

Recruiting International Students: Decisions to Consider (Part One)

I don't know about you, but normally I don't know what's going on in the classroom next to mine, let alone classrooms in another country. Normally, I have no idea what goes on behind the scenes in administrative politics. This past year, however, was not a normal year for me. Instead of teaching science at **Montpelier High School**, I received funding to take the year off to explore how my school, a public school, could attract tuition-paying international students. Over the course of my paid sabbatical year, I've learned a great deal about the international education system and how public schools can take advantage of a world market of students. As a result of this work, my school has initiated an international program to attract tuition-paying students. Here are some things your school should consider if they wanted to try something similar.

Is it about the money?

First things first, the sound of adding "tuition-paying students" sounds great for our budgets, for our bottom line, but let's be clear. Money absolutely should not be the top reason to put energy into this endeavor. Yes, the money is nice, but if it's your top priority, that will shape the way your school designs its program. You may have seen some recent press about tuition-paying students flooding American high schools. Judge them as you will, sometimes it sounds like these schools have "sold out" and become meaningless-diploma-mills for the richest 1% of families in the world. However, some of these international programs are putting the students first and helping their international students succeed academically. What does this look like? For those schools dedicated to student success, it means only accepting those who they think will have a meaningful experience. It means vetting international transcripts prior to graduation. And it means purposefully celebrating and welcoming someone with a different background into their community. Even if it was about the money, if my school of 350 total students accepted 10 international students (probably the maximum we could realistically absorb in one school year) the tuition revenue would be about 1% of our total school budget. It's not going to substantially change what the school can do, and it's certainly not enough to relieve the burden on the taxpayers. Even if it did, I learned that it's not a good idea to get your tax base addicted to foreign money.

As the global economy and value of the dollar fluctuates from year to year, from one year to the next, a variable number of students may apply to attend an

American school. One year there may be 20 students, the next year there might be five. If a school has a substantial amount of money coming from international tuition-paying students, the resulting tax rate fluctuation can be confusing to the public. As I learned from one exemplary school, money brought in through international student tuition really ought to be earmarked for some one-time need that the school has. Otherwise, it artificially lowers the tax rate, and becomes a structural deficit that the community will have to make up in the long run.

So if money isn't the reason, what is?

Every school will have to answer this question for themselves, but here in Vermont, there are clearly some other benefits to inviting the world into our school. Vermont is one of the whitest states in the country. In 2010, 95% of Vermont's population was white, which makes our school, in which only 90% of the students are white, feel very diverse by comparison. All joking aside, our community recognizes diversity as a value. We want to give our students the opportunity to meet people with different backgrounds and life experiences. We want them to reach across societal barriers and build empathy with people who look, act and believe differently than they do, but it's hard to support that when the local community is so homogenous. As a result, our school is looking to find students from all over the world, not just a single country.

What about regular exchange students?

At this point, you may be thinking that international exchange students could bring the same kind of diversity to a school. While that is true, these students, typically here on J-1 visas, have paid some agency like American Field Service or the Rotary, neither the sending-families nor the agency pays the school anything. For this reason, many public schools have limits on the number of J-1 visa students they will accept, because basically the public is subsidizing their experience. As a result, my school only admits four J-1 visa students per year. Even with our small school of 350 students, that means that many of our resident students may never encounter the exchange students in their classes. By contrast, students on F-1 visas pay tuition to the school and potentially pay funds to a recruiting agency, and they are here for a primarily academic experience. So there's no financial reason to limit the number of F-1 students attending the school, and if diversity is a value, this is a way to get around the limit on the number of non-tuition-paying students.

To be fair, though money should not be the top reason for doing this, it's not that money is off our list of priorities entirely. With the money we receive from tuition-paying students, we're hoping to create a better orientation and support network for these students, so that the F-1 and J-1 international students and our resident populations can have a rich, healthy, international experience.

In part two of this post, I'll share tips on how to find international students and how to market your school.