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Assessment of Chinese International Graduate Students' Experience Working with

Agents

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Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Master of Education in Higher Education

Degree, Merrimack College

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### **Abstract**

In the past fifteen years, the numbers of Chinese international students have increased rapidly across the United States in all types of institutions of higher education (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2015). This study explores the experience of Chinese international graduate students working with study abroad agents in China. In this qualitative semi-structured interview study, seven Chinese international students were interviewed. Students were asked x, y and z about their experience working with agents; several challenges of Chinese international students, including finding college information, Internet limitations, language barriers and limited time, and lack of knowledge of the application process. Based on the findings, several recommendations for improving the college marketing outreach and admission process were developed, including creating a pre-departure checklist, using established Chinese internet providers to share information, and adopting specific strategies to support Chinese students' academic success.

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### **Introduction**

China has become the country sending the most international students overseas for higher education (Choudaha, Chang, & Kono, 2013). According to *Open Doors 2015 Report*, the United States attracted 304,040 Chinese international students, 32 % of the total international student population during the academic year 2014-2015 (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2015). This was approximately 7% more from the previous academic year (Farrugia & Bhandari, 2015). Almost half of the total Chinese international students are enrolled in graduate level programs (42.1%) and matriculation (bridge) programs (3%) in the U.S. (Mahmood, 2015). Not all Chinese international students were able to complete their programs or matriculate to their desired programs. According to WholeRen Education, academic dishonesty or low academic performance resulted in approximately 8,000 Chinese students being expelled from U.S. colleges and universities since 2012 (Jacobs, 2015). These expulsions raise the question: how could Chinese students enroll in these programs with such low academic ability?

Part of the answer to this questions lies in the fact that many Chinese students' applications were not completed by the actual applicants. Some of them hired study abroad agents to complete their applications for them (Nylander, 2015). What is more, some Chinese parents are willing to pay agents to see that their children to be accepted to top U.S. universities. The agents were asked aggressively to "push" [cheat on] the student applications in order to get them into those universities (Marcus, 2013). Study abroad agents work for commission from the student abroad agencies. It is in their best interest to find as many potential students as possible as quickly as they could (Wang, 2012). Study abroad agents have also been known to make exaggerated admission promises, overcharge for their services, and only pass on certain information to the students and parents (Gao and He, 2015). Chinese students hold different expectations, which are

often challenged after they arrive on campus (Gao and He, 2015). Because of the promises made to them by agents, some parents and students paid three consultants as much as \$4,500 each to fill out the application, complete their personal statement and compose the recommendation letters (Nylander, 2015). According to a 2010 Zinch China report, 90% of all Chinese students' recommendation letters, 70% of application essays, and 50% of transcripts were composed by their study abroad agents (Nylander, 2015). Many U.S. universities and colleges were aware that their accepted Chinese students might not be on par with others in the program. However, institutions appreciate the additional diversity Chinese students bring, and those who can easily pay their tuition rates, so they offer what they can to accommodate these students by offering additional help like bridge programs (Gao and He, 2015). Kuntner (2015) explained that several universities and colleges have been aggressively recruiting Chinese students by teaming up bridge programs that enable foreign students to gain credits toward degrees while still supporting their Chinese students in working on English proficiency. This study was designed to learn how Chinese international graduate students' experienced working with their study abroad agents. I wanted to know more about what information they were provided with, and how they felt about the institution where they ultimately matriculated.

In order to answer these questions, I collected data from seven Chinese students attending a four-year, private liberal arts college (Sumner College) in a town north of Boston, Massachusetts. I hoped to learn about their motivations to use study abroad, their full experience of working with agents, and their expectations coming into their respective programs. Colleges and universities would like to improve their services and adjust their admission process to allow for even greater numbers of Chinese international students. Many Chinese students in bridge programs failed to matriculate into their ultimate program, and many Chinese students transferred out to other institutions after

they found the reality of their student life did not meet their expectation (Redden, 2013 & Gao and He, 2015). In order to adjust and improve the current admission process, more feedback from current Chinese international graduate students and conditional accepted students is valuable to take in account. Supporting Chinese international students' academic success will continue providing critical global exposure to domestic students and contributes essential financial support to the U.S. institutions (Institute of International Education, 2015).

### **Literature Review**

#### **Institutions' resources and student expectations**

Bista (2011) explored the obstacles colleges and universities facing in retaining international students. Many universities and colleges focused on the overseas recruitment and increased attendance of international students, but neglected the importance of retaining international students. In this study, the researcher conducted a survey with 600 international students, and interviewed two Chinese international student through a semi-structured interview. The interviewer was seeking to learn about the student's experience at the university, as well as the community feeling, academic issues and concerns they experienced. The findings of this research suggested that increasing college and universities' services, such as providing more detailed information of the campus, and enhancing on-campus employment, could increase student retention. Many universities provided services to international students, but failed to provide effective services that meet the student needs. Also, international students required more accurate information of the college, study methods, visa regulations and the grading system. Both Chinese students mentioned lack of access to entertainment at the university and limited transportation schedules were the reasons for transferring to other institutions with better options. Lack of on-campus employment and colleges offering better scholarships would

lead international students to transfer to the institutions that had better employment opportunities.

Some researchers have focused on improving the institution's response to international students, but they were not aware that international students from different regions had different needs. Chinese students based their expectations and the information they received in selecting institutions and on the location itself. Wu (2014) expanded research exploring the motivation and factors of Mainland Chinese students choosing majors and study abroad locations. Wu (2014) conducted a survey with 169 Chinese students, and interviewed 30 participants in the United Kingdom. The researchers asked participants of why they choose to study abroad in the U.K, what factors made them to select the school that they attended, and what were the challenges that they have been facing. The findings of this research were that most participants seek to enrich their cultural difference experience by learning new languages, and living in a new environment. The students also believed studying abroad would assist them to build up career advancement in obtaining new learning skills and gaining overseas work experience they could use when returning to their home country.

The Chinese students considered that they would obtain personal growth and development in becoming more confident by surviving in an unfamiliar culture and by living alone. The study indicated that Chinese students were more willing to choose a school with a good reputation and recognition to attend. Having a comfortable environment with reasonable cost and interesting locations were important as well. Nearly half of the participants (especially younger students) used study abroad agencies. The students claimed that using a study abroad agency was an important and comfortable channel to obtain information on universities and colleges, as well as to learn more about preparing the documents, and receiving academic offers.

While Bista (2011) and Wu (2014) focused on Chinese international students who were already studying overseas, Lu and Schulmann (2015) sought to understand the pattern of Chinese international students selecting study abroad institutions. Lu and Schulmann (2015) explored how different segments of prospective international master's students make the complex decision of selecting an institution based on institutional attributes: school reputation, career prospects, location, and cost. They also found that they could map students segments with institutional characteristics: funding sources, setting, size and basic Carnegie classification. In this online survey, 3,472 students provided in-depth findings for six crucial markets by region and, countries. Respondents were asked to indicate their own academic preparedness, indicate their primary funding sources for their studies in the U.S., and list their institutional choices. The major findings of this study were that 73% of Chinese students have stronger financial resources, which means they considered international education to be affordable, but they had low academic preparation. Institutional reputation is critical for Chinese students; 47% percent of Chinese students considered school reputation as the most important factor in their decision making. This study suggested that Chinese students pay great attention to overall institutional rankings. Meanwhile, 42% of Chinese students selected career prospects as the most important factor. Three percent of Chinese students considered cost as the most important factor. Chinese students tend to attend private universities (60%), and most (85%) choose a large campus setting and 36% prefer major cities.

