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# International Education Consultants: An Examination of their Role in Admission and Enrollment of International Students at Private Secondary Institutions in the United States

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INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION CONSULTANTS:  
AN EXAMINATION OF THEIR ROLE IN ADMISSION AND ENROLLMENT  
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT PRIVATE SECONDARY SCHOOLS  
IN THE UNITED STATES

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PIM 74

A capstone paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of Arts in  
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**List of Abbreviations**

GATS: General Agreement on Trades in Services

IEC: International Education Consultant

IECA: Independent Educational Consultant Association

NACAC: National Association for College and Admission Counseling

NAIS: National Association of Independent Schools

TABS: The Association of Boarding Schools

U.K.: United Kingdom

U.S.: United States

WTO: World Trade Organization

## **Abstract**

Over the past ten years, the United States has seen a significant increase in the number of international students seeking a high school diploma from private secondary schools (Farrugia, 2014). Coinciding with this increase in international students is an increase in the use of educational consultants who help international students gain access to these schools. Little research has been done on what the relationship entails and the impact these consultants are having on U. S. private secondary schools international enrollment. Using a thematic analysis approach, this study looks at how consultants are involved in the international student admission and enrollment process at private secondary schools in the Eastern United States. The study and its findings are framed by human capital and social reproduction theory, which help us to better understand the relationship between educational consultants and their clients. The findings show that consultants play a significant and active role in admissions and enrollment, but that role depends on their relationship with the school. It was also found that consultants provide services to not only students but to schools. Those services include, but are not limited to, material verification, increasing access to less represented student groups and an overall increase in the number of international students. Moreover, this study addresses the ethical considerations of the relationship between schools and consultants.

*Keywords:* educational consultants, international students, private schools, secondary education

## **Introduction**

As a Domestic Programs Coordinator Intern at Student Cultural Exchange, I have gotten the chance to work closely with international students at the secondary level who attend boarding schools in the United States. Through my conversations with international secondary students and with the two directors of my organization, I began to develop an interest in this specific sector of international education. My interest grew from international students in general, to the admissions and enrollment practice of international students at secondary boarding schools in the U.S. In discussions with students and my directors, international education consultants (IECs) frequently surfaced as important actors when we discussed the admissions and enrollment process. The more I learned about them, both positive and negative, through online articles and conversations with colleagues, the more it prompted me to research the role of the educational consultant and to investigate their impact on the admissions and enrollment of international students at U.S. boarding schools.

Over the past ten years, there has been a significant increase in the number of international students seeking a high school diploma from private boarding schools in the United States. In 2004, that number was 16,000 (Marklein, 2014) but, it has since more than tripled to almost 49,000, as of October 2013 (Farrugia, 2014, p. 9) and continues to increase every year. Due to this increase, there has also been a rise in the number of international education consultants (IEC), who are considered part of the educational services industry and are also for-profit businesses. Consultants primarily work with students and schools to facilitate the process of international student placement at private schools in the United States, often for a large fee or commission. One source wrote that fees for consultancy service can go as high as \$50,000, but did not go into detail on what is included in that fee (Krantz & Meyers, p. 6, 2016). No official

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certifications or licensures are needed to become an IEC in the United States, and this has led to questions of ethics and the legitimacy of the profession (Grappo, 2012). This also means there is little oversight in the profession, including guidelines for relationships, services or fees. A recent study conducted by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) in 2015, stated that six out of ten secondary international students studying in the U.S. use an educational consultant.

Despite the high prevalence of consultant use, there is little to no literature that defines what the role and overall impact of these intermediaries are in international student admissions at private secondary schools. This study attempts to provide some insights into these important educational actors. Specifically, through my examination on this topic, I wish to illuminate the relationship between IECs their consumers. This study will examine the following question:

**Research question:** How are international education consultants involved in the international student admissions and enrollment process at select private secondary education institutions in the Eastern United States?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Human capital theory and social reproduction theory set parameters that help to frame the present study. According to Kubow and Fossum (2007), human capital theory suggests that investments in education result in returns at the individual and societal levels due to education directly contributing to economic development (p. 44). Parents who send their students to U. S. boarding schools invest a substantial amount of money into their child's education because many believe it guarantees big returns. Some international parents believe that a U. S. education may set their children apart from the masses of their home country and either enables them to maintain their position in the upper class or propel the students and their families towards the upper class. This investment in their children's future comes at a high price. The average

boarding school costs between \$40,000- \$55,000 a year, which usually includes tuition, housing, meals and student fees (USA Boarding Schools, 2014). At most schools' international students do not qualify for financial aid, so international students must have the available funds to pay the tuition in full.

The other theory relevant to the study is social reproduction theory. It was first posed by Karl Marx in his book, *Capital* (1867) and looks at social inequalities and the structures put in place to maintain those inequalities, making the wealthy more likely to produce wealthy offspring and the reverse to be true as well. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) went further with this theory and stated that the wealthy produce the wealthy because they have developed financial, social and cultural capital, which are necessary components for social reproduction. Pertinent to this study is financial capital, which is related to monetary gains, and social capital, which is defined as a network of relations that generate trust, establish expectations and create and enforce norms (Phillips, 2002). This theory coincides with the idea that wealthy international students are able to study in the U.S. because of their financial and social capital, which enables them to have the money and the networks needed to gain access to the world of U.S. private boarding schools. I will use both of these theories throughout my analysis to ground and frame my findings. In the following section, I will present a synopsis of the available relevant literature.

## **Literature Review**

The information outlined below is a preliminary literature review of consultant's role in the admissions and enrollment process of international students at secondary boarding schools in the United States. I began my preliminary research by going to the website of the Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA) per the suggestion of my organization's director. This website has information for and about educational consultants, with a specific library of

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resources dedicated to the international practice. From there I took the search to SIT's EBSCO Host database search. I searched the terms "educational consultant," "international education consultants," "educational agents," and "private secondary education" with no success. I decided to use alternate wording and found a few articles using the search terms: "international education agents," "international student recruitment," "secondary international student recruitment" and "boarding schools and international students." After the database search, I felt dissatisfied with the results and decided to do a Google search of "international education consultants." This search brought up many professional organizations, blogs and business websites that aided in my review of the current literature. My preliminary search results clearly show the lack of professional academic literature written about educational consultants, in sharp contrast to the wealth of information on business websites and professional organizations. This incongruity demonstrates the focus of the consulting industry which is the commercialization of education. This further strengthens the argument for more academic engagement on the subject.

