may be negative. (p. 148)

This deontological view of ethics, with its emphasis on principles, is demonstrated by the stance taken by many institutions that using commercial agents for

recruitment is unethical. These institutions are functioning, then, as “moralist cultures [in their] adherence to principles regardless of economic temptations to discard them. . . . Ethical standards come first for moralist firms and are not trumped by economic consideration, except under the most dire circumstances” (Jones, Felps, & Bigley, 2007, p. 149). Illustrative of this viewpoint are assertions from the Recruiting Officer Survey that while recruiting officers are encouraged to increase international enrollments for “diversity on the campus and for the economic benefit,” ethical standards come before the benefits: “We do not use commercial agents. I am not in favor of commercial agents. The potential for abuse and fraud is too great leading to the same types of concerns that surround the for-profit proprietary schools in the U.S.”

The teleological—or “consequentialist” (Thiroux, 1986, p. 34) view, however, holds that “human beings ought to behave in ways that will bring about good consequences” (Thiroux, p. 35), without adherence to “absolute rules” (p. 44). From this position, one could argue that what is considered ethical behavior in one culture may not be accepted as ethical behavior in another culture. Students and their agents, who are generally from the same culture, may consider some action or behavior to be ethical, even if the institution views the action as unethical. For example, when asked if Institution B’s agents’ agreement addressed the matter of what fees the agents charge students, ROB answered:

I take the laissez-faire approach of I’m not going to meddle in those things and tell agents not to do that. When the students come and check to see was that fine and they’re willing to pay \$4000 for a service that gets them here and they have



the money and the market bears that price, then that is something that we are willing to deal with.

Another example of cultural ethics from the teleological view is the willingness of Chinese parents to pay a great deal of money to an agent to facilitate an admission to an American university when there would be no possibility in China for their child to go to a university. In one case, the agent would not release the I-20 form and admission letter to the student until the parents had paid several thousand dollars for her own scholarship (SA4). In essence, these scholarships bought by the Chinese students were the means to the end—they were able to obtain visas because the I-20 forms listed the scholarships. SA1 acknowledged that when her friend paid for her own scholarship,

It's kind of cheating. . . and actually what you paid for the scholarship is your money. . . So, some agencies are not responsible, but since people want to go to United States and they want to get scholarship [they are willing to do that].

According to Liu (2005), China “has never been truly a country governed by law” (¶ 9), resulting in a “lack of clear laws for punishing [such practices as] plagiarism as well as the ineffective enforcement of existing laws” (¶ 9). In such a culture, then, perhaps the practice of purchasing one's own scholarship to gain the prized possession of a student visa to the United States is not viewed as unethical. Rather, the practice demonstrates the teleological view that the ends justify the means.

One approach to differing cultural views on ethicality is found in this statement by Yokoyama in *Guidelines for Ethical Practices in International Student Recruitment* (DOC C1):

If the norm or common sense of standard practices of a profession differs from country to country, the ethics (and at times the legal interpretations of issues) will vary as well. The interests and purpose of the sending counseling agents and the receiving U.S. schools are not the same. Therefore, each side must define first the 'ethical' standards in their own field, then work closely together to fine tune mutually agreed-upon codes of ethical practice.

This is one reason professional agent associations such as JAOS and KOSA are so important to their members and to the international education community. Their advocacy for standards in the industry of student recruitment helps promote ethical practices and holds stakeholders in the process accountable to the principles established in both the associations' codes of ethics and the agents' agreement from the institution.

On the other hand, it is arguable that the ethical norms of U.S. culture, not those of foreign countries, should be the basis for deciding if the practice of recruiting through agents is ethical. As administrators consider the ramifications of such a policy, they are under compulsion to uphold operative principles, such as those established through a contract or a code of ethics. Reynolds and Smith (1990) stressed the need for ethical guidelines in higher education: "Precisely because the academic profession wields such enormous power in a postindustrial information society, it is appropriate for us to explore an ethic of responsibility, and a statement of principles of responsibility that can guide the choices of individuals and institutions in higher education. The codes [of ethics] are an attempt to bring deliberative and sober judgment to bear on those areas of professional practice in which ethical dilemmas are most likely to arise" (p. 33).