### **Life stress and academic stress for Chinese students**

Yan and Berliner (2011) examined the characteristics and life-stresses of Chinese international students both in China and United States. They interviewed 6 students and asked about life expectations compared with when they were in China and the United States. The finding specified that the motivation of Chinese students was that they were

interested in obtaining foreign educational experience. Meanwhile, the students were frustrated by the insufficient opportunities and promotion potential, and lack of societal respect and prestige in China. They were also experiencing peer pressure. The students reported that there were significant differences on both societal and individual variables, which changed students' extrinsic cultural traits with lifestyle, behaviors, manners, and language skills. The intrinsic cultural traits were with religious belief, viewpoints of ethnic and cultural heritage. The students were also concerned about their future employment opportunities and immigration status. Most Chinese students slowly realized that without a green card, they significantly lacked employment opportunity. Also, academic settings were significantly different from their home country, where they studied for the exams and which did not require much guidance and discipline. The English training they received in China was designed to pass the TOEFL and GRE for admission. These types of programs did not help the students meet the academic demands in the United States. The students also lacked realistic information before their departure. Most students had pre-conceived ideas about America, and felt disappointed when they deciphered the rules, norms of discourse, and social engagement in the United States. The implication of this study was that students and their parents should obtain more comprehensive and accurate pre-departure information about life and study in the United States before making a final decision about study abroad.

Research also noted that after the Chinese students started their studies, their stresses would start adding up. Some studies explored the Chinese students' stresses and suggested effective programming to help the Chinese students. Yan & Berliner (2013) continued their research on Chinese international students. They explored their study on the life stressors and concerns of Chinese international students studying and living in the United States, and sought to learn how to help Chinese students adapt to the American

educational environment and to improve the services and programs of American universities. The researchers used mixed (criterion sampling and snowball sampling) sampling and interviewed 18 Chinese students in Mandarin Chinese. They asked the Chinese students about their experiences and stressors. The findings indicated that Chinese international students face multiple stresses, including: personal concerns, which included job opportunities and visa problems, pressure from dating or marriage, financial pressure, and sociocultural stress that have interactions with Americans, language and culture deficiency and clashes in values. The implications of this study are that universities need to offer more effective orientations for this population, such as more cross cultural staff to work on Chinese students' issues, institutional student loans, and help Chinese students improve their English to proficiency.

Some academic stress factors were coming from external sources. Even though the numbers of Chinese international students have been expanding in the United States, U.S. institutions have not been successful in meeting the needs of this population. Valdez (2015) conducted a qualitative study and explored Chinese international students' perceptions about U.S. classroom participation, their knowledge in U.S. classrooms, and how American faculty and American students perceive Chinese students. Valdez (2015) used snowball sampling, and recruited total of 15 Chinese students who had arrived within the last six years to participate in this study. The questions allowed the students to express their ideas and experiences. An important finding of this research is how assumptions shape perceptions in American classroom setting. American faculty and American students made the assumptions. Chinese students were often linked to academic integrity violations attributed by professors. Students felt that American faculty members often did not have favorable perceptions of Chinese international students. They also felt that American students stereotyped Chinese students, who were unable to

contribute in group projects, and relied on stereotypes and embedded cultural assumptions. The implications from this study were the need to provide more training and professional development to faculty, in order to create more inclusive classrooms. Also, increasing collaboration between Chinese international students and American students could improve cultural awareness.

### **The role of parents in Chinese international students' decisions**

Bodycott (2009) explored the different important factors of Chinese parents and students obtaining information about study abroad, and explored the relationship between the Chinese students and their parents on choosing to study abroad. The researcher conducted a survey and interviews with 251 Mainland Chinese parents and 100 students. The findings of this research were that 60% of Chinese families invest one third of their income for their children's future education, which was second in overall expense only to food. The parents hoped their children would obtain a quality education in order to obtain a good job. This could also determine their future migration to the U.S. However, the students were mainly focusing on obtaining high quality education and international education experience with institution reputation, tuition fees, environment consideration, immigration prospects and scholarships. Students rated immigration prospects much lower than their parents. Over 65% of Chinese parents and students believed that an education exhibition/fair either by schools or provincial recruitment offices were the most initial sources to obtain study abroad information. Parents were not willing to use agents to apply to overseas schools due to the high costs. However, some students admitted that if they used education agents, they had had little or no personal contact with the agents.

Parents become the main contact with the agents. The relationship between parents and children was characterized by obedience, which affected the decision making process, as children felt obligated to always respecting their parents' decision.

International student recruitment markers played a crucial role in terms of study abroad, and Chinese parents were identified part of the recruitment process.

Bodycott (2012) expanded previous research from 2009 to further understand the role of Chinese family culture in Chinese students making decision of studying abroad. Bodycott and Lai (2012) explored the correlation of the cultural traditions between Chinese parents and the students' decision of choosing study abroad to Hong Kong. This was a mixed-method study, with 95 Chinese students completing the survey, and 24 students were interviewed. The findings of this research showed that more than half of students claimed that the idea of studying in Hong Kong came from their parents or family members. Some students mentioned that they were inspired by the stories from alumni who studied in Hong Kong. 25% of the mainland students were attracted by the image of freedom, prosperity and openness of Hong Kong. Many parents reported that they considered the future benefit for their children in the employment prospects, the opportunities of obtaining Hong Kong's permanent residency, and entitlement to social service and welfare. 25% of the students reported that location was the most important consideration; their parents lived in Guangdong, which is closest province to Hong Kong, so staying in Hong Kong allowed them to travel home back and forth. Many students expressed that they were not happy with the outcome with their parents intervening in their applications, being involved in discussions, providing suggestions, and manipulating the application process.

### **Study abroad agents and Chinese international students**

Hagedorn and Zhang (2011) explored the reasons why Chinese high schools decided to use agents to apply U.S. universities and colleges, and discovered some ethical problems with using agents. The researchers used a quantitative method and categorized

the students into agent-assisted and non agent-assisted, and qualitative method. The researchers used a paper survey written in Chinese which was hand-delivered to 500 students, 60 students were invited to face-to-face interviews. The findings of this study were that agent-assisted students reported that the main reason of they used agents was to complete the college application process. More than 69% of the students were going to use agents, 31% were non-agent assisted students. Only 30% of agent-assisted students believed their English fluency was strong, and 40% of non agent-assisted students reported their English level was high. Most agent-assisted students had higher family incomes than non-agent assisted students. Agent-assisted students reported that they had little knowledge of college applications, lack of knowledge in visa application, and had less information on the U.S. colleges and universities. They believed they were more likely to be accepted if they used agents, and felt they had time constraints. For non-agents assisted students, they lacked trust of agents' promises or promised, and felt that agents overall charged too much for their service. Non-agent assisted students mostly had more access to the application and information with the help from parents, family friends, or relatives, and they believed they were capable of processing the application without agents' assistance.

Students and parents selected agents from someone they knew. Friends' positive feedback and successful cases were the most critical part of them to using agents. High family income was more likely to lead students to use agents. Student reported that an agent promised to write his/her personal statement, and students complained about the lack of long-term service upon the student's arrival in the United States.