The industry of international educational consulting is an emerging market and little has been written about its practices. As I will present in greater detail below, beginning in the early 2000's, the United States saw an increase in the number of international secondary students attending private boarding schools, most notably from Asia. The majority of these students and their parents are seeking a U.S. diploma in order to better prepare themselves for future higher education in the U.S. With this increase in international students, there has also been a rise in the number of international educational consultants working in the U. S. context. The use of consultants in other receiving countries, such as Australia and the U.K. is a relatively established practice in comparison to that of the U. S. as it dates back as early as the 1990's (Hulme, Thomson, Hulme & Doughty, 2012). An educational agent, as defined by Krasocki (2002), is an

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“individual, company, or other organization providing services on a commercial basis to help students and their parents gain places to study programs overseas” (p. 3). Many IECs are seen as intermediaries and work with families and/or schools to help navigate the complicated process of placing international students at boarding schools. The primary difference between educational consultants and educational agents is that consultants do not accept a commission from a school or institution for student placement, instead, they receive payment directly from the families that they work for, as opposed to agents who collect a commission from a school or institution for student placement (Lakeside College School, 2014). For the purpose of this study, I will use “consultants” to refer to both consultants and agents commensurate with the conventions of the existing literature.

IECs have faced scrutiny over the legitimacy of their profession. Some experts have stated that the use of agents has been, and possibly remains, one of the most controversial aspects of current business practices in the recruitment of international students (Vincent-Lancrin & Pfothenaur, 2012, p. 17). In 2011, the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) in the United States banned American universities from partnering with commercial recruitment agencies to boost international enrollment, however, that ban was later lifted in 2013 (ICEF Monitor, 2013). In the United States and some other countries, the profession does not require a special license or certification which, in turn, means that as of this writing there are no set standards or a governing body to which consultants are accountable. In contrast, the use of agents in Australia and the U.K. is a relatively established practice (Hulme, Thomson, Hulme & Doughty, 2012). For example, the British Council developed a strategy to work with agents as partners and to increase the quality and effectiveness of agents working on behalf of U. K.

providers (Hulme et al., 2012). Clearly, IECs are part of the ever-growing educational services industry and as such may have a significant impact on international student mobility.

Understanding the current international secondary student population is a key component to my research question. A study published in 2014 by Christine Farrugia, in conjunction with the Institute of International Education, produced a report about international secondary students studying in the United States. Her report stated that as of October 2013, there were over 73,000 international secondary students studying in the United States (p. 9). Nonetheless, this number of students accounts for less than one percent of the total enrollment of secondary students in the United States (Farrugia, 2014, p.9). The majority of these students, 67%, held F-1<sup>1</sup> Visas and were directly enrolled in a U.S. high school (Farrugia, 2014, p. 9). According to the same source, the remaining held J-1<sup>2</sup> Visas and were involved in short-term study or exchange programs. Ninety-five percent are enrolled at private schools, with the number one sending country being China, followed by South Korea and then Germany (Farrugia, 2014). The sending countries only vary slightly with those of Post-Secondary Education in the U.S. California, New York, and Florida are top host states for international private secondary students (Farrugia, 2014), which again, only vary slightly with those of Post-Secondary Education host states.

Although this report provides greater insight into the mobility linkages between secondary and post-secondary international students and the numbers of students currently studying at the secondary level, it does not speak to the process of international student recruitment or enrollment. On the contrary, a 2015 survey on international students done by the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS) offers more detailed information about

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<sup>1</sup> F-1 visa is a non-immigrant visa issued to students who wish study in the US.

<sup>2</sup> J-1 visa is a non-immigrant visa issued to individuals to participate in work and study exchange programs.

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international students studying at independent schools. (Please note that boarding schools fall under the category of independent schools). The purpose of the NAIS (2015) survey was to better understand how international students are included and supported in independent schools with a special focus on understanding how international recruitment is practiced and the challenges of admissions and enrollment associates. NAIS received completed surveys from a total of 268 admissions officers at independent schools with students aged K-12 and 9-12 grades. Of the admissions officers, 67 % indicated that they enroll international students at their school (NAIS, 2015). Of those that do enroll international students, 63 % stated that their school works with agents, although it was not specified in what capacity they work with agents (NAIS, 2015). In addition, the biggest challenges that were cited by schools that work with international students were homestays, followed by working with agents and admissions (NAIS, 2015). Unfortunately, the report did not go into greater detail on the specifics of what the challenges of working with agents and admissions were.

This 2015 NAIS survey is useful because it highlights the prevalence of schools that work with agents and then cites one the biggest challenges as working with agents, but as previously stated does not elaborate on what those challenges are. Nor does the survey go in depth about the involvement of the agent in the process. There have been at least two publications on the use of agents in international recruitment (Zhang & Serra Hagedorn, 2011; Hulme et al., 2012) but none pertaining to the secondary level. Both of the aforementioned publications pertain to higher education and specific countries experiences with consultants. Below, I will provide a more comprehensive summary of the previously mentioned publications.

The first publication, “Trading Places: The Role of Agents in International Student Recruitment from Africa” by Hulme et al. (2012) provides an overview of the international trade

in educational services which is officially recognized in the World Trade Organization's (WTO) General Agreement on Trades in Services (GATS). Many experts say that GATS has contributed to the commodification of higher education. The publication then goes to share the results of a small-scale study conducted by a British university about their use of educational agents in Sub-Saharan Africa, addressing why they employ agents, how universities assess the value of agents and how students perceive the value of agents. Findings indicated that agents had access to markets that universities would not otherwise be able to access and for this, both universities and students saw the value of agents as brokers (Hulme et al., 2012). The publication also concluded that, "agents are a symptom and effect of commercialization in higher education" (Hulme et al., 2012, p. 685).

