Recruiting firms help universities attract foreign students

By Chris Vetter
Chippewa Falls News Bureau

UW-Eau Claire is among UW System campuses that pay foreign agencies to help them recruit international students, and UW-Stout could soon join them.

Ten of the approximately 250 international students currently attending UW-Eau Claire were recruited by a firm specializing in that work, said Karl Markgraf, director of the Center for International Education at the university.

While UW-Stout is one of the system's 13 four-year schools that don't hire agencies to recruit international students, Hong Rost, director of director of the Office of International Education at UW-Stout, said that could be changing, as university officials agreed in November to allow Rost's office to work with recruiting firms.

"We don't have an official contract with one to pay them," Rost said. "So far we haven't paid an agent, but we are looking into the possibility of doing that."

Worth looking at

Attracting international students to universities not only can make those campuses more worldly, it also can mean big bucks for schools.

Paying agencies to attract international students to their campuses can cost universities more than $1,000 for each student agencies attract. But schools stand to gain money by attracting international students.

During a four-year period, an international student will spend about $68,000 in tuition, which translates to about $20 million for the school if there are 300 international students, Markgraf said.

"They pay a lot more money to come over here," Rost said.
However, paying commissions for each recruited international student is common yet controversial. It is banned within the U.S. but largely unregulated abroad.

Commission-based agents are motivated by money, not by making the perfect match between a student and a school, critics say. For example, agents working for Dickinson State University in North Dakota reportedly misrepresented themselves as employees of the school, giving students inaccurate information about majors and degree requirements. An agency hired by UW-Stevens Point allegedly falsified admissions information to get foreign students accepted into U.S. colleges. Stevens Point has since stopped using that company.

"It's something we would collectively, I think, agree is completely unethical here," said Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director at the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. "How does it become acceptable just because the targets are foreign nationals?"

Markgraf said UW-Eau Claire selects agents through an organization called ICEF, which connects educators with agents.

"All agencies we work with are licensed professionals, and they conform to the standards of ethics of ICEF. We interview the agents and train their staff to ensure they are selecting students of the quality that we want to enroll here," he said.

Setting goals

UW-Eau Claire, UW-Stout and most other universities hope to attract more international students to their campuses. UW-Stout has 207 international students, a figure Rost would like to see climb to 300. UW-Eau Claire has 250 international students, with a goal of growing that number to 300 by 2014, Markgraf said.

Like UW-Eau Claire, other state universities are paying agents to recruit international students. Some campuses, such as UW-Madison and UW-Whitewater, don’t use agencies while others, such as UW-Green Bay, UW-Oshkosh and UW-Superior, have between two and five active contracts with companies that bring in a handful of students — or in the case of Green Bay, none at all.

UW-La Crosse recruited 25 students through nine agencies while UW-Stevens Point brought about 100 students to campus through 13 agencies, although most are recruited for a program to study English as a second language.
The schools usually pay the agent some percentage of each recruited student's tuition, which ranges between $250 and $1,700.

Rost said agencies can help attract international students, particularly those with limited English skills, because they can adeptly help students fill out necessary paperwork and prepare them for studying in this country.

In addition, agencies can attract students who likely have never heard of colleges such as UW-Stout and UW-Eau Claire, Markgraf said.

"Working with agents brings an international student here who otherwise would not have come to our state," he said. "Also, working with agencies allows us to bring students from all regions of the world, thereby enhancing the diversity of our student body."

Having international students on campuses benefits everyone, Rost said.

"It's a learning experience. The world is getting smaller and smaller," Rost said. "Bringing international students here brings the world to UW-Stout."

Vetter can be reached at 715-723-0303 or chris.vetter@ecpc.com. The Wisconsin State Journal contributed to this report.