Furthermore, other researchers conducted studies showing that when using agents, students might face different obstacles after they arrived. Bartlett and Fischer (2011) explored Chinese international students who met all the requirements on the college

application, but they were having academic difficulty or failing to transition from the language program to a public four-year university. The researchers interviewed 8 students, and asked them about the differences of China academic experience and American educational experience. They also interviewed five educational practitioners about their experiences of teaching or working with Chinese international students. The findings indicated that the Chinese students' academic failure was associated with the students' learning strategies and institutions lack of understanding of Chinese market. This included using study abroad agents to complete the college application, and the students were taught how to pass the test but did not really learn, and suffered academic dishonesty by cheating on exams. They also worked on making the grade by taking math-related courses, and institutions rushed to expanded Chinese international student market due to a lack of funding from government. The implication of this study was that having a mentor program which paired Chinese international students and other international students with mentors, who would then help the students with academic life and to improve study skills, was important. They also explored whether the institutions provided English language workshops to assist the students to improve their English. Adding interviews, either in the home country or Skype, into the admission process to help understand more the students more before issuing the offer was also seen as helpful.

Other research showed that Chinese students also rushed to study abroad. Zhang and Hagedorn (2011) explored how study abroad agents assist Chinese students applying to American universities and colleges, and disclosed the potential problem of students who used the agent services. The mixed methods study had total 257 Chinese international students and all interviews were conducted in Chinese language, in order to minimize the barriers of sharing. 57% used an agent and a higher percentage of non-agent assisted students indicated that they were excellent in English while most agent-assisted

students reported their English was only at a fair level. Also, a higher proportion of agent-assisted students attended college in China. Agent-assisted students had higher financial resources than non-agent assisted students. Most agent-assisted students indicated that they used agents because they had little knowledge of the college application, a lack of visa knowledge and limited knowledge about the U.S. higher education. Non-agent assisted students claimed that they were capable of applying on their own, and did not trust agents' service, believed agents were expensive, and also stated that they had parents or friends to help. The research pointed out that many Chinese students who studied in the U.S. for a while stated that they had discovered the college application was not as hard as they thought.

Some agent-assisted students explained that they had started applying to school on their own, but had a lack of English skills. Then students gave up their own application and found an agent to assist with the application. Agent-assisted students were told that the rate of successful visa application was 100 percent by using agents. Almost 25 percent of agent-assisted students expected the agent to contact all necessary personnel in the American institution, department, or admission office on their behalf. None of the students indicated that agents assisted them for adjusting to a new living and studying environment, and some agents crossed the ethical line by writing their personal statements or recommendation letters.

Many Chinese students hired study abroad agents to help with their application due to lack of knowledge. Zhang and Serra Hagedorn (2014) explored how knowledgeable Chinese education agents were about the U.S. education system, and how universities and colleges could work efficiently with Chinese education agents. In this qualitative study, eight agents were purposefully selected from eight different regions in China. The interview questions were open-ended, and interviews were conducted in Mandarin

Chinese via telephone, in order to make it easier for agents to share their experiences.

The findings suggested that the research agents might receive a commission from the U.S. institution in which the students enroll. Also, education agents would change their promotion skills to suit parents and students. The agents promoted community colleges as the stepping-stone to four-year colleges and universities, and used transfer resources as the selling point. However, most agents lacked experience and required knowledge in assisting students' transfer process to a four-year university. Also, agents reported that four-year university applications were harder to complete than community college applications, agents considered it less stressful or easier to complete the community college application. An agent's knowledge of community colleges primarily came from Internet and the college websites. Education agents were a for-profit business, and had less interest in community colleges, and they were not focused on sending students to them. Lastly, all agents lacked understanding of the value of an associate's degree, and highlighted the transfer function to baccalaureate institutions as the selling point. The researchers also found evidence that many community colleges have dedicated their efforts to promoting overseas recruiting, however, the agents felt that community colleges were less engaged in the Chinese market than four-year colleges or universities.

Overall, most Chinese students struggle with getting the accurate college information in China, learning the academic and cultural differences between China and the U.S., and having a hard time to find on-campus employment opportunities to support their financial needs. Many Chinese students used study abroad agents to apply for U.S. colleges and universities because they had little knowledge of the college and university, application process, and visa application. Also, the students and their parents expected that using study abroad agents, who completed their application packages, could increase their chance to get accepted by their ideal institutions. To those students who did not use study

abroad agents were based on lacking trust of agents' promises and the high charges for agents' services.

### **Methodology**

In this study, the constructivist paradigm was used for interpreting the meaning of cases or situations from a different standpoint, representing a phenomenon to others; the researcher seeks to do this by increasing the community rapport (Mertens, 2015). Many Chinese students who wish to study in the U.S. hire study abroad agents for helping with the college admission process. Meanwhile, many U.S. institutions rely on using agents to recruit international students (Bartlett and Fischer, 2011). The paradigm allowed the researcher to explore the complex world of someone else's experience and allowed the participants to share their viewpoints (Mertens, 2015). The relationship between institutions, students, and study abroad agents is still unclear in the higher education world. Students' voices are crucial, and this constructivist paradigm provides the opportunity to focus on that (Mertens, 2015).

In terms of the sample for this study, the student contact list was provided by the Director of the Office of International Programs at Sumner college. The student sample available for this research was composed of 18 Chinese international students--13 graduate level students and 5 conditional graduate students--attending a private liberal arts college (Sumner College) in Massachusetts. All participants were invited through an email that was written in English and Mandarin Chinese. There were 7 Chinese students, including 4 graduate students and 2 conditional students, who responded to the email, and all of them agreed to participate in the interview process. At the beginning of the interviews, the researcher explained the information on the consent form, the purpose of the study, and the participants' rights during the interview in Mandarin Chinese or Cantonese Chinese. Participants signed the consent form. The participants had an option

to select a pseudonym that was used with this research. Their real names and personal contacts are kept confidential.

The interviews were conducted in a private room in an academic building on campus. In order to reduce the students' nervousness about sharing the experience, the participants were informed that our conversations would not be reported to the admission office and the International Programs Office, and their immigration status and enrollment status would not be affected by this study. The participants were asked to respond to demographic questions about their majors, the duration of studying in English as Second Language programs, year(s) of work experience, and duration of time they been in the United States in order to understand their academic and personal backgrounds. All participants majored in business management. Two of them studied in English as Second Language programs for three and six months prior enrolled the Master's program. Most participants have lived in the U.S. for approximately a year. Two participants worked full-time prior to enrolling in the program. Each interview was 40-50 minutes (for the full protocol see Appendix A). All the records and data were saved in a USB and kept in a safe at a personal space. The interviews expected the participants to share their full experience in working with agents, from selecting the agents and selecting the colleges or universities, to recalling the information that they were told and comparing it with their current feelings. The researcher also asked about the barriers they were facing in applying to U.S. Colleges and Universities, and the reasons why they decided to hire study abroad agents to get information.

### **Trustworthiness**

In order to increase the trustworthiness of the study and reduce the participants' concerns, the participants have reviewed and approved all their quotations in this study. After transcribing the interviews into a Word document in Chinese, the researcher used

standard methods to code all transcripts and translated them into English (Mertens, 2015). After seeing the coding patterns, the researcher filtered those codes into several categories (Saldana, 2012). The researcher sent each participant's direct and indirect quotations back to the participant and asked for approval. The participants reviewed all the quotations and approved that this study could cite the quotations using their pseudonym.