Educational leaders are “under intense pressure to respond to societal issues resulting from trends in demographics and enrollment and economic and social forces that bring both possible disruption and/or opportunity” (Wilcox & Ebbs, 1992). Thus, they are compelled to find solutions to the critical issues of diminishing state and federal funding (Liefner, 2003; Lovett, Newman, & Couturier, 2002), decreasing domestic enrollments (Recruiting Officer Survey), inadequate diversity on campuses (Whitt, et al, 2001), increasing need for researchers in medicine, science, and technology (Brainard, 2005), and other areas in which international student recruitment plays a large role.

Writing about the extraordinary marketing and academic restructuring in Australia that has occurred in recent years, Marginson (2002) reported, “Foreign students have become crucial to the resource base of many Australian universities. . . . At one large university . . . it [international education] provides one dollar in every four—and is run as a business” (p. 36). In comparison, he noted that “in American universities, international education is run more as a source of intellectual labor, a branch of foreign aid, or an exercise in cultural exchange than as a revenue-generating program” (p. 36), yet he warned:

If Americans develop a more commercial take on internationalization, and this plays out at the expense of the cultural and educational objectives that dominate foreign-student education in the United States today, there will be a price to pay.

It will be necessary to reinvent those objectives later. (p. 43)

Profit-driven policies and practices in Australia, according to Marginson, have led to a dependency on the revenues from international students and weakened the quality of academic programming. His warning, then, adds a cautionary note to this discussion of

profit-centered vs. student-centered outcomes for policies promoting recruitment through commercial agents.

Another warning also addresses the topic of maintaining quality programs rather than focusing on income from international students:

American higher education institutions that take international students for granted, as ‘cash cows,’ do so at their peril. Formerly, the international student grapevine widely circulated information on campus in a matter of days. As the Internet means virtually instantaneous communication, weak programs and services for international students could be known worldwide in hours, if not minutes. To successfully recruit international students, U.S. colleges and universities need well-run, international programs with ethical, professional staff. (Peterson, et al, 1999, p. 69)

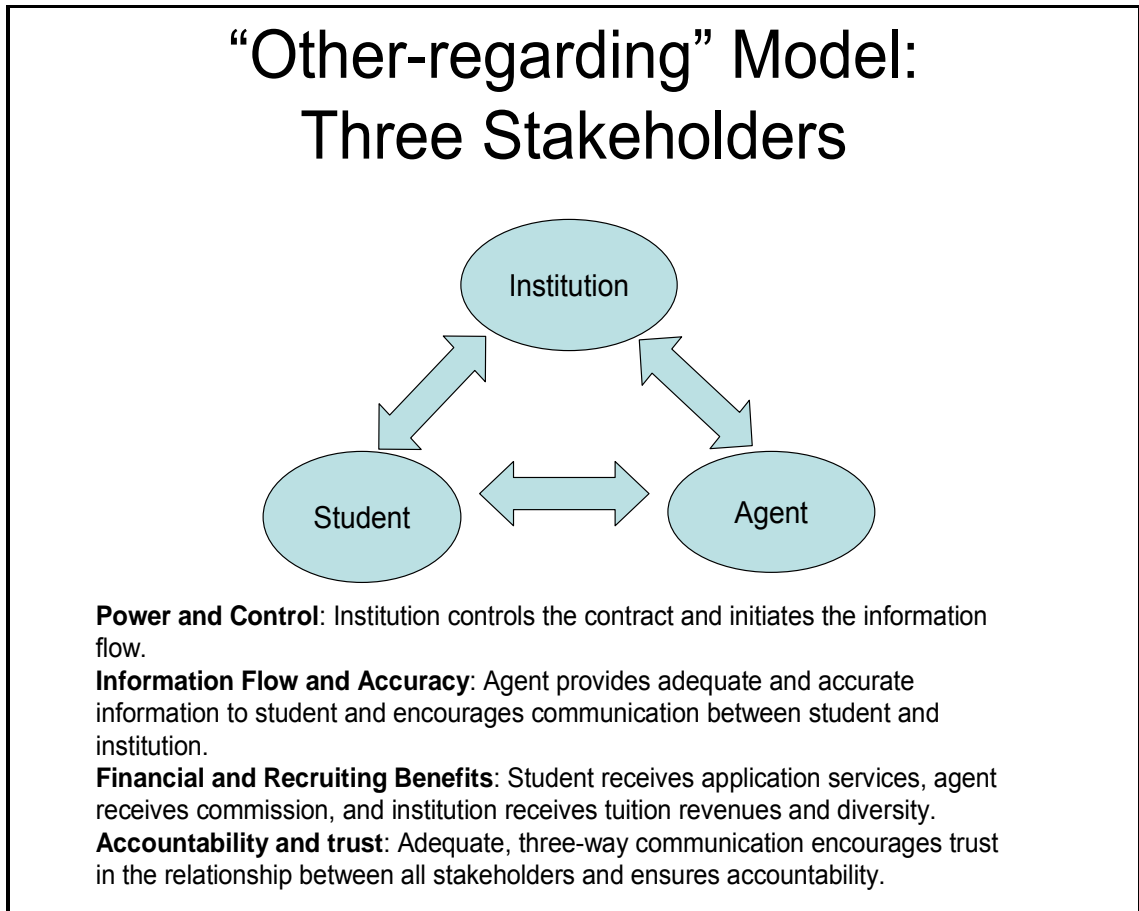
These sobering comments emphasize the need to pursue student-centered policies and practices rather than profit-driven policies and practices.