The second (2011) study entitled, "College application with or without assistance of an agent: Experience of international Chinese undergraduates in the U.S." by Zhang and Serra Hagedorn illuminates the reasons Chinese undergraduate students chose or did not choose to work with an educational agents. Of the 257 respondents to the study, 57 % reported using an agent while 43 % reported they were not assisted by an agent in the application process (Zhang & Serra Hagedorn, 2011). The main reasons that Chinese students chose to work with an agent were 1) lack of knowledge of the college application process followed by 2) lack of knowledge of the visa application process (Zhang & Serra Hagedorn, 2011). Those individuals who did not use an agent cited the following reasons: 1) they were capable of applying on their own and 2) they did not trust agents' services. Additionally, the publication reported that those students who did use agents expected the agent to contact personnel, help with college application materials, give advice on college placement and help with visa materials (Zhang & Serra Hagedorn, 2011). In the end, of the individuals who did use the agents, 70 % were satisfied with their services and

also many stated they would recommend their agent to a friend (Zhang & Serra Hagedorn, 2011, p. 14).

Although both of the above publications that I presented offer valuable insights to the relationship between universities and agents as well as student and agents, both publications focus on higher education and are country-specific. The educational level in which the consultant is practicing and the specific country can have a vast influence on involvement and relationships with IECs and their consumers.

In summary, the review of the literature describes how the U.S. has seen an increase in the number of international students studying at private secondary schools, the majority from Asia for the purpose of obtaining a U.S. high school diploma and often using a hired consultant. Consultant use is a relatively new phenomena in the U.S. at the secondary level but is more established in other countries. In the studies that have been published on consultant's relationship with their clients, consultants are generally seen as favorable and people are satisfied with their services. Additionally, while there is information available on international secondary students and there is information on IEC's there is not sufficient information that combines both topics. More information is needed to fully understand what impact the consulting industry could have on international student mobility. I anticipate that this study will contribute new learning to the field of international education, most notably at the secondary level.

## **Research Design**

I used a qualitative approach to address the research question, “How are international education consultants involved in the international student admissions and enrollment process at private secondary education institutions in the United States?” I employed the strategy of triangulation, which is defined as using multiple data sources, multiple points in time and a variety of methods to create a picture of the topic that is being investigated (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). This helped to ensure the credibility and thoroughness of the study. In the following paragraphs, I will provide a more in-depth explanation of the study’s design process.

### **Data Collection**

The primary method that I used to collect data was semi-structured interviews. I held a series of semi-structured interviews with educational consultants that are based both in the U.S. and abroad. Additionally, I used the same method to interview international admissions officers, directors of admissions, and international student coordinators currently working at U. S. boarding schools in the eastern United States. Hereafter in this paper international admissions officers, directors of admissions and international student coordinators will be referred to as “school associates” for participant privacy. I elected to interview both consultants and school associated in order to understand individual perspectives and generate meaningful, diverse and descriptive data. I chose semi-structured interviews to allow for new knowledge to emerge based on how the interviewee chose to answer the question (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The sampling strategy I employed to select participants was a mixture of snowball and convenience sampling (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), based on contacts through my practicum organization and the SIT community. I obtained written permission from my practicum organization for the approval to use their contacts for research purposes only (See Appendix A). All interviewees that I contacted through my practicum organization were informed that this study was not related to the

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practicum organization and was for educational use. Interviewees signed consent forms prior to participating in the interviews to inform them of their rights as a participant (See Appendix B). All interviews with educational consultants and school associates were recorded on my personal iPhone 6 using “Voice Memos” or my personal iPad mini using “My Memos.” After each interview had been completed, I transcribed the dialogue using my personal computer. Prior to fieldwork, the study’s research design received approval from SIT Graduate Institute’s Institutional Review Board through the submission of an Expedited Human Subject Review.

In total, I contacted 10 educational consultants via email and phone for inquiries into interviews. Of those contacted, I was able to conduct two in-person interviews, one using Skype, another using the phone application WeChat and the last via phone call. Both in-person interviews were conducted at the consultant’s office. One in-person interview had two consultants present at the time, while the others were individual interviews. One consultant agreed to speak with me on Skype but after three attempts on my part did not return my follow-up emails to schedule a time. Four consultants did not respond to my emails nor answer or return my phone calls. Below is a table that provides more details on the educational consultant interview participants.

**Table 1: Consultant Interview Participants**

Participants	Company	Location of Consultant	Duration of Interview	Means of Interview
Consultant A <sup>3</sup> Consultant B	Company A <sup>4</sup>	United States	37 minutes	In-person
Consultant C	Company A	Singapore	22 minutes	Skype
Consultant D	Company A	China	18 minutes	WeChat
Consultant E	Company B	United States	24 minutes	In-person
Consultant F	Company C	United States	14 minutes	Phone Call

As previously stated, the consultants were asked a series of semi-structured interview questions (See Appendix C). On average, the interviews with educational consultants and agents lasted 22 minutes, with one being as short at 13 minutes, while another lasting as long as 37 minutes.

In contrast, I was able to be in contact with more schools for this study than educational consultants. I contacted a total of 13 school associates from 12 different boarding schools located in New England, the Mid-Atlantic and the Great Lakes Region of the U.S., for characteristics and a description of each participating school please refer to Table 3. Of those contacted, I interviewed nine school associates, two of which were from the same school, but worked in different departments, for a complete list of titles of those associates interviewed (See Appendix E). Only three school associates did not return my emails or phone calls. Additionally, one school associate did agree to be interviewed but due to scheduling conflicts was unable to do so. The majority of interviews were conducted via phone call or Skype and a consent form was sent prior or directly following the interview for the participant to sign. I was able to conduct two in-

<sup>3</sup> Consultant A & Consultant B participated in a joint interview

<sup>4</sup> Company A has three separate offices and locations. All offices and locations operate under the same company

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person interviews, both of which took place at the respective schools. Similarly in interviews conducted with educational consultants, I asked school associates a series of semi-structured questions, but the average interview was much shorter, lasting on average 12 minutes. Below are two tables, the first, a table that provides more details on the school associates interview and the second is a table that gives more details on the schools in which the school associates I interviewed were employed.