### **Findings**

Many participants shared that they had a hard time finding information about Summer College in China by themselves. They felt that using study abroad agents was the only way to obtain the institution information and complete their application. Most of the students selected their study abroad agents carefully by asking recommendation from families and friends, researching from the Internet, and comparing agents' reputation and agents' promised. However, most participants shared that they did not have a good experience of working with their agents. Many of them considered their agents overcharged the services and the participants did not feel satisfaction about the overall services.

### **Challenges in finding the college information**

All Chinese international students in this study expressed that they had a difficult time finding information about American colleges and universities while in China due to the Internet limitation, lack of English and time, and lack of the knowledge of application process. Therefore, they perceived that using study abroad agents was the best option for them to complete the application process on time.

**Internet limitation.** Most participants mentioned the biggest challenge in China was not being able to get on American college websites. Hagedorn and Zhang (2011a) reported that many Chinese students said they were not able to obtain information about

U.S. colleges and universities online due to the government control foreign websites. All participants said the Sumner College's website was not available in China due to the Chinese Internet restriction. Students could only get limited information from other Chinese search engines, such as Baidu, 163.com. It is important to note that Google is not available in China. To this end, Jeremy mentioned:

I do not think many Chinese international students know enough about this campus before we applied. It was impossible for us to get on the school website. As you know in China, the government has limited most of the foreign websites. I did not have any access to get on the school website! [sigh]

Another student shared a similar insight about the Internet limitation. If there were an option of requesting more information, the student would have to purchase it. Sunny said:

I could only find some basic information on Chinese websites, such as location and admission requirements. Because I was in China, I could not use Google. I could only use Baidu [One of the main search engines in China] to search for the information about this college. There was no video, poster or even the college web page there. I remember the information I saw was dated 2009. I guess the information was already out of date [Sigh]. If I wanted to get more information, I could have purchased the information through the search engine. But I was not sure how accurate it would be.

Since the government has limited the Internet access to foreign websites, most of the participants said the college information they had was coming from their study abroad agents. Student Bre mentioned, "I could not find any information about the college on my own. Using a study abroad agent was the only option for me to obtain more college information."

In contrast, one participant was able to reach out to an alumnus for the college information. She believed she understood the college well before she applied. Sunny stated "I got 60%-70% of the campus information from my agent, and she/he was the College alumnus." She also said her agent did a good job explaining the application process and the college environment. With the limitation of the Internet, most participants agreed using agents to obtain college information was helpful.

**Language barriers and limited time.** Most participants started their graduate school applications in their senior year of college, between 3 months and 12 months prior to the program start. This timeframe also included their TOEFL or IELTS preparation. Zhang and Hagedorn (2011b) stated that many students were applying for their foreign college application while they were in course sessions, and the students claimed that they were in a rush to complete both at the same time. Even though some of them had the idea of studying in the U.S. since freshman year of college or even high school, they started selecting colleges and preparing applications late. By that time, they said, they did not have many college or university options to apply for. There were only limited numbers of colleges and universities still accepting applications. Also, most of them were still in undergraduate sessions while preparing for the language test and college application. With the limited English and limited time, participants agreed using agents could make the process move faster and easier. In this respect, Jeremy stated:

At that time, my English was not strong enough to complete the application. I also did not have time to do that, because I was still in college. The agent helped me complete the rest of the application package. I just needed to submit my TOEFL score to the agent.

Also, some participants were working full-time while preparing the language test and application. They also expressed that agents could lower their stress with the college application. With respect to this, Bre said:

I was working a full-time job. It was really hard for me to sit down and just do the college search. Also, due to the time difference, I was not able to communicate with the admission office at midnight. Therefore, using the agent made my life easier.

Agents were able to meet the needs of the group of students. Beside the time and language barriers, agents also helped students with on the application process.

**Lack of knowledge of the application process.** Most of the participants also said they were unable to obtain adequate information on the application process, such as writing personal statements, constructing English resumes, and filling out college

applications. Hagedorn and Zhang (2011a) also indicated that many Chinese students did not know how to find out the application process besides consulting information on the Internet. The Internet barrier was mentioned again at this step. Participants said they could not get any detailed information or at least the format for the resume and personal statement. Additionally, they did not know how to find that information. Agents were their only resources to ask for help. In this respect, Wendy said:

At that time, I was so lost. I did not know what the application process was. I did not know how to write the personal statement and resume. I trusted agents were the professional place to ask and I believe their professional experience. The most important part of using the agent was saving time and making the process easier.

Furthermore, Zhang and Hagedorn (2011b) explained that many students did not have time to do research on their own and the students are more likely to ask agents for recommendation. A participant, Bre, stated a similar fact noting “without the agent’s recommendation, I would not even know about this school. I would not even know how to complete the application process.”

### **Considerations in selecting study abroad agents.**

As noted previously, all participants in this study used study abroad agents to help with their college applications. Many of the participants said they first heard about their agents through the Internet, families, and friends. Most of them did not make any final commitment before they compared the agencies ranking and the agents’ guaranteed offer packages. Lastly, most parents were involved in the agent and school selection.

**Recommendations from the Internet, families, and friends.** Over half of the participants said they found their agencies online first. Also, most of them mentioned that their agencies always appeared on the top on their searching pages. Students were more likely to click on the agency web pages and find the agents. The online ranking of agencies played a significant part in the agent search, as Ronny sated:

I just randomly searched study abroad agents online. My agency was, at least what I saw at that time, ranked number one in my city. I thought I could complain to them more easily if they did a bad job on my application or gave me a bad attitude! So I went to the agency and selected an agent.

Many students shared the same strategy of using the Internet to find an agency.

Meanwhile, family and friends who were good listeners also played a role as part of the resources. Bodycott and Lai (2012) mentioned that many Chinese students and their parents gathered study abroad information from family and friends. At this point, Bre shared:

I found my agent online. I searched the keyword “study abroad agency” first, then my agency was the first one popped up on the search outcome. Meanwhile, I also heard from some family friends whose children were studying abroad and my high school classmates who had studied abroad at that time. They all recommended using this agency.

Also, another student provided a summary of his experience of why he listened to his friends and family members, in this respect, Jeremy said:

I think Chinese love listening to others before we make any decision. I believe this is the way we [all Chinese] work [laugh]. In Chinese culture, we scare to make any decision by ourselves. We would like to gather others’ options and decision as much as possible before we make our own decision. At that time, I had no clue of what to do, so I asked around my mother friends whose children were studying abroad.

**‘Guarantee’ of placement.** Students would visit some agencies to compare the agent service packages before they committed to the agents. Moreover, Wang (2012) explained that agents worked for commission; they would like to move the sale as quickly as they could by using different strategies with students and parents. A few students reported that agents would make some oral promises about the college offers, but not written in the contract. In this respect, Ronny said:

My agent made some oral college offer promises, but I could not find it on my contract. After I signed the contract, I reviewed the contract a while after that. I recognized the contract was just a disclaimer contract. The contract did not say I would get any guarantee offers.