Closely linked to the concept of profit-driven vs. student-centered is the model developed by Jones, Felps, and Bigley (2007), which illustrates their perspective on the relationship of stakeholder culture and ethics:

Stakeholder culture is grounded in ethics and is based on a continuum of concern for others that runs from self-regarding to other-regarding. We argue that firms vary with respect to the extent and nature of their moral concern for their stakeholders and that this variation will often be linked, conceptually if not semantically, to the different moral philosophies. . . . Many managers are aware of and subscribe to common language understandings of these ethical theories—



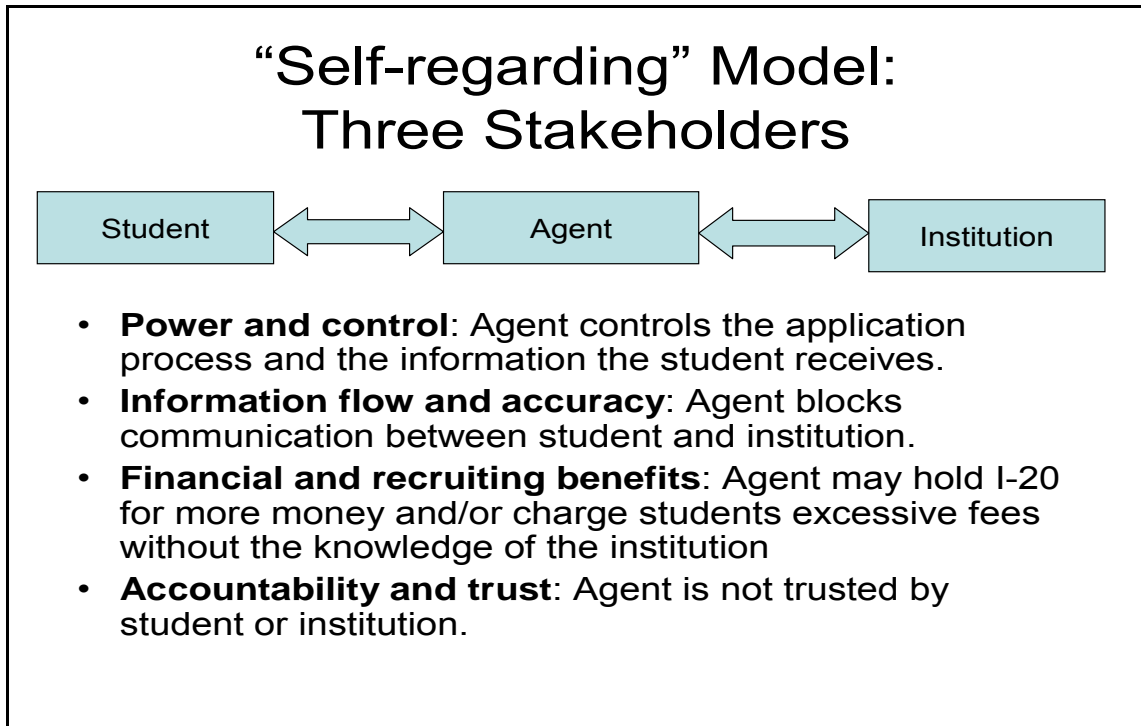
degree of ethicality can be plotted, the findings of this study are better demonstrated through a concept map showing the relationship between the three stakeholders—student, agent, and institution. This ethical or “other-regarding” relationship is illustrated by a triangle, with communication and information flowing back and forth between all three parties (see *Figure 3*).



*Figure 3.* Other-regarding model based on three-way communication.