**Table 2: School Associates Interview Participants**

<b>Participants</b>	<b>School</b>	<b>School Location</b>	<b>Duration of Interview</b>	<b>Means of Interview</b>
School Associate A	School A	New England	35 minutes	In-person
School Associate B	School B	Mid-Atlantic	7 minutes	Phone
School Associate C	School C	New England	18 minutes	Phone
School Associate D	School D	Great Lakes Region	11 minutes	Phone
School Associate F	School F	New England	11 minutes	Skype
School Associate G	School G	New England	25 minutes	In-person
School Associate H	School H	New England	8 minutes	Phone
School Associate I	School H	New England	11minutes	Phone

**Table 3: Participant School Profiles**

School	Location	Total Enrollment	Grades offered	School Type	% international students	% of students boarding	Yearly Tuition (boarding students)
A	Rural, New England	230	9 – 12, PG <sup>5</sup>	Co-ed, non-denominational	23	74	\$52,900
B	Rural, Mid-Atlantic	366 (9-12) 636 (PreK-12)	Pre K-12, (boarding 9-12 only)	Co-ed, Quaker	10 (9-12)	78 (9-12)	\$55,240 (upper school, 9-12)
C	Rural, New England	345	9-12, PG	Co-ed, non-denominational	22	70	\$55,400
D	Rural, Great Lakes Region	115	9-12, PG	Boys, non-denominational	34	98	\$52,460
E	Township, New England	250	9-12, PG	Co-ed, non-denominational	25	75	\$53,600
F	Rural, New England	240	9-12, PG	Co-ed, non-denominational	20	80	\$51,500
G	Rural, New England	142	7-12, PG	Girls, non-denominational	35	65	\$56,600
H	Rural, New England	650	9-12, PG	Co-ed, non-denominational	25	80	\$54,700

### Limitations

There are inherent limitations to the present study. These limitations include, but are not restricted to, the limited sample size, the absence of involvement of students 13-17 who have or have not used an IEC, the inability to speak with parents of students who have or have not used an IEC, willingness of consultants and school associates to speaking candidly with me, strong regional focus of the schools and the consultants and lastly the general time constraint that as a

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<sup>5</sup> Post-Graduate, similar to a gap-year

researcher I was given to work within. Also, the perceptions included below come from a particular set of sources and those perceptions cannot be generalized. That being said, the perceptions will still introduce new information to the field of international education, specifically at the secondary level because of the unique perceptions that will be captured by individuals currently working directly in the field.

### **Presentation and Analysis of Data**

As previously mentioned, I interviewed six consultants and nine school associates, for a total of 15 participants. For my presentation of data, I will be using a thematic analysis (Glesne, 2011), highlighting themes and patterns that were found in both interviews with school associates and those of interviews with consultants. I will also show differences in the data I received from school associates and consultants. To protect the identities of the participants, all schools and all school associates were assigned a letter. Consequently, all school associates are identified as School Associate A- I, and all schools are assigned the corresponding letter from their school associate. Consultants are cited as Consultant A-F, with their corresponding company noted as Company A-C. For further clarification, please refer back to Tables 1 and 2. The coding for this data was aided by the use of the software Dedoose. In the findings section below, I will connect the data back to the Theoretical framework throughout the ‘Presentation and Analysis of Data’ and ‘Discussions’ section of the study.

### **Findings from Interviews with School Associates**

During the coding of the nine interviews, certain themes emerged that were true for all schools that participated in the study. That being said, there were also differences and opposing information that schools presented to me. That opposing information shows the complexity of the industry and a schools’ relationship with consultants. In the following section, I will explain

the findings of the study in narrative form. I will present the findings by major theme starting with understanding international student populations, then moving to looking at student populations who use consultants with the greatest frequency. From there I will focus on the schools' relationship with the consultants and then I will examine the findings of the perceived impact a consultant has on student admission to a school.

### **International Student Populations**

To begin all my interviews, I asked the associates where the majority of their international students were from. It was important for me as an interviewer to know the makeup of their international student population because I found this is an important factor in consultant use. Not surprisingly, of the nine school associates interviewed, eight said the majority of their international students, were from Asia, specifically mainland China. This aligns with the literature, for as of 2015, China had close to 32,000 secondary students studying in the U. S. (Krantz & Meyers, 2016) the highest of any sending country population. Other large international student populations that associates referenced were from South Korea, Japan, Canada, Spain, Mexico, and Germany.

Although the majority of schools cited mainland China as their biggest sending country, maintaining diversity in the international student body was a high priority for all of the study participants. As one associate stated, "We have 46 countries on campus. We like to have a diverse mix for all students, whether they are international or domestic." A different associate explained it as: "By design, we're from about 25 countries because the percentage [of international students] is one thing, but you have to have diversity among that percentage. You can't have 25 percent from two different countries, that's not ideal for us." Associate G (School

G), spoke at length about the struggles to maintain diversity in their international student population and had this to say about applicants from China:

It is a hard balance because we get so many applications from China and all of them can pay the full tuition and they are often really strong candidates that have good English and are really interested in the school and we just get this huge volume but we don't want to overwhelm the student body in one way or another. You just don't want to have too much of one [group] because it makes people separate from each other.

Many other associates felt similarly about the Chinese population. For example, one claimed that they receive 300 Chinese applicants for three or four spots each year (Associate B, School B).

This example can be linked back to human capital theory and the investments that many Chinese families are willing to make in their child's education, even with such a slim chance of getting a spot. According to the participant, the low number of Chinese students accepted at schools was not always the case. Around eight years ago, schools began to actively recruit Chinese students, but now that they have a surplus of them, schools are beginning to go in the opposite direction.

One school associate stating that they pay a company that does preliminary interviews for Chinese students, to "weed out" those not qualified.

### **Student Populations who use Consultants**

Findings from this study provide evidence to support that the majority of Asian students use an educational consultant to gain entry to U.S. boarding schools. Some schools participating in this study cited as many as 85 % of Asian students use them, while the overall international student population usage estimated by school associates was around 50-60 %. One associate stated, however, that 90% of her international students had a consultant that they worked with. Moreover, according to study participants many students from Spain, Mexico, and Germany also use consultants with a high frequency, although their reason for use is usually different from Asian students. School associates that I interview said that students from the aforementioned

countries most commonly use consultants because students they are typically studying abroad in the U. S. for one year through an exchange program and not seeking a diploma, as opposed to Asian students who usually are in the U.S. for long-term study.

When I asked School Associate F (School F) why he thought Asian students used consultants with a higher prevalence than other world regions, he responded by saying, “because of the language barrier and because they want to rely on someone who claims they at least have the experience placing students in the boarding school [*sic*] in the United States... their parents come from the upper and upper-middle class.” The last part of the quote again aligns with the conceptual framework I outlined previously, human capital theory, and the idea of investing resources into education for individual and societal returns.

