

Walking The Line:

Navigating a Relationship with Unaffiliated International Recruitment Agents

Ali Liffrig

Middlebury Institute of International Studies, Monterey, CA, USA
Email: aliffrig@middlebury.edu

Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; Ethics, Equity, and Social Justice; International Student and Scholar Services; Partnerships; Personnel Management; University/Higher Education

Setting

Black Pine College is a small, 2-year university in rural Wisconsin. Given the small size of the school, most employees are in one-person offices and Juniper, new to the field of international education, is the only international educator on campus. She is the International Program Coordinator, who reports to the Campus Director. Juniper starts at Black Pine College over the summer and has two weeks of training with her predecessor before her predecessor leaves the university.

The student population is around 500 students, with a small group of international students, mostly Chinese. The majority of the international students who attend Black Pine College are hoping to transfer to the state's highly-ranked public research university after a couple semesters. Although the university does not contract with any agents for international student recruiting, there is a Chinese agent, Ellen, who has been recruiting for Black Pine College anyway. She charges the students' parents to help them find a suitable American university. Every once in a while, Ellen approaches Black Pine College to ask for compensation, but the university reiterates that they do not use agents for any international recruitment and declines the request. Juniper is advised by her supervisor to navigate that relationship carefully, as Ellen is not an official employee of the university but she has been vital to bringing international students to campus.

Case

Juniper is excited and nervous for her first International Student Orientation Week. She's planned a solid itinerary and, although there are the expected issues and delays, the week runs smoothly. Juniper has been told by her predecessor that she should send some pictures of the Orientation Week to Ellen, who likes to see what the students have been up to. Juniper thinks that's a bit odd, as she's never met Ellen in-person, and decides not to worry about it.

Later in the week, the Chinese students talk to Juniper about how excited they are that Ellen will come to the International Student Welcome Picnic Thursday night, having apparently invited her. The students clearly trust Ellen and, upon meeting her at the picnic, Juniper feels comfortable sending Ellen pictures of her students, presumably to show their parents.

The following year, Ellen comes to the International Student Orientation Week picnic again and brings a present for Juniper to thank her for her hard work. The present is a lovely silver bracelet with Chinese characters and dragons on it. In the moment, Juniper accepts the box, not knowing how to refuse politely. Juniper is uncomfortable accepting a personal gift from an agent and speaks to her supervisor about it. Eventually, they reach the conclusion that Juniper should message Ellen that, although she appreciates the gesture and the bracelet is gorgeous, there is a policy against university employees accepting gifts and that Juniper will display the bracelet in the International Club room so everyone can appreciate it. They do not know if there is such a policy, but hope that this will preserve good will in the relationship while also removing any possibility for wrongdoing.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- Should Juniper have sent any pictures to Ellen? Why or why not?
- What would have been the ideal reaction to Ellen's gift?
- How could the cultural role of gift-giving be affecting this situation?
- What can the university do to help International Education professionals navigate situations with unaffiliated agents?
- How is the university protected or vulnerable in this situation? How is it benefiting or being harmed?
- Is it ethical for universities to have any contact with unaffiliated agents?