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A second concept map (*Figure 4*) presents the unethical situation illustrated by the “self-regarding” agent positioned between the student and the institution, filtering information or blocking communication between the student and the institution.



*Figure 4.* Self-regarding model with agent control of information.

While the agent in this second model (*Figure 4*) is obviously acting unethically by blocking the flow of information, is the institution also acting unethically to continue in the partnership? If so, how can this dilemma be resolved?

### *Implications for Practice*

International students, especially those from certain cultures where agencies are well-established, legitimate enterprises or where Internet access is limited and direct communication with institutions is difficult, will likely continue to secure agents who will provide them a variety of services. Unless the student has a personal connection to the institution, as was the case with six of the students interviewed at Institution B, or a contact in the U.S., he or she may find the institution selection and application processes to be overwhelming or, in some cases, unachievable. Therefore, one might assume that an

agent would, in fact, do the student a service in helping that student narrow the choices by offering options based on the student's preferences (e.g., cost, academic programming, and location) and academic background. If the agent operates in the best interests of the student, demonstrating an ethical position of "other-regarding," would it not behoove an institution to partner with that agent? It could be argued that the institution's goals and the agent's goals are, in essence, one and the same: student satisfaction and monetary gain. If student satisfaction is not diminished in the process, has the ethics of "other-regarding" been violated just because the agent and the institution benefit financially?

Perhaps, then, the question recruiting personnel and administrators should ask is not, "Is the practice of using commercial agents ethical?" but, rather, "How can the use of commercial agents be monitored so that the student's interests, as well as the institution's reputation, are central not only to the agreement, but also to all stages of the recruitment process?" In other words, how can an institution ensure ethicality in the relationship with the agent?

One way to resolve the issue of ethicality in the relationship is described in the statement from Guidelines for Ethical Practices in International Student Recruitment (DOC C1), the training manual from NAFSA. Inserted in the text are references to the four themes which emerged from the data in this study:

If third-party . . . agents in foreign countries are to be used, develop a contract outlining the relationship [power and control]. Ask recruiters and agents to visit your campus at least once a year [information flow and accuracy]. Make sure you have access to prospective students so that you can communicate with them about your institution [information flow and



accuracy]. Evaluate agency contracts or relationships regularly [accountability and trust], and collect student feedback on the services [recruitment benefits] they receive.

These steps were also described by ROB as the process he uses to assess the agents with whom his institution holds contracts. This on-going evaluation is critical to maintaining ethicality in the relationship with agents: “The ethics of working with agents for me has been one that you have to continually monitor and reflect” (ROB).

As both recruiting officers emphasized, the contract is vital to the institution’s control of the relationship and to the monitoring of the agent’s fulfillment of responsibilities to both the student and the institution. Yet, a contract can be difficult to enforce. For this reason, Stedman (2000) offered this advice: “Contract only with agents whom you have met and whose qualification and references you have checked. Ask prospective agents for references from other institutions they represent and from students whom they have placed” (p. 125). Meeting agents in person helps establish a basis for accountability and trust: “Agreements with agencies are ideally based on mutual understanding and trust, and this most reliably develops when face-to-face meetings occur with agency staff before setting up agreements” (DOC C1). When in-person meetings are not possible, the institution (i.e., the recruiting officer) should find out if the agency has membership in an association that “promotes ethical practice” and “articulate(s) standards” (DOC C1) that match the practices and standards of the institution. Organizations such as KOSA and JAOS stipulate ethical principles for their membership (DOC E1; DOC E2), as does NAFSA (DOC C2) in its Code of Ethics. One way to evaluate whether or not the agent is adhering to the terms of the contract or to an

association's code of conduct is to talk with students whom the agent recruited. In fact, "student feedback ultimately provides the best information regarding the level of service an agency provides to a student" (DOC C1).