In addition, students assumed the agent fee policy was a guaranteed policy. Many students said their agents mentioned the agent service fee was refundable if they did not get any school offers. In terms of this expectation, Wendy said:

I do not recall that my agent had said they would guarantee any school offers to me, but he said he would try his best to get me into an U.S. college. Moreover, he promised that if I did not get any school acceptance, the agency would refund part of the service fee.

Overall, based on the feedback from the students in this study said, most of them got accepted by at least one of the colleges they applied for and a few of the participants got accepted by all colleges they applied for.

**Reputation of the agents.** Half of the students indicated their agents' reputations were part of their considerations. Hagedorn and Zhang (2011a) explained that students believed big agencies and agents with a good reputation would ensure their acceptance rate. Many students refused to use small size agencies, even though they provided the same services for a lower price. Ronny said:

I compared two agencies [one big agency and one small agency] and I visited their offices. The big agency's office looked great. I liked the big agency reputation and its location, which was in the most high-class area of my city. I also believed that big agency would have a good reputation to the school as well.

Sometimes agencies proactively showed the students their successful student cases and their professional recognition. Student Bre said:

I visited the agency office. They had some successful student cases and a lot of Thank You Pennants [see in Appendix B] from families. Some of the pennants were from some famous government workers with big titles listed. They also framed some local newspapers saying how great they were. I think those were really convincing.

Most participants found their study abroad agents through a thoughtful searching process. They used the Internet to select agents and asked families' and friends' to recommend agents to them. Also, they compared agent's services and reputation before they committed to their agents. The challenges were that most participants used several

possible ways to pick their agents, but most of them still felt mixed regarding working with their agents.

### **Challenges in working with study abroad agents**

Most of the participants articulated they did not feel satisfied with the agent services. Only one participant indicated that he had an above-average experience with the agents. There were four main reasons for the dissatisfaction with the agent services. First, many participants considered their agent fees overpriced. Second, agents' attitudes and services changed after they paid the agent fee. Third, half of the participants believed their personal statements did not truly reflect themselves. Fourth, many participants mentioned that their expectations of the campus did not meet the reality.

**Agent service fee.** Many participants believed that agents overcharged for their services. Hagedorn and Zhang (2011a) expressed that some Chinese students did not use study abroad agents because they considered the service fee unreasonable, regardless of which year they paid for the agents and how many schools they applied for. There was only one student who reported that she applied for one school, and none of them reported that they paid any institution application fee. According to all participants who reported to me, the price range was from 12,000 RMB at the lowest to 49,000RMB at the highest. According to the current exchange rate at the time of writing this paper is 6.5 (1 dollar=6.5RMB) on XE.com, the price range is \$1,846 to \$7,538. The agent service fee can be can be 4 times higher. The prices that they reported included a visa interview training and a pre-departure workshop. In this respect, Jeremy stated:

My agent fee included the application process, two acceptances, and visa training. I paid the fee upfront. If any school did not accept me, they promised to refund part of the fee. Or if I got the visa rejected, they would refund the visa-training fee and keep the application process fee.

Moreover, there were some extra charges that were not listed. Bre mentioned:

There were some ranking fees that would be added on if I decided to apply higher-ranking colleges. There were three price tags: the first for the top 100 U.S. News College Rankings, the second for the top 50, and the third for the top 30.

It is important to note that one participant reported that she did not know how much the agent fee price was. The student said her parents paid the fee on her behalf.

**Agents' attitudes and services.** Many participants felt that their agents charged their attitudes and services significantly different after they paid. Most participants reported that their agents stopped being proactive after they paid the service fee. Before they signed the contracts, the agents had followed up with them daily. The agents were always available to reach out to and to ask questions. However, after the participants signed and paid the service fees, most participants said they became the ones to contact the agents.

With respect to this concern, Wendy stated:

I remember I had to call my agent often in order to track my application process. [Long sigh] the agent never proactively called me to say what I needed to submit and what I needed to change. I was the one who always call to make sure what I needed to do next.

Sometimes, the agents became hard to find, which affected one participant's application. In this respect, Patrick reported:

I felt like my first agent did not pay any attention to my application at all. After I paid the service fee, he [the agent] liked to disappear and did not give me any updates. Sometimes he would answer my calls, but he came up with so many reasons to not meet me...[I] was really frustrated after he told me that my application got rejected because of a transcript issue. He also told me I already missed the deadline to re-submit the document, I had to defer the program for one semester.

Additionally, family relationships could affect an agent's services. One participant, Jim, believed he had a great experience working with an agent. His agent was actively keeping him posted on the application process. He also pointed out his family had a great relationship with the agency. In this respect, Jim stated, "due to the family relationship, my agency dedicated a couple of agents to work on my case. They called me and reported on my application process daily. I did not need to worry about the process."

**Personal statement and application form.** All participants have mentioned that agents completed their college applications. Nylander (2015) stated that Chinese study abroad agents composed 90% of all students' recommendation letters, 70% application essays, and 50% of transcripts. Some participants said their personal statements and resumes were fully written by their agents. After they committed to the agents, the agents asked them to fill out some forms for the purpose of writing personal statements. One student refused to answer my question. The agents asked the participants to sign the final draft before the statements were sent out. At this point, Jim said:

I only provided basic personal information, education history, and transcript to the agent. That was all I gave. After they wrote the personal statement and resume, they called me back to the office to sign them. I quickly reviewed the documents and signed. They [the agents] did not give the original copies. [Long pause] but they sent me the digital copies after I got accepted.

Ronny said he had a similar process. He mentioned:

The agent sent me a couple forms right after I paid and signed the agent contract. The forms asked me basic information, education background, special experience and family background. Then they asked me to review when it was done. I felt like they [the agent] took someone's personal statement and changed my name on it. I wish I could conduct my own personal statement. [Laugh] maybe I will write my own personal statement in the future.

Nevertheless, two participants said they wrote their own personal statements and resumes in both English and Chinese. They only required agents to review and proofread both documents.

**Expectations not met.** The participants believed their agents were the key channels to find information about the College. However, the participants' expectations were not always connected with reality. Yan & Berliner (2011) indicated that the students lacked realistic information before their departure; most of them had preconceived ideas about the U.S. and the college they applied for and felt disappointed once they arrived. Most of the participants said that they did not feel their agents were knowledgeable enough about the college, especially about the location and transportation service. Bista (2011) stated

that Chinese students would transfer out if the institutions lacked access to entertainment, and have limited transportation schedules. Also, Lu and Schulmann (2015) expressed that 36% of Chinese students are more likely to select the campuses located in major cities.

Most participants did not expect the campus location to be so far away from the city of Boston. Student Ronny mentioned:

I thought the main difference was the distance between the campus and downtown Boston. I saw the school brochure and heard from the agent, they both said the campus was only 25 minutes away from the city. I thought the campus was in downtown area, because of the distance of 25 minutes. In reality, I actually spent more than one hour to get to the city! [Exasperated]

Not only does the campus location not meet the participants' expectation, but also the campus transportation service does not match the information they received. Student Bre stated:

Even though I knew the campus was not close to the city, the campus location was still further than I expected. I thought the campus was right next to the train station, and I could walk there in a few minutes. I also was told that the school offers a shuttle. He [the agent] said it would bring me to downtown Boston. I did not know it only brings me to the train station, and I had to take a one-hour train ride to Boston. This is very inconvenient!