### **Schools that pay or do not pay a Consultant**

All schools stated that they worked with consultants in some capacity, but that capacity varied from working with them only because students’ families hired them to schools paying consultants for bringing students. Of those school associates interviewed, approximately half stated that they pay consultants for bringing them students, under the condition that the student they bring enrolls. The other half said that they do not pay consultants to bring them students and one associate was unsure of what their school’s practice was.

Of those that do pay consultants their reasons varied, such as to help bring in students from diverse countries, boosting international enrollment, and having long-standing, trusting relationships with consultants. One associate had this to say about paying consultants and agents:

There’s certain countries where schools will actually give a percentage to a consultant if it means getting a kid from Kazakhstan or a real outlier.... Spain, Kazakhstan, potentially we will consider it with certain Latin American countries .... That’s where some of our expense goes. I just came back from a tour of Latin America with an educational consultant that we don’t pay per se a percentage to, but we spend a lot of

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effort on that program and commitment and they are there taking us around to meet families and giving us access so there's different ways that we work with consultants. Some you pay a percentage and some we use them for using their fairs, their networks. (School Associate C, School C)

Another example of a school paying consultants is outlined below, this quote supports the previous associate's in stating that they only pay for diverse areas:

There are five organizations that we work with that they get the first year, it's ten percent, the second year it's five percent of the student's tuition, but not until that student has paid the full amount. And those are in areas that we want to see more representation. (School Associate E, School E)

Although many schools seem content to pay consultants to bring them students, others are not.

An Associate at a different school stated that they signed a multi-year contract with two organizations that they must pay a fee to but now seem unhappy with the arrangement:

We only have two companies that we do work with that we pay a fee to, we entered into agreements with them before I was here a couple of years because our enrollment was pretty low and we really wanted to kind of boost the international population, so they signed multi-year contracts with two organizations. They aren't our favorite people to take [students] from because of the fee and because of the fact that one of the companies doesn't allow us to connect with the students or parents directly. (School Associate G, School G)

Of the three associates that stated they do not pay consultants and agents to bring them students, one gave a clear reason as to why they do not do this practice. School Associate A (School A) said, "We do not pay consultants because they are already getting paid. This is a common ethical debate in our world. We do not need consultants, we can stand on our own two feet." In the interviews, a few associates mentioned the ethical dilemma behind consultant usage and felt conflicted about the practice. "I find some that double dip and some will charge the school five percent, then they'll charge the family ten grand and you think, 'oh my god, is there a conflict of interest?'" said School Associate C (School C).

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The ethics behind paying someone to bring students to a school can be seen as a gray area at best and brings up questions of why a school really needs to do this. This is an important aspect of the consulting relationship with certain schools and due to a lack of oversight and governing body in the industry can make cases of exploitation and conflict of interest common place.

### **Schools' Relationship with Consultant**

I asked all interviewees what their relationship was like with consultants, asking, for example, how much contact they had with them, what services they provide to the schools, etc. These relationships varied based on a number of factors, including: associate position, school, time of year and the particular consultant. Some participants stated that the relationship and contact depended on the consultant, while others stated they had a lot of contact and others said they had very little.

As illustration, a participant that said the relationship and contact really depended on the consultant had this to say regarding their relationship:

I think it depends. Some consultants are very proactive for families. It really depends on where they are, how many clients they have and how serious they take their job. In my experience, all of the consultants that I have worked with have been pretty professional and persistent in making sure that we have all the information necessary. (School Associate H, School H)

Similarly, a different associate said that she had quite a bit of contact with consultants: “The consultant is directly involved through that whole process, making sure all the I’s are dotted and the T’s are crossed. They’re confident that I really know the student as they are going through the process” (School Associate E, School E). Two associates mentioned that smaller agencies or independent consultants that act as guardians for the students have the most contact

with the school and will usually keep contact throughout the students' academic career. "There's quite a bit of contact maybe because [some] they are within an hour away and they like to come to campus and check on their kids," said School Associate D (School D) in reference to consultants that act as guardians.

On the other hand, there were school associates that were quick to point out that the relationship with the consultant should be limited and should focus more on the student and their families. "It's limited. You have to be careful that you are connecting with that student applicant and learning more about them first hand than through someone that was essentially hired by them," said School Associate B (School B). Other associates echoed this sentiment, saying that the consultant helps a lot, but it's really about the student and their family and if a student is not right for the school a consultant will not be able to help them get in.

The level of involvement in the process is important to recognize. It again brings up the question of how much impact the consultant is having on the admissions process and if there is too much involvement. A school's and consultant's relationship is ultimately up to those involved and only they can decide what is appropriate for their relationship.

### **Impact a Consultant has on Student Admission**

At the heart of this study, I wanted to know if the consultant really had an impact on student admission to the school, so I asked all interviewees to speak about the impact that they noticed, if any. While the majority of schools expressed that a consultant has no impact at all on whether or not a student is admitted to the school, others had very different opinions on the impact. For example, one associate had this to say on the impact of a consultant on admission at this school:

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None at all, I think it has to do with the students and the family. It really comes down to are they qualified as far as what we're looking for, with grades and testing and extracurriculars, everything along that line but also their interest level for our school. Yeah I think if the consultant is constantly bring[ing] us students that are in the pool of consideration for us that's great, we take that into consideration each year but it doesn't weigh on our decision one way or another. (School Associate H, School H)

Another associate said this about the impact, "really none, they will make a referral and it's not because of the agency that we say we will accept the student they still have to go through the same interview process and we make the determination." Other school associates had similar answers, one even citing that they have had a particularly negative past experience with a consultant, and for that reason the impact at times a consultant may have on admissions could be negative:

We know we've all been burned occasionally, where we have had proprietary information with an education consultant and they released it early or they're doing something to figure it out. There are educational consultants that we distrust and we have said, "Let's not work with that consultant anymore." (School Associate D, School D)

Associate E gave a very different perspective on the impact a consultant has on admissions to their school. This participant commented:

I would say if there are two students that have the same profile and I only have one spot left, I would probably lean towards the student with the consultant because I know I have probably had more interaction with that person and have additional knowledge on the student than I would otherwise not have. That student was referred to us for a reason, especially if it's a consultant that I've worked with for a long time... that certainly will impact the decision for me. (School Associate E, School E)