To build relationships of mutual trust and understanding and to provide accurate and adequate information to the agent, Stedman (2000) offered this advice:

Meet with agents annually, either on your campus or in their country. Encourage them to visit your campus as often as possible, at your expense or theirs, so they can describe to prospective students the environment, academic programs, and people. Agents will represent you much more competently from first-hand experience rather than from information gleaned from a book. . . . As far as possible, treat them as members of your staff who need regular communication. Call agents several times per year to develop your relationship, inquire after their business, and assess the prospects for referrals to your programs. (p. 127)

Following these suggestions will help to establish the basis for an "other-regarding" partnership between the stakeholders in the recruitment process. With the student's best interests as the focus of this process, the other stakeholders are expected to follow the terms of the agreement, resulting in ethical interactions between the stakeholders. Among the descriptors, then, of the "other-regarding" partnership, are the following ethical behaviors expected of the agent: (a) provide services needed by the student; (b) provide accurate information needed by the student; (c) provide contact information of the recruiting officer and, if possible, other students on the campus; and (d) provide multiple options for university selection. In this same "other-regarding" partnership, the institution, represented by the recruiting officer, fulfills the following

responsibilities: (a) establish criteria to select legitimate agents; (b) use contracts that incorporate an established code of ethics or code of conduct; (c) meet agents face-to-face to build trust; (d) host agents on campus; and (e) interview new students for feedback on agent performance. In this model, the agent and the recruiting officer cooperate and collaborate to ensure the student's best interests are foremost in the recruitment process from school selection to orientation at the host institution. Information is accessible and accurate, with freedom of movement from institution to agent to student to institution to student. Because of the accessibility of information, all stakeholders view each other as trustworthy. Financial and recruiting benefits are also realized as the recruitment process is fulfilled.

*Summary.* This study has established no conclusive answer to the question of ethicality in the use of commercial agents for international student recruitment; rather, the data have served to inform the issue by describing the personal experiences of both students who were recruited through agents and recruiting officers who use agents to recruit for their institutions. The discussion of the findings revolved around the concept of ethics, in its simple definition of "other-regarding" and the implications this definition brings to the question of practice. Suggestions were offered to help prevent unethical behavior on the part of commercial agents. These steps included establishing criteria for agent selection by conducting company profile research; using of a formal contract developed by the institution; meeting agents in person when feasible; establishing open lines of communication with the student throughout the recruitment process; and evaluating the agent's performance through student feedback.

### *Limitations of the Study*

Initially the study was considered to be limited because the researcher recruits students for an intensive English program at a public institution of higher education. The researcher had considered that recruiting officers from other institutions might not cooperate fully or might respond with reservation to interview questions because they might view the researcher as a competitor. This concern did not materialize, however, as the researcher found that the recruiting officers were not only cooperative, but they also expressed an interest in the study because of their own questions related to the topic.

One way in which the study was limited, however, was that some of the recruiting officers who took part in the survey could not distinguish which of their international students had used commercial agents to apply for admission. Therefore, it was somewhat difficult for them to answer one of the survey questions. In addition, the study was limited because there are many alternatives for recruitment of international students, and, unless an institution has a lengthy history of using commercial agents, the number of students recruited through commercial agents at the time of this study was limited. In addition, the number of international students at each of the case sites was less than 200, limiting the availability of appropriate participants in the student interviews. The two recruiting officers who participated in the interviews, however, were able to identify international students whom they recruited through an agent. While they contacted a group of students at their institution to participate in the student interviews, at each institution only two students from their contacts responded to the request, revealing a limitation in the researcher's ability to contact students who are not known to the researcher. Another limiting factor with the student participation was the fact that some

of the students were reticent to be interviewed by a stranger, primarily because they thought their English skills were weak.

In addition, the study was limited because many institutions do not have strategic plans for recruitment of international students nor do they have formal policies for recruiting international students. Moreover, the practice of using commercial agents for recruitment has been perceived as either unethical or difficult to establish because of bureaucratic governing of such practices and policies. Therefore, some of the respondents in the survey who have not engaged in the use of commercial agents spoke from hearsay rather than from their own experience, which may have skewed their responses. Finally, this study was limited geographically due to its focus on the institutions from only one Midwestern state.

#### *Recommendations for Future Research*

The literature regarding the specific topic of ethicality in the use of commercial agents was quite limited, yet the topic itself led to several other interesting avenues for future research. For example, related to this study is a suggestion for future research to examine the ethicality of the recruitment-through-agent process through the agent's perspective. The study would explore the positive and negative situations encountered by agents while working with institutions in the recruitment process. The findings might prove to be beneficial to institutions as they consider their own role in the agent-institution relationship and the agent's view of the need for accountability on the part of the institution.

In reflecting on another related dimension of recruitment through agents, the topic comes to mind of other types of overseas advisors who work through U.S. government-

funded offices such as EducationUSA, often located in Fulbright Centers or U.S. embassies. These organizations are usually not-for-profit, in contrast to for-profit commercial agents. Future studies could be conducted to compare the experiences of students who use the services of these advisors with the experiences of students who use commercial agents. In addition, research could be conducted to explore the perspective of recruiting officers regarding recruitment success through EducationUSA services.