Moreover, one participant said he was told the campus offers some transportation service that the college has never offered. Student Bre mentioned:

I asked my agent if there was any subway line run by the school. The agent said yes, there was a subway line connected between the campus and downtown Boston. After I came, I was shocked that the subway line does not exist [laugh].

Overall, most participants felt disappointed working with their agents who overcharged for their services, were dishonest on giving out the institution information, and were fabricated some aspects of the student's application package.

### **Recommendations**

The length of most of the U.S. graduate programs are one or two years.

Comparing with the length of Undergraduate programs, international graduates have less

time to adjust academic and cultural difference. Providing extra services to this group of students are necessary. The majority of the participants in this study expressed that they had a hard time to obtain college information from the college's website and had received misleading information from their agents. U.S. Colleges and Universities should improve their communication system to deliver accurate information to international students prior they arrive the U.S. Also, some participants reported that their agents fabricated their application package in order to help them to get into the college. U.S. college and universities should improve their admission system by implementing a new technology to prevent this circumstance. Lastly, institutions should improve their on-boarding services to international students upon they arrive the campus.

**Recommendation 1: Colleges must improve their websites to be available in China to increase access to the information about the college and admission process for Chinese students and parents.**

Hagedorn and Zhang (2011a) found out that many Chinese students were not able to get on U.S. colleges' and universities' webpages', and most of the college information came from their study abroad agents and family and friends. Moreover, Chinese parents invested a high portion of their income for their children's education; they were highly involved in the college search process (Bodycott, 2009). Bista (2011), Wu (2014), and Lu and Schulmann (2015) stated that Chinese students had particular preferences for campus settings when studying abroad. Additionally, all the participants in this study reported that the Chinese government limited Internet access to the College website. Some participants also expressed that their parents were involved in their college search and application process. Limited Internet access to college information and application progress forced the students and parents to obtain information from study abroad agents. The information that they received may not be accurate and may not match their

expectations. The students in this study held different expectations of the College from the reality, especially about the location and transportation services.

In order to address this ongoing problem, The College should partner with a local Chinese Internet provider to create a Chinese user-friendly webpage. The College must improve its outreach strategies and information delivery to prospective Chinese students and parents. The most popular Internet provider in China is called WeChat, which had 272 million active users around the world by 2013 (Chester, 2013). A few U.S. institutions have implemented WeChat for advertising of campus activities and reminding the Chinese students of event deadlines (Chester, 2013). Moreover, WeChat allows users to create their company information page, provide a subscriber function, and offer business to customer service [See in Appendix C] (About WeChat, n.d). For example, Michigan State University has launched a subscription account embedding university branding into the fabric of the Chinese internet (Chester, 2013). The marketing and admissions department should jointly implement this platform to advertise the campus information and provide an admission advice portal directly to the Chinese students and parents. The marketing department should create a subscriber page to allow prospective students and parents to obtain college information. There is little that institutions can do to change their location and the campus setting, but marketing department should determine what makes the institutions a more attractive place to study at (Lu and Schulmann, 2015).

The Admission Department should add an admission portal on WeChat that allows students to communicate with admission counselors directly. The marketing and admission WeChat page should be written only in English to require students to have basic language skills, and it should be open to any students who are interested in applying for the institutions. Study abroad agents are encouraged to follow the information on the

page to promote the college. Prospective students and parents who have difficulty reading the information and communicating with the admission counselors are encouraged to work with study abroad agents.

The marketing and admission WeChat page should include clear detailed information of the campus history, campus location with a screenshot from Google Maps, public transportation information along with the schedule of all the buses and trains, campus shuttle information attached with the newest schedule, photos of major buildings and campus facilities that parents would love to see, location of the Office of International Programs (OIP) with brief information of visa regulations, Career Services with on and off campus employment opportunities, calendar of all social integration events, stories of successful students, a variety of academic support programs from the English as Second Language Program to the Writing Center, and the information of admission requirements with the counselors' contacts.

The College should create a budget to purchase this service, and set a timeline to gather information for the purpose of making this WeChat page, including collecting Chinese student success stories, finding the Chinese students' program enrollment trends, gathering marketing materials from academic and student affairs, and finding native Chinese faculty and staff to do the final translation. Furthermore, the marketing and admission departments should require all current department staff to receive a training of how to use WeChat in order to make a smooth transition for marketing and admission departments once the page is released.

The Admission Department will heavily use WeChat to communicate with prospective students and parents. For future hiring, the department should add a suggested job qualification of familiarity with using WeChat. The Marketing Department should also request a budget for promoting the institutional WeChat page in China,

including sponsoring college fairs, posting advertisements in local newspapers, and revising the college brochures. The marketing and admission departments should assess how effective the WeChat page is by conducting a survey with new incoming Chinese students during the orientation to hear experiences of those using the page in order to make further adjustments.

**Recommendation 2: Colleges should require accepted Chinese students to complete a pre-departure checklist in their home country.**

The literature reported that many Chinese students felt stressed by dealing with the academic and life differences between the U.S. and China (Yan and Berliner, 2011). Most students had a hard time of learning to improve the language skills and adjusting their lifestyle, and some students held some social misconceptions of the U.S. (Bartlett and Fischer, 2011; Bodycott and Lai, 2012; Yan and Berliner, 2013; Valdez, 2015). Furthermore, in this study, many participants expressed a similar experience of having a hard time with their language and social integration. They also reported that their agents did not provide enough useful information in their pre-departure workshops. Accepted Chinese students and their parents did not have many opportunities to obtain more cultural information and adaptability training.

The College must encourage the accepted students to obtain more accurate pre-departure information about life and study in America before their departure (Yan & Berliner, 2009). Yan & Berliner (2009) suggested that Chinese students should enhance their culturally relevant knowledge and skills by meeting American students, visiting American families in China, and watching American movies and documentaries. It may be difficult to require students to meet an American friend or visit an American family in such a short time in between admission and departure. In this study, Yan and Berliner's ideas will be adopted and revised accordingly. For this reason, college offices of international programs (hereafter, OIP) should implement a pre-departure worksheet. The

purpose of the worksheet is to ensure incoming Chinese students gain some ideas of what the environment is that they are going to study and live in, and what skills they should prepare to study in the U.S. The OIP will do some research on questions based on U.S. current events and will require students to join one or two local cross-cultural and language exchange activities. The OIP should strongly recommend the students to join in the U.S. Embassy' or Consulates' events, which are free of admission, but not limited to other organizations (Information Resource Center, 2016). For some students who may not be able to travel to the Embassies or Consulate, OIP should also come up with two to three meaningful movies or documentaries for those students to watch. The OIP should screen through all the material to ensure students would gain some useful information.

The researched events should be positive and include U.S. college life, including academics, U.S., philanthropy stories, and U.S. sports because there is less restriction in the Chinese Internet. It should avoid any type of political and celebrity gossip topics. Both topics may not be available in China. The OIP should encourage the students to participate in some pre-departure workshops offered by Education USA which provides academic difference trainings, cultural-exchange workshops, and guest speakers at the U.S. Embassy or Consulates regularly. The movies and documentaries should cover a variety of topics in U.S. history, college culture, sports, and geography.