In addition to having no impact or quite a bit, a third opinion emerged on the impact of consultants and agents on student admission, stating that they help in more in-direct ways:

In terms of getting the student into the school, yes, they have the experience packaging the students to be good at interviews, to be looking at small details, like follow up thank you notes, gifts to the teachers when they visit the school, asking intelligent questions. I think educational consultants make a positive impact on making the students more competitive. (Associate F, School F)

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School Associate F's statement directly ties with human capital theory because families are paying for their student to be packaged by consultants. Another associate stated that the consultants' role is to help craft an appropriate school list for that student's level of academic success and also taking into consideration what they are looking for out of the experience. This role of theirs indirectly impacts student acceptance because they make sure the student is applying to the right schools in the first place and understands the differences between all the schools. I believe that a consultant has more of an impact on student acceptance than many schools would like to admit, which is clear in the way that many associates answered the question.

In my findings from interviews with school associates, it is clear to see that consultants play an important part in the international student admissions and enrollment process at U.S. secondary schools, but that part changes from school to school. Some of the most significant findings include that all schools work with consultants in some capacity, whether they are through students' families or hired and paid by the schools themselves. Diversity among international students is similarly a high priority for many school associates and some will pay consultants to bring them students from less represented countries. Also, the impact a consultant has on student admissions at a school depends on the school. The majority of school associates viewed consultants as generally positive and helpful. Although there were some associates who were vocal about the ethical dilemmas and sometimes negative aspects of using consultants.

### **Findings from Interviews with Consultants**

In order to gain a more comprehensive perspective of how consultants are involved in the process of international student admissions and enrollment at private secondary schools in the U.S., I interviewed six consultants. The use of various research methods also serves to

triangulate the data. The relevance of the conceptual frameworks of human capital theory and social reproduction theory became even more evident in my interviews with consultants. Once again I will present my findings my major themes starting with the services that consultants provide to families and then the services they provide to schools, continuing on to the theme of their impact on school admissions. Lastly, I will share my findings on the criticism. Before turning my attention to the findings, I provide a brief description about the consultants involved in this study.

To begin the interviews with consultants I asked a few questions regarding their customer base, if they were members of any professional organizations, and how long they had worked in the industry. All of the consultants that I interviewed had similar answers to the above questions, with the exception of how long they had been working in the industry. All six professionals' primary customer base was located in mainland China and Hong Kong. None were members of any professional associations related to the profession, all stating that because they primarily work with Chinese families this was not necessary. The majority of those interviewed had been working in the industry less than five years, the longest started ten years ago. I now turn my attention to the findings.

### **Services Provided to Families**

To establish specifically what the consultants do, I asked each interviewee what their primary role is in working with the family and what services they provide. Due to the fact this is a small sample size of participants, I cannot generalize beyond the work of the participants in this study but knowing what these participants do provides insights into what others in the same profession may do and illuminates the topic. Consultant C (Company A) gave a detailed answer regarding what his company does:

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We provide the whole consultancy, the whole package, for example, you come to me today and I will interview the kid and I will evaluate them, get all the information and select the right fit school for him and help him through the whole application process... the essays and help them get teacher recommendations, whatever needed to put the application together to best present the student then we will submit the complete application for them. And after they are accepted, we pay the deposit, fill out medical forms and do F-1 visa ... Our job is working for our families, we represent and advocate for our students to boarding schools. If they are on the wait list we have to fight for them.

Consultant B echoed what is stated above and added that part of their job is to educate families about U.S. boarding schools.

We try to get them [students] as early as possible so we can steer them to different programs in the U.S. that we think they would benefit from. A lot of these families will just want to do SAT or TOEFL test prep and they're really focused on testing and testing results in China, so it's a battle to get them to do other things and for them to see the benefit of other things and that's part of speaking the admissions officers language. (Consultant B, Company A)

From Consultant C and B's description, it's clear to see consultants do a lot for the student and their families. Not only do consultants provide logistical support and complete paperwork, they all stated that a lot of their work is supporting the student and educating the family about schools in the U.S. For instance, "there is a lot of support because I contact the mother and father, so it's not just with the student it's also the whole family... Sometimes they don't understand the process it takes and how it's not just about the grades and school rankings," said Consultant F.

Different from the previous consultant's answers, Consultant E referred to what he does as more of a guardianship rather than a consultant and approached his work in a holistic manner. He explained:

I would say that consulting is a small part of what we do... We act as guardians. We bring kids over and we help them to find an appropriate school, we assist them in getting accepted by a school, which is difficult these days and then this is their home base for the

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entire time they go to secondary school. We attend parent teacher conferences, we get involved in just about everything they do. (Consultant E, Company B)

In Consultant E's holistic approach to consulting he is providing his customers with a form of social capital. He is providing them more than just access to a school, he is providing them almost a new, secure lifestyle. Essentially, his guardianship, trusting environment and network is what families are purchasing when they choose to work with him.

All the consultants that I spoke with performed the same basic services but some, such as Consultant E were more involved and continued involvement through the duration of the students' academic career. All were passionate about the work that they do and communicated that, above all, they believe that the students benefit the most from their services. This provides further validation for the work that they do and can be tied back to social capital that they are helping students to obtain.

### **Services Provided to Schools**

Although all the consultants that I interviewed stated that the main benefiter of their services are students, they did say that schools benefit in many ways. While each consultants relationship and the way in which they described the services they provided was unique common themes such as trust, reliability and knowledge of their individual students' needs emerged as benefits provided to schools.