Another topic of research for future studies is the comparison of the success rate of recruiting through recruiting fairs, printed materials, agents, websites, and commercial advertisers (websites and publications). Information gleaned from this type of study would certainly help institutions recruit more effectively and efficiently.

An additional area of interest for future research is the impact of their native culture on students' perceptions in the recruitment-through-agent process. Exploring the concept of ethics in various cultures and identifying different perspectives on ethical issues within those cultures would aid in intercultural communication and help establish better understanding between parties involved in the process of recruiting international students. One way to approach the study of cultural perspectives on ethical issues, especially those related to recruitment of international students, would be to view the study through the "other-regarding" model developed in this study. It would be interesting, indeed, to determine if participants from other cultures would view the "other-regarding" model as an ethical framework comparable to their lens of ethicality.

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## Appendix A

### *Letters of Introduction*

1. Letter of Introduction for Student Participants
2. Letter of Introduction for Recruiting Officer Participants

## Letter of Introduction for Student Participants

Date

<Title> <First Name> <Last Name>  
<Position>  
<Institution>  
<Address>

Dear <Title> <Last Name>:

Thank you for participating in my research study. I look forward to meeting with you on <date> <time> for you to share your experiences as an international student recruited through a commercial agent. Your observations and insights will be a valuable source of information for others who work with international student recruitment.

I have allotted two hours to conduct the interview. Enclosed is a list of the interview questions for you to preview. Of course, you do not have to answer any with which you are not comfortable. I have also enclosed the Informed Consent Form for your review and signature. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity of your personal identity and your institution's identity are assured.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by email at [JaneRobison@MissouriState.edu](mailto:JaneRobison@MissouriState.edu) or by telephone at 417-894-9611.

Sincerely,

Jane E Robison  
Doctoral Candidate  
University of Missouri

## Letter of Introduction for Recruiting Officer Participants

Date

<Title> <First Name> <Last Name>  
<Position>  
<Institution>  
<Address>

Dear <Title> <Last Name>:

Thank you for participating in my research study. I look forward to meeting with you on <date> <time> for you to share your experiences in international recruitment, especially through the use of commercial agents. Your observations and insights will be a valuable source of information for others who work with international student recruitment.

I have allotted two hours to conduct the interview. Additionally, I would like to collect documents [contractual agents' agreement and agent promotional materials] to further inform the study.

Enclosed is a list of the interview questions for you to preview. Of course, you do not have to answer any with which you are not comfortable. I have also enclosed the Informed Consent Form for your review and signature. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity of your personal identity and your institution's identity are assured.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by email at [JaneRobison@MissouriState.edu](mailto:JaneRobison@MissouriState.edu) or by telephone at 417-894-9611.

Sincerely,

Jane E Robison  
Doctoral Candidate  
University of Missouri

## Appendix B

### *Research Instruments*

1. Recruiting Officer Questionnaire
2. Student Interview Guide
3. Recruiting Officer Interview Guide



## Recruiting Officer Questionnaire

1. As part of your international student recruitment efforts, does your institution work with commercial third-party agents?  
 Frequently  Occasionally  Rarely  Never (Skip to Question 9.)
2. If **yes**, does your institution have **formal**, contractual agreements with commercial agents?  Yes  No If **yes**, please describe the agreement.
3. Does your institution pay commission to these agents?  
 Frequently  Occasionally  Rarely  Never
4. How long have these agreements been in existence? \_\_\_\_\_ years
5. Does your institution have **informal** agreements with commercial agents?  
 Yes  No If **yes**, please describe the agreement.  
  
If so, does your institution pay commission to agents with whom you have informal agreements?  
 Frequently  Occasionally  Rarely  Never
6. How many students per year does your institution receive as a result of agreements (formal or informal) with commercial agents?  
 0  1-5  6-10  11-15  16-20  21-25  25 +
7. Please share any **positive** experiences you have had in recruiting through commercial agents.
8. Please share any **negative** experiences you have had in recruiting through commercial agents.
9. If your institution has received international students who came through agents with whom you had no agreement, are you aware of any positive or negative outcomes for the **student** or for your **institution** as a result of the student's placement at your institution? (For example, how well was the student informed by the agent about costs, programs options, student services, housing, etc.?) Please share those outcomes.
10. Is there encouragement (or pressure) from the administration to increase the number of international students at your institution?  Yes  No  
If **yes**, for what purpose, as you understand it? Please explain.
11. If you answered **no** to Question 1, please explain your institution's position on using commercial third-party agents, including economic and philosophical reasons, if applicable.