The OIP should be aware of the timeframe for the students to complete this checklist. The office should also communicate closely with the admission department to coordinate mailing the schedule. This checklist can be included in the orientation package. Students can bring the checklist on their visa interview day and obtain more event and activity schedules in the Embassy or Consulates. Staff of the OIP should hold a discussion session during the orientation to allow students to express their experience of completing the worksheet. Those who did not complete the checklist should make up the checklist by

attending some on-campus activities within the first two weeks. OIP should assess the worksheet by conducting an end-of-semester survey in order to hear how effective and useful the worksheet is in their college lives. It also creates an opportunity to obtain feedback to adjust the worksheet.

**Recommendation 3: Colleges should implement a database to check student application packages in order to detect and prevent fabrication.**

Bartlett and Fischer (2011) found that admission departments admitted students who met all the requirements on their applications, but some students still failed to enroll into the programs because the students significantly failed on the placement exams. Nylander (2015) also stated that high percentages of international students' application packages were composed by study abroad agents. The application materials may not truly reflect their backgrounds and experiences. Additionally, some students in this study reported their study abroad agents composed their application packages with only some basic personal information. Moreover, one participant mentioned his personal statement and recommendation letters looked like from someone else and did not fully reflect his own personal experience, academic attainment, and personal goals. Admission departments may not be able to check all application packages without technology assistance.

Admission departments should control ownership of the database. Program directors and academic integrity boards will be considered as stakeholders in the admission process. The database should be used to compare every new incoming application package with previous application records. This process will ensure each application material is authentic. SafeAssign is an application that provides similar services. Many colleges and universities implemented SafeAssign to match students' papers and existing sources (University College, n.d; SafeAssign Originality Report, n.d). Admission should integrate SafeAssign into the admission process, but the software should be revised and limited to the Colleges' previous applications because of the confidential concerns. Admission

officers and program directors can make their admission decisions based on those filtered documents.

However, database detection should be considered as a reference factor, not the final decision. Some students may have similar experiences even though the possibility is extremely low. The Admission Department should work closely with program directors and academic integrity boards. If a new student file has shown higher percentages of matching with previous applications, admission offices should share the student document with all three stakeholders who make the final decision of either rejecting the student, requesting a new updated document, or inviting the student for a Skype interview.

The admission offices should request a budget for purchasing the software, hiring a student worker or administration assistant to input all incoming applications into the software, and funding database maintenance or upgrade if needed. Furthermore, admission offices should meet with program directors and academic integrity boards monthly to check about student applications and hear the program directors' and academic integrity boards' feedback about students' academic performance.

**Recommendation 4: Colleges should establish a peer mentorship program specifically designed to support international graduate students in language development and college academic performance.**

Some researchers indicated that many Chinese students did not receive enough support from the colleges in improving their academic performance and language training (Bista, 2011; Bartleet and Fischer, 2011; Valdez, 2015). Moreover, Zhang and Hagedorn (2014) found out that study abroad agents did not have much knowledge of the U.S. higher education system, and they would not be able to inform the Chinese students of academic differences. Additionally, some participants in this study also reported that they did not receive much information about U.S. academic expectations from the agents. One

student also mentioned that he did not think his agent was knowledgeable in the academic differences.

The OIP and academic support departments should conduct this peer mentorship program. The mission of the program is to provide a platform for international students to improve their language skills, especially in speaking and listening, and to understand colleges' academic expectations. The programs should require the mentor and mentee to meet weekly in order to keep up the improvement progress. The program also creates leadership opportunities for those who have a passion for international education. Some institutions have implemented similar mentorship programs to new incoming international students to adjust to the academic differences and provide language exchange. For example, Northeastern University offers the Global Leaders Mentor Program (n.d.), which advises international students how to adjust to college academic performance requirements, and the university offers the Language Speaking Partners Program that focuses on improving Chinese students' speaking abilities and comprehension skills with the help from native English speakers (Programming and Mentioning, n.d.). Since the sample institution is a small liberal arts college, the institution should combine both programs into one peer mentorship program. The program should also take place throughout the international orientation and let the mentors meet with their mentees on the first day of arrival. Recruitment for a group of mentors should be open to all students. The Office of International Programs should hold an interview process to select the peer advisors who are interested in working with international students. The advisors should be knowledgeable about the cultural and academic differences between China and America.

The college should request a budget for the purposes of establishing and maintaining this program, including funding for purchasing learning materials, offering stipends to the

mentors for participating to appreciate their leadership efforts, and offering a scholarship to the most highly academic highly academic achieving students in order to keep up the motivation. The academic department should assess the peer mentorship program each semester by collecting feedback from instructors and professors on the international students' academic progress and conducting a end-of-semester focus-group interview with the peer mentors in order to make adjustments to the program for the future

### **Conclusion**

Using agents is a low-cost and time saving method for U.S. colleges and universities of entering the Chinese student market. Given this, it is likely that colleges and universities will continue working with study abroad agents. Study abroad agents have been helping U.S. institutions to increase the campus diversity and expand the international education market. It was recently documented that there were over 300 U.S. colleges and universities that use study abroad agents to recruit international students (The Substitution Effect, 2014). Meanwhile, Chinese international students see study abroad agents as the key channels of obtaining information about American higher education, but these students and their parents often make important decisions based on listening only to their hired agents, which can lead to the cases the Chinese students ended up in unsuitable programs or arrive on campus and the information they received does not match the reality (Nylander, 2015). Agents work for commission, and it is in their best interest to close as many sales as quickly as possible. This can lead to a lack of awareness of what the students actually need to succeed when they arrive at their academic institution (Wang, 2012).

Zhang and Serra Hagedorn (2014) stated that agents often lower their workload by applying only to colleges with less rigorous application processes. These agents do not always fully explain the cost, scholarship options, visa regulations, and academic

differences between Eastern and Western standards to the students and parents. This can lead to Chinese students having higher academic, financial, and career development stresses (Zhang and Hagedorn 2011; Bista, 2011; Yan and Berliner, 2013; Valdez, 2015; & Lu and Schulmann, 2015). If Chinese international students' expectations are overwhelmingly different from what they were told by their agents, they run the risk of transferring or dropping out (Kutner, 2015).

Study abroad agents have played a significant role with Chinese students and U.S. institutions. Through conducting interviews and collecting data from Chinese graduate students and bridge program students, institutions should gain a better understanding of the working relationship with their agents. The student feedback can help the colleges improve their admission process to be more globalized and increase the role of the colleges in the admission process. The goal of this study was to provide a better understanding for admission departments of what information have gone to the students before they left their home country. For the Office of International Programs (OIP), knowing the students' expectations would help the officers to better prepare the international student orientation and increase certain student services to meet their needs. Also, hopefully the findings and the information will improve academic support practices by improving better access for international admission applicants. The college may take specific steps like creating an information page in Chinese for the Chinese market. This page will not only providing information to the students, but also allowing the parents to gain access to the school information. The last suggestion is adding a live online chatting page during the working hours that allows students and parents to communicate with the admission team. In both ways, it would improve the delivery of accurate information to the students and parents. Recruiting and retaining international graduate students from China is a laudable goal but that must be done correctly on the communication between

institutions and international students and with integrity U.S. foreign agency for pre-departure information.

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**Appendix A****Student information and background question protocol**

1. What is your major?
2. How long have you been in to the United States?
3. Did you have a job prior to apply for this college?
4. Have you studied in any ESL courses in the U.S.?
5. How long did you study in an ESL school if you have attended?