A large part of what the consultants provide to the schools is trust and convenience. Consultant B stated that, "We believe the most important is not the ranking of the school, it's the right fit, so the school trusts us because they know the students we send to them have been interviewed and screened." This saves the admissions staff time, which another consultant mentioned as a valuable service they provide to schools. Consultant B continued:

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They have so many international students applying, I think consultants understand the application process. Consultants understand what is appropriate. Consultants might also say if there are schools that don't have Vericant (interview service for Chinese applicants) they might be reading applications of kids that would never get in and a consultant would probably filter that, like, 'don't apply to X school, there's no way you would ever get in in a million years'. (Company A)

Not only does a consultant save the admissions staff time by only referring students that are a correct fit, they sometimes verify materials because falsification of documents from China is common practice. One consultant had this to say:

Some admissions officers think Chinese material is fake, we verify their documents for admissions officers, we work with students for about a year and we know who is the best fit for those schools [sic] so we save admissions a lot of time and energy. (Consultant D, Company A)

Consultant E went into detail about his relationship with a school and what services he provides to them. He said:

There are several schools that we work closely with that basically let's put it this way, most boarding schools these days will let three or four Chinese in a year out of 237 applicants from China. So they're going to choose students whom they're met but the schools that we work with if they're looking for three or four students they will usually ask us, 'okay so how many students do you have for us X?' and if we have two students that we feel is appropriate for a particular school they will really highly consider those students because we understand the schools and we understand the kids. We only introduce kids that are appropriate for a certain school and the admissions directors know that and so if they need four students and we've got two, they'll take our two. So why do they do that? One, because they know that we know our students well, we're very straightforward with them in the strong points and the weak point. Number two, they know that the information that we give them is all correct and they know that the student once he or she arrives at their school that that student will be supported. (Consultant E, Company B)

Consultant E has a very unique and unusually close relationship to the school he describes above.

This type of relationship was not typical of the consultants that I interviewed. The school is placing an incredible amount of trust into this consultant to prioritize his clients above others, which asks the question of whether or not this is an ethical situation. This is, however, just one

example of just one of many types of relationships that a consultant can have with a school. Clearly consultants provide a valuable service to schools, saving the schools time and effort, whether it is in the form of verifying materials, screening students or organizing application materials.

### **Impact on Student Admission**

In contrast to Consultant E's experience above, most consultants that I interviewed did not express the ability to directly impact student admission acceptance to schools, such as being able to guarantee admissions or call a school directly to ask to let a client in. They did express, however, that everything they do to help the student, from test preparation, interview preparation, and essay writing, to advocating for students to admissions officers, aids in acceptance. Written below is Consultant C's feelings on her contribution to student admission acceptance:

I can say that the application we help students put together is the best representation of them, you can see the child while you read the essay, secondly you know that honesty and authentication is a big problem in China, so we guarantee that nothing has been made up, so I think that is already the first part of success. Secondly, we teach them how to present themselves and the last part is we do advocate for our students because my consultants [that I oversee] are very highly reputable and respected in the industry and it does help. It doesn't mean that they will get in if they are not qualified, but they trust our reputation. (Consultant C, Company A)

Her quote echoes what all the consultants I interviewed stated: there are no guarantees for students to get into a school, but a consultant is in a special position wherein they can call the school and advocate for their students, ultimately having an impact on the decision of the school. The reputation of the consultant's organization and the networks that the consultant maintain are forms of social capital. The aforementioned are only a few of the many examples of social capital that consultants possess in order to better serve their clients.

### **Criticism of the Industry**

Many times consultants get a bad reputation due to the lack of oversight in their profession. That said, throughout the interviews it was clear that the consultants that I interviewed were passionate about their work and may sincerely want to help the students and families they support. When I asked interviewees if that bad reputation was warranted, they all agreed it was, at least to a certain extent, but most were quick to say that it depended on the consultant or agency. One consultant had this to say about the profession in China:

Every agency is different, it's hard to be a clean consultant because you are competing against so many other very qualified candidates who want your job. It's hard to maintain a clean record because you really want to earn more money. Let me use my words carefully, in order to survive in the economy or in the competition, especially in China, I feel like a lot of times you have to do things that are borderline immoral or unethical. (Consultant F, Company C)

Another consultant agreed that the questionable reputation was warranted and stated that a lot of times consultants promise things that they cannot deliver, deceiving the students and the families:

I think it's very fair [of the criticism]. I think we have definitely seen that and I think there is a lot of consultants and I think there are a lot of agents who don't do it right and who promise a lot of things. (Consultant A, Company A)

From the six interviews I conducted with consultants, it is clear to see that they have an important role in international student admission and enrollment at U.S. boarding schools. However, data from this study shows that their role varies based on the consultant and the school. For instance, some have specific schools that they work very closely with, while others do not. In addition, consultants offer many services to their students and to schools, but for a consultant to be most effective, they must prioritize their students and families' needs in order to

find the best fit for their schools. This, at times, may introduce an ethical dilemma for the school or the consultant based on monetary incentives or other relationships. The importance of the ethical component of consulting is something that each consultant felt strongly about and some even struggled with. Educational consulting will continue to have a large and polarizing ethical dimension as long as professional standards are not explicitly set.

### **Discussion**

In the following paragraphs, I will explain the conclusions that can be drawn from the findings of the present study in greater detail. In addition, part of the discussion will be on the implications of secondary age international students studying in the U.S., and how it connects with the conceptual framework that I introduced at the beginning of this paper.

One of the most profound conclusions that can be drawn from this study is that, despite some ethical dilemmas that I have noted, participants agree that consultants provide a valuable service to both international students and their families and schools. They work for both families and schools, but for different reasons. Schools work with consultants to increase international student populations on campus and to help diversify the international student population by bringing students of less represented countries to schools. The long-standing relationships and the trust that has been built between some consultants and the schools lead many schools to assume that the consultant will bring them students that are verified and a good fit for the school, further exemplifying the value that many schools place on their collaboration with consultants. At the same time, families hire consultants to help navigate the complicated admissions process of private boarding schools and to ultimately gain admissions to those schools. Consultants facilitate and give access and opportunities to schools and students that would not otherwise be there. Consultants have or are perceived to have the social capital, which are the networks and

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the trust to place students that the students and families alone would not be able to access. Due to the fact that consultants possess the social capital, many families willingly invest a significant amount of time, effort, and financial resources into working with a consultant for the advantage that it can bring. This directly connects to human capital theory and the idea of investing in education for economical and societal gains – the gains in this case coming in the form a prestigious education in the U.S.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from the study is that consultants have varying relationships with schools. Some of these relationships are unique and most certainly have an impact on student acceptance to the school, while others do not. Those that do not have close relationships with schools show their impact in more indirect ways such as, test and interview preparation, and the crafting of appropriate school lists. Schools must be cautious in their relationships with consultants due to conflicts of interest and ethical dilemmas that may occur if relationships become too informal.

