

PART 6

COMMISSIONED AGENTS AND NACAC'S GUIDE TO ETHICAL PRACTICE SERIES

INSTITUTIONAL TRAINING, ONGOING SUPERVISION, AND STUDENT MONITORING

This is the final paper in a series of six NACAC resources designed to guide member institutions in the implementation of NACAC's *Guide to Ethical Practices in College Admission*, approved by the association's Assembly in September 2020.

This installment focuses on the institution's responsibility for training agents, providing ongoing support to agent partners, and managing the relationship, which includes appropriately handling improper behavior. Per the guide to ethical practices, "Colleges employing agents should: Disclose that they have employed agents to recruit on their behalf; Ensure that commissioned agents are accountable for employing ethical business practices; Respond quickly and decisively when responding to reports of misconduct of the agents representing them. (NACAC *Guide to Ethical Practices*, p. 9)

This paper is organized into four sections: 1) institutional training of agents, 2) creating an agency manual, 3) ongoing monitoring of agency activity, and 4) gathering student feedback.

Significant resources are necessary to ensure commission-based agents recruit students who are a good fit for your institution. Once your institution has vetted, selected, and contracted with agent partners, the hard work begins to ensure that the partnership is mutually beneficial. Developing a strategy that combines contractual and relationship management is the key to success when working with agents.

1. Institutional Training of Agents

It is important to commit to regular and frequent communication with agency partners. Agency personnel may be less likely to fabricate information or avoid answering students' questions when they can rely on quick responses to queries posed. Being proactive and responsive via email or phone reduces the risk of misrepresentation.

One essential element of communication is training. Institutions should conduct formal trainings of agency staff. Ensure agents receive thorough information about your institution, pertinent visa regulations, and the higher education system in the country or region in which your institution resides.

Due to frequent employee turnover at many agencies, regular training—ideally once per term or at least once per year—should be provided to agency partners. Remember that changes in agency staff should be reported to your institution, as stipulated in the contract. In addition to benefiting new agents, refresher trainings also serve experienced agency staff given the inevitable programmatic and operational changes at your institution and the fact that agents often represent a multitude of different schools.

Visit the agency's office and/or have agents visit your institution to conduct trainings and ensure the adequacy and currency of agents' knowledge. Trainings via teleconferencing and online communication platforms, along with companion PowerPoint presentations, can also be conducted.

2. Creating a Manual for Agents

A manual is a common component of the training and support materials institutions provide their agency partners. Among other benefits, an agency manual can reduce the risk of a contracted agency providing students misleading or false information.



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Components of a thorough agency manual include:

- an overview of the education system in the host country
- information about the institution, including points of distinction
- concept of fit, including institutional type in relation to the broader higher education landscape
- institutional policies and practices, including reference to NACAC's *Guide to Ethical Practice* and any policies that might not accord with existing cultural norms in other regions (e.g., gender equality)
- a description of the surrounding geographical area of the institution
- academic programs and calendar
- international student support services
- accommodations
- admission criteria, including English language proficiency
- admission process, timeline, and deadlines
- application procedures
- tuition and fees
- payment deadlines, refund deadlines, and conditions
- intensive English language coursework and/or conditional admission criteria
- new student orientation
- enrollment and attendance requirements and procedures
- student visa acquisition information
- ongoing immigration regulation requirements
- dedicated point of contact
- sample invoice between agent and institution
- agency requirements concerning application and communication protocols with your institution and with students, including transparency stipulations
- protocols for handling complaints
- importance of demonstrating respect for peer and other institutions.

It is important to routinely update the agency manual so that agency staff have access to current information. Some institutions maintain this resource online, either publicly or in a password-protected section of their website. This allows for real-time updates of important institutional details, such as new or discontinued programs; changes to admission criteria, deadlines, or tuition and fees; and other knowledge critical to ensuring your institution is accurately represented by agents.

Regardless of how it is delivered, an institution may wish to require agencies to acknowledge receipt of the manual and affirm their commitment to stay abreast of its contents. Also, for maximum clarity, consider translating the manual into the local language of the agency. Agency staff, including personnel doing student and parent advising, may have limited English language ability.

In addition to updating agencies via a dedicated webpage, consider distributing a newsletter to agency partners on a regular basis. This could also serve as an opportunity to feature the experiences of current international students at your institution.

3. Ongoing Monitoring of Agency Activity

When working with agencies it is essential to establish effective feedback loops. This starts with clearly communicating expectations via the contract and other interactions. Commit to monitoring and assessing the agencies working on your institution's behalf on a regular basis, such as each term or every six months.

Institutions are well-served when their assessment of agency performance is formalized in regular reports that are shared with key campus constituents. These reports can include student enrollment information and an assessment of the agency's

adherence to contractual terms intended to foster accountability, transparency, and integrity. Assess the caliber and fit of students recruited by agencies on the basis of admission and enrollment rates, as well as academic metrics such as grades, persistence, and graduation. It is also important to incorporate measures of student satisfaction. Consider benchmarking assessment data longitudinally, across agencies, and compared with international students who were not recruited by agencies. Your institution may also wish to supplement its own analysis and student feedback by requiring partner agencies to report on their activities to a designated campus official.

Regardless of how such assessments are conducted, it is imperative to take immediate preventive or corrective action if your institution becomes aware of any unprofessional conduct by an agency.

4. Gathering Student Feedback

An important way to determine how well an agency has performed is by asking the students it has served. Conduct student surveys, focus groups, and/or individual interviews to ensure students received what they were promised during the recruitment process. Agency-related questions can also be incorporated into existing student surveys. Share the feedback gathered with agent partners to afford them the opportunity to improve their work while reinforcing the importance of student protections. An agency's receptiveness to this feedback and its ability to act on it are important indicators of its commitment to good practice. Student feedback is also critical to ensuring that future students have a positive recruitment experience.

Ask students:

- To rate their overall satisfaction with working with the agency/agent, as well as satisfaction related to specific areas of service, such as:
 - quality and accuracy of information on the particular host country
 - knowledge of the university's application process and guidance in completing the application
- visa and immigration advice and assistance
- pre-departure orientation.
- Whether their experiences at your school matched the advisement they received from the agency prior to arrival.
- Which types of services the agency/agent provided.
- Whether the agency fees (if applicable) were felt to be appropriate.
- Whether they would recommend the agency to friends without hesitation.