**Interview Protocol**

1. How is your year going so far here at this institution?
2. How was your experience in working with study abroad agents to access admission to study in the U.S.?
3. Why you decide to use agents?
4. How did you find your agents?
5. What factors made you select your agent/agencies? And where did you hear about this agent/agency?
6. When did you plan to study abroad? (How long before the program started?)
7. How do you feel about your agent's work?
8. Did you feel that you knew enough about the schools before you applied to them?
9. Where did you get information about the colleges you applied to?
10. Was someone helping you with your college essay?
11. Were you told you might have a guaranteed offer from any college?
12. When you arrived on the campus, did the campus situation meet your expectations when you were in your home country?
13. Did your agent explain the campus location, transportation, entertainment, and housing information in detail to you before you arrived?
14. Did you agent provide any type of pre-departure workshop or orientation before you left? If so, how did you feel about that?
15. Did your parents meet the agents and were they involved in the college application process?
16. What do you feel about the fact that the agent charged a fee?
17. Do you think you could have completed your applications by yourself?
18. How many colleges did you apply to? How many offers of admission did you get?
19. What was the most important service the agent provided? How do you think the agents helped you the most?
20. Since you came to the States, have you communicated with your agents?
21. After your experience, do you recommend that students use agents to apply colleges?
22. Have you learned about any visa regulations, or immigration regulations from your agents?
23. What else have I not asked you about working with agents in the admissions process?

## Appendix B

### Thank You Pennants

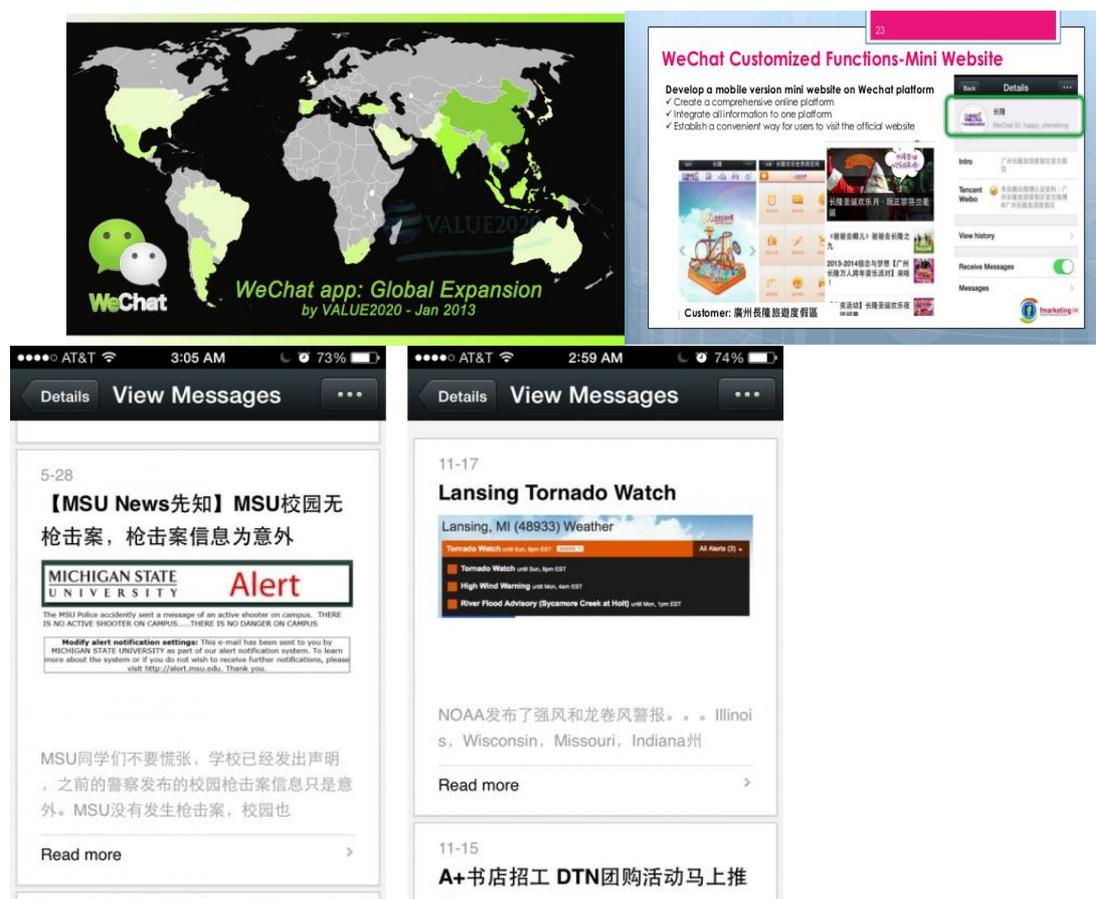
In general, Chinese people send Thank You Pennants to institutions or individuals who has helped them. It is a respect way to show the sense of thank you. Also, it is an honor to receive a Thank You Pennants from others. The receivers normally hang the pennants to the viewable area in their office or their desk.



“Thank You New Zealand Education Group”, (July 20, 2014). Universal College of Learning. Retrieved from <http://08nz.cn/00108353.html>

### Appendix C

WeChat is the most common use application in China. The application offers Internet browser, online chatting, sharing page, voice message, online shopping, and online payment.



Chester, K. (Dec 5, 2013). Tornado spotting and partying: how WeChat is being used by US colleges. *TECHINASIA*. Retrieved from <https://www.techinasia.com/wechat-accounts-being-used-by-american-colleges-to-engage-chinese-studentsWeChat>

## Appendix D

EducationUSA is a U.S. Department of State network of over 400 international student-advising centers in more than 170 countries. The goal of the program is to promote U.S. higher education to students by accurate, comprehensive, and current information to study at accredited postsecondary institutions in the United States.

The screenshot shows the website for the U.S. Consulate General in Guangzhou, China, specifically the EducationUSA section. The header includes the consulate logo, the text '美国领事馆 广州·中国', a search bar, and the date 'Mon Apr 18 2016 23:14:56 GMT-0400 (EDT)'. The main navigation menu includes '主页', '关于我们', '签证', '公民服务', '新闻与活动', '文化与美国', '商务', and '美国资源库'. The current page is '文化与美国', with a sub-menu for '留学美国'. The content area is divided into several sections: '信息资源中心' (Information Resource Center) with a '留学美国' (Study in the U.S.) link; '基本情况介绍' (Basic Information Introduction) listing links for '美国留学 (国土安全部)', '美国教育系统', '国家教育统计中心', '联邦教育成就资料', and '美国高等教育简要指南 (PDF文件)'; '大学检索' (University Search) with links for '美国大学——佛罗里达大学提供', '优秀大学排行榜——美国新闻和世界报道提供', '大学布告牌', '大学网', '大学之源', and '查找你的大学——国家教育统计中心'; '美国教育咨询中心' (EducationUSA America Education Online CHINA) with a logo; '出版物' (Publications) featuring '在美国见! 电子期刊' and '美国高等教育入学指南 电子期刊'; and '美国签证基本知识' (Basic Information on U.S. Visas) with a text block explaining the application process.

Information Resource Center. (n.d). *Consulate General of the United States*. Retrieved from <http://guangzhou.usembassy-china.org.cn/resources.html>