Finally, it should be stated that there is a need for more oversight of the profession, whether that be at a national or a more localized level. As previously mentioned, at present consultants do not need any certifications or licensures to practice, leading people to question their legitimacy (Grappo, 2012). Similarly, best practices are not yet firmly established and, therefore, there is no standard in relationships between schools and consultants, which gives room for rumors to grow about certain schools and consultants relationship that may or may not be true or ethical for that matter. The U.S. should look at other countries, such as the U.K. or Australia that have more established consulting practices (Hulme et al., 2012) as an example of how to improve oversight of this profession and its relationships.

### **Practical Applicability**

There are many practical uses for the information that emerged through this study. Organizations such as the National Association for Independent Schools (NAIS) and The Association of Boarding Schools (TABS) may benefit directly from this study as it demonstrates practices that are happening in their schools. It can be used as a starting point for those associations' own more in-depth research as to the relationships and practices. Also, as organizations like NAFSA: Association of International Educators become more interested in the influx of international students at the secondary level in the U.S. this information is helpful to them because it shows a small snapshot of what the practice currently is and how it could impact the future of secondary international education in the United States.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Much of the information that that this study produced will not surprise consultants or schools, but it might surprise international education professionals. This area of international education is getting more and more attention from outside the profession. For instance, there have been articles written by The Boston Globe (Krantz & Meyers, 2016), The Wall Street Journal (Millman, 2013) and USA Today (Marklein, 2014) in recent years about the growing international student population in U. S., all of which reference the use of consultants. Without a doubt, this is an important subject that needs further academic research to fully grasp future implications for the growing trend of younger international students in the United States.

While conducting this study, I encountered numerous questions that could not be answered from my inquiry alone. I suggest that a study be done on a larger scale, with the inclusion of consultants from outside of Asia. Another direction that research could take would be that of examining best practices and further exploring the ethical side of the relationship

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between schools and consultants. Additionally, I suggest research that includes families' and students' opinions about their relationship with consultants. Lastly, more studies should be done regarding the mobility linkages between those international students that study at the secondary level in the U.S. and those at the tertiary level.

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Appendix A



To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Jesse Friedman. I currently serve as the co-director of Student Cultural Exchange. For the past 4 months, Sarah Wiggins has done extraordinary work with Student Cultural Exchange as a part of her practicum through SIT.

As a part of her capstone, Sarah is planning on researching the role of educational consultants in international students journey to American high schools and colleges. We are more than happy to have Sarah reach out to our contacts in the boarding school world (and educational consultants) as a part of her research.

Please let me know any further questions you might have.

I can be reached at [jesse@studentculturalexchange.com](mailto:jesse@studentculturalexchange.com) if necessary.

Best,

Jesse H. Friedman

**Appendix B**

**Participant Consent Form**

*International Education Consults:*

*An Examination of their Role in the Admissions and Enrollment of International Students at Private Secondary Schools in the United States Education.*

You are invited to take part in a research study about the relationships between boarding schools and international education consultants. The study is being conducted by me, Sarah Wiggins, a student at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, VT. I am doing the study to complete requirements for my Master’s degree in International Education. Currently, I am a domestic programs coordinator intern as Student Cultural Exchange which provides break programs for international and domestic boarding school students.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked a series of interview questions that will take approximately 30 minutes. Please note that your name and identity will be kept confidential. Neither your name nor your organization/school will be made public in my study. All data will be recorded using voice memos on an iPhone. You may decline to be recorded if you choose. Recorded data will be kept on my private, home computer. All data gathered will be stored in a password protected folder on my personal computer.

You may ask to skip or decline to comment on any question that you are not comfortable with and you may decide to stop participating at any time. It should also be noted that you will not receive any benefits from taking part in this study. If you would like a copy of my capstone paper once it’s complete, please let me know and I will follow up accordingly.

If you have any questions about this study and/or your participation in it, please do not hesitate to contact me, Sarah Wiggins, at [sarah.wiggins@mail.sit.edu](mailto:sarah.wiggins@mail.sit.edu) (240) 253-7720 or my academic advisor, Karla Sarr, at [karla.sarr@sit.edu](mailto:karla.sarr@sit.edu) (802) 258 – 3521.

If you agree to participate in the study, please sign below:

Subject \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Questions for International Education Consultants:**

1. Title and Organization?
2. Are you a member of the Independent Educational Consulting Association (IECA), or another professional association, why or why not?
3. How long have you been working in the industry and how did you get started?
4. Where are the majority of your clients from and why are they seeking your services?
5. Do you charge a flat rate for your educational services or is it based off commission?
6. What is your primary role in working with international students and families? What sort of services do you provide to student and families?
7. What is your role/relationship in working with private boarding schools? What sort of services do you provide to schools?
8. Who benefits the most from your services and how do you know?
9. How do you think you contribute to student admission acceptance at a school?
10. Do you think it is possible to be accepted to a school without a consultant or agent?
11. How do you feel you contribute to the field of international education?
12. There are people who criticize consultants, saying that they may be taking advantage of international students and their resources. How would you respond to that criticism?
13. Where do you see the field of International Education Consulting in the next 5 years?

**Appendix D**

Titles of School Associates interviewed (in no particular order)

- International Student Coordinator
- International Admissions Director
- Director of Admissions
- Assistant Director of Global Programs/ Chinese Teacher
- Director of Admissions
- Director of Admissions
- Associate Director of Admissions, international coordinator
- Head of English department
- Director of Admissions

## Appendix F

### Interview Questions for Private Secondary School Associates:

1. School and Department?
2. How long have you been working with international students and how did you get started?
3. Where are the majority of your international students from?
4. What are the most common reasons for students to study at the secondary level in the United States?
5. Does your school work with international education consultants (IECs), why or why not?

If your school does work with IECs,

1. What percentage of international students have a consultant?
2. What is your relationship like with the consultant, for example how much contact do you have with him/her?
3. In your opinion, what impact does a consultant have on student admittance to your school, if any?
4. Do you think a consultant or agent is necessary to get accepted to a school?
5. What sort of feedback do you hear from students who work with IECs about their experience?
6. To your knowledge, does your school give any incentives to consultants, such as providing a commission?

If your school does not work with IECs,

1. What impact do you think not working with IECs has had on your school, if any?
2. Do you anticipate changing the policy in the future?
3. Do you have any misgivings about not working with IECs?