## Student Interview Guide

1. When did you first consider studying in the United States? What led you to the decision to study in the U.S. instead of another country?
2. Where did you first learn about this university? Why did you choose this university? What process did you go through to make the choice?
3. I understand that an agent helped you with at least part of the application process. How did you select the agent? Did you look at several agencies or just the one you used?
4. How did the agent help you? What types of services did the agent provide? (Did the agent help with the visa application process? How? Travel arrangements?) Which services did you use? Were the services free?
5. Did the agent tell you about other universities or just this one? Do you feel that the agent directed you towards choosing a particular university or do you feel that you were free to choose any university?
6. What information about the university did you have before you came here? How did you receive the information (from agent or university, website, printed materials, emails, etc.)? (Location of the university: what part of the U.S. and information about the area; weather/climate; cost of living, housing on campus and off campus, food, cost of tuition and books; information about degree programs, intensive English programs, including requirements for admission; number of international students on campus and number of students from your country; international student services; organizations of interest to international students; what to expect when you first arrived; contact information for university personnel and other students from your country) Did you correspond with someone at the university before you arrived? (Another student? Staff?)
7. Do you think the information you received from the agent was accurate? Was it enough or were there things you would like to have known before you came? Please be specific.
8. Have you had any negative experiences or situations as a result of being recruited through the agent? Please be specific.
9. Have you had any positive experiences or situations as a result of being recruited through the agent? Please be specific.
10. Would you recommend to friends in your country that they use an agent to help them in the application process if they decide to study in the U.S.? Why or why not? If you were able to go back in time, would you choose to use an agent again? Why or why not?

## Recruiting Officer Interview Guide

1. How long have you been working in your current position?
2. When did your university begin to work with commercial agents to recruit international students?
3. What is the attitude or philosophy of the administration regarding payment of commission to commercial agents? To your knowledge, has this policy ever been questioned or challenged?
4. Does your university use a formal contractual agreement or an informal verbal agreement or both? Does the agreement incorporate some type of ethical code or principles of good practice?
5. How many agents do you have agreements with? How many countries are represented in that number?
6. How many students per year does your institution receive as a result of agreements (formal or informal) with commercial agents? What percentage of your international student population is recruited through a commercial agent?
7. Please share any **positive** experiences you have had in recruiting through commercial agents. (Services the agent has provided, continuing communication with the student and/or university personnel, increased enrollments from target countries, etc.)
8. Please share any **negative** experiences you have had in recruiting through commercial agents. (Difficulties in communicating, misunderstandings, misrepresentation of the institution, etc.)
9. Have you ever had to dissolve an agreement with an agent? Why?
10. If your institution has received international students who came through agents with whom you had no agreement, are you aware of any positive or negative outcomes for the student or for your institution as a result of the student's placement at your institution? (For example, how well was the student informed by the agent about costs, program options, student services, housing, etc.?) Please share those outcomes.

## Appendix C

### *Informed Consent*

1. Letter of Informed Consent
2. Informed Consent Form

## Letter of Informed Consent

Dear Participant:

This letter is an invitation to participate in a research study entitled, “Ethical Considerations in the Use of Commercial Agents in International Student Recruitment.” I am conducting the study as part of the requirements for a doctoral program in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis at the University of Missouri. Following is a summary of the study and what your involvement would entail should you agree to participate.

Internationalization has become a popular effort across U.S. university campuses, with the benefits of international students being one of the leading reasons for this trend. At the same time, visa restrictions and increased tuition costs have discouraged some students from pursuing higher education in the U.S. As a result of other countries’ recruiting campaigns, competition for international students has increased, both among nations and among U.S. institutions. In an effort to draw international students to our campuses, many institutions have begun to use the services of commercial agents. In past years, paying commercial agents was perceived to be an unethical practice, but many agents today have reputable businesses. This study was designed to uncover the layers of this complex issue by examining the experiences of both recruitment officers and the students who were recruited through agents.

**Researcher:** Jane E. Robison. University of Missouri, Doctoral Candidate, (417-894-9611), JaneRobison@MissouriState.edu

**Dissertation Supervisor:** Dr. Cynthia MacGregor, Missouri State University, (417-836-6046).

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this study is to examine the ethicality of recruiting through commercial agents, especially in relationship to the experiences of recruitment officers and international students who have first-hand knowledge of the practice. The study will explore the following questions:

5. What are the positive and negative experiences of international students who were recruited through school-initiated commercial agent agreements?
6. What are the positive and negative experiences of recruitment officers at institutions that recruit international students through school-initiated commercial agent agreements?
7. In light of the experiences of students and staff in the use of school-initiated commercial agent agreements, what conclusions can be drawn regarding the ethicality of such policies?
8. In what ways are recruitment policies that encourage school-initiated commercial agent agreements profit-driven? Student-centered? Other-regarding? Self-regarding?

**Procedures:** If you agree to participate in this study, I will conduct a two hour interview of open-ended, semistructured questions with you. I will ask for documents [agent/institution contractual agreement and agent promotional materials] to better inform the study. Although the interview questions have been predetermined, please understand that the interview itself will be informal and any insights and observations you would like to add would be welcomed. You may choose to answer any and all questions, or you may abstain if you are uncomfortable with any question. With your permission, I will audio-tape the interview to ensure an accurate transcription of your responses. Following the interview, I will send you a copy of the transcript to review. Any additions or clarifications you request will be made immediately. At any time, you may withdraw as a participant without any negative consequences.

**Confidentiality:** The audio-tapes, transcriptions, observation notes, and documents will be kept in a locked file under the direct supervision of the researcher. All evidentiary documents will be securely maintained for three years following the completion of the study and then be destroyed. The information from the interview, observation, and documents is considered confidential. Your name or any identifiable information will not appear in print, although anonymous quotes may be used.

**Risks and Benefits:** There are no known risks associated with your participation in this study. The research data should help inform administrators and recruiters as they develop policies and best practices in international recruitment and as they consider the ethicality of using commercial agents as part of their recruitment plan.

**Injury:** It is not the policy of the University of Missouri to compensate human subjects in the event the research results in injury. The University of Missouri does have medical, professional, and general liability self-insurance coverage for any injury caused by the negligence of its faculty and staff. Within the limitation of the laws of the State of Missouri, the University of Missouri will also provide facilities and medical attention to subjects who suffer injuries while participating in the research projects of the University of Missouri. In the event you suffered injury as the result of participating in this research project, you are to immediately contact the Campus Institutional Review Board Compliance officer at (573-882-9585) and the Risk Management Office at (573-882-3757) to review the matter and provide you further information. This statement is not to be construed as an admission of liability.

If it is your decision to participate in this study, please sign the attached consent form. Please retain a copy of this letter and your written consent for future reference.

Sincerely,

Jane E. Robison  
Doctoral Candidate  
University of Missouri

## Informed Consent

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read the Letter of Informed Consent and agree to participate in the study entitled, “Ethical Considerations in the Use of Commercial Agents in International Student Recruitment” that is being conducted by Jane E. Robison. I understand that:

- My responses will be used for the purposes of dissertation research and future publications.
- My participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any point in the process without negative consequence.
- My identity and that of my employing institution will be protected at all times throughout the process as well as in all reports of the research.

I have read the information above, and any questions I posed have been answered to my satisfaction. I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

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Signature of Participant

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Date

## Appendix D

### *Forms*

1. Interview Protocol Form
2. Document Review Form







## VITA

Jane Ellen Galloway Robison was born January 29, 1950, in Jonesboro, Arkansas. She grew up on a university campus where her father taught history for more than 35 years, instilling in her a love for education. She graduated in 1972 with honors from Arkansas State University, earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art with an emphasis in Printmaking. Several years after moving to Springfield, Ms. Robison completed courses for teacher certification in Art and English, and taught art in the Springfield Public Schools. In 1995, she received a Master of Arts in English from Missouri State University.

Ms. Robison taught writing courses at Missouri State University and Evangel University. In 1996, she was requested to develop an intensive English program for international students at Missouri State University. She has served as Program Administrator for the English Language Institute since its first classes in 1996. For a number of years she has been active in MIDTESOL, serving on the Board of Directors as State Representative, Vice President and Conference Chair, President, and Past-President.

Ms. Robison currently holds the office of secretary for Messiah Project, a not-for-profit Christian fine arts organization that she and her husband Lindsey founded in 1991. They have traveled to 23 countries, performed both abroad and locally, and met many wonderful people from other cultures. The Robisons are parents to two sons who have blessed them with four beautiful grandchildren.