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PROMOTING U.S. COMMUNITY COLLEGES IN SWEDEN:
FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SWEDISH EDUCATION AGENTS

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PIM 74

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of
International Education at SIT Graduate Institute in Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.

April 14, 2016

Advisor: Sora Friedman, Ph.D.

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Student name: Ashley Marie Sansotta

Date: April 14, 2016

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my supervisor and, more importantly, my mentor, Michael Brennan. You have helped to ignite a flame inside of me, which has revealed my passion, dedication, and commitment to making positive contributions to the field. I am ever so grateful for your continuous support and encouragement. I truly would not be here without you!

“What is a teacher? I’ll tell you: it isn’t someone who teaches something, but someone who inspires the student to give of her best in order to discover what she already knows.”

- Paulo Coelho

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ABSTRACT

This purpose of this study is to find out what role agents play through marketing community colleges in the Swedish education market and recruiting Swedish students to U.S. community colleges. This study explores Swedish education agents' perspectives of the community college system in the United States, their experiences in marketing community colleges in Sweden, and the factors that may lead to or prohibit the success in recruiting Swedish students for U.S. community colleges. Qualitative research methods were used, which included preliminary surveys, interviews, an analysis of the agents' marketing strategies, and a review of relevant studies. The findings revealed that agents are aware of the key benefits of attending a U.S. community college: affordability, simple admissions process, and university transfer options. Disadvantages were also noted, which included the absence of experiencing a typical American college experience and lack of on-campus housing. The marketing tactics that the agencies used ranged in size and scope. Some of the agents focused on digital marketing tactics, while others focused on a more personal approach. The research revealed that the principle difficulty in marketing community colleges to Swedish students is that they are unfamiliar with the concept of community colleges. The importance of building strong partnerships between institutions and agency partners was also indicated through this investigation. The results of this study can be used by U.S. community colleges, in order to develop successful international student recruitment and marketing strategies in Sweden. Additionally, this study provides researchers, faculty, and staff at community colleges in the United States with insight on how community colleges are perceived by Swedish students and their parents.

Keywords: International students, study abroad, international student recruitment, Swedish education agents, U.S. community colleges

Promoting U.S. Community Colleges in Sweden:
From the Perspective of Swedish Education Agents

Introduction

International student recruitment in the United States is an uneven playing field. Universities such as Harvard or Boston University, which already have major brand recognition, do not need much assistance in recruiting international students. However, small colleges and universities across the United States, including community colleges, have accelerated their use of commissioned agents, because they acknowledge the fact that they need the support.

Community colleges in the United States began recruiting international students only recently, and very few of those colleges work with contracted agencies. However, Hillsborough Community College (HCC), work with agencies across the globe. In HCC's international department, part of the recruitment team's responsibility is to establish, develop, and maintain successful agency partnerships in their respected regional areas of focus.

As a recruitment manager at HCC, I observed a sharp increase in the number of Swedish students enrolled in community colleges in the United States. *Open Doors* (Institute of International Education, 2015) illustrates this surge in its data reporting the top 25 places of origin of international students enrolled in U.S. community colleges.

After not making the list for the 2009-2010 academic year, Sweden has since climbed the charts. Moving from a rank of 20 in 2010-2011, Sweden now maintains a stronghold on the chart of top 25 places of origin of international students enrolled in U.S. community colleges, currently at a rank of 12 in the latest *Open Doors* data released for the 2014-2015 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2015). Moreover, out of the total number of Swedish

students who studied in the United States in the 2014-2015 academic year, 36.6 percent of those students studied at a community college.

Table 1

Swedish Students Enrolled in U.S. Community Colleges

Academic Year	Countries of Origin Rank	Total Enrolled in U.S. Institutions	Total Enrolled in U.S. Community Colleges	% of Total Enrolled in U.S. Community Colleges
2010-2011	20	3236	899	27.8%
2011-2012	13	3926	1584	40.4%
2012-2013	9	4283	1736	40.5%
2013-2014	11	4369	1671	38.3%
2014-2015	12	4507	1650	36.6%

Note. Adapted from *Open Doors Data: Special Reports: Community College Data Resources*, by the Institute of International Education, 2015, Washington, DC: IIE.

In my position as a recruiter at HCC, I observed this increase in its early stages and began to explore the potential to target the Swedish market and recruit Swedish students. This strategic decision to focus on Sweden produced impressive results. Through nurturing agency partnerships in Sweden, Swedish student enrollment at HCC increased dramatically, in less than two years. In the fall 2012 semester, only one Swedish student was enrolled at HCC. In the spring 2016 semester, there were 14 Swedish students enrolled at HCC. This growth stems from the decision to use specific promotional tactics and collaborate in recruitment activities with Swedish agents, such as digital marketing campaigns and numerous in-country visits. As my expertise in the Swedish market has quickly progressed, it has resulted in a considerable amount

of interest in the role that agencies play in recruiting Swedish students to U.S. community colleges.

Therefore, this study asks: *What role do agents play through marketing community colleges in the Swedish education market and recruiting Swedish students to U.S. community colleges?* To answer this question, this study explores Swedish education agents' perspectives of the community college system in the United States, their experiences in marketing community colleges in Sweden, and the factors that may lead to or prohibit the success in recruiting Swedish students for U.S. community colleges.

The goal of this study is to use the collected data to explore agents' experiences in promoting U.S. community colleges, to find out how community colleges are perceived by Swedish students and their parents in order to better understand the Swedish recruitment market. This information can be used by U.S. community colleges to develop successful international student recruitment and marketing strategies in Sweden.

Literature Review

The areas of current research which assisted in this study primarily included: the use of education agents, international student recruitment strategies in U.S. higher education institutions, and research conducted motivates of international students to study in the United States, specifically in community colleges.

Education Agents

The use of commissioned agents in international student recruitment has been a hot topic in the field for several years. Countries such as Australia and the United Kingdom have perfected the art of working with agents as a vehicle to recruit international students, while the United States has been slow to get on-board.

Small colleges and universities across the United States have accelerated their use of commissioned agents, because they acknowledge the fact that they need the support. Richard Garrett is the North American director of i-graduate, which tracks and measures student and stakeholder opinions across the entire student journey. Referring to the use of commissioned agents, Garrett recognizes that, “This isn’t some crazy, evil, phenomenon that needs to be curbed. It’s supply and demand; it generally meets a need that otherwise isn’t well served by governments or institutions” (as cited in Redden, 2014, para. 15).

Detailed research was conducted by surveying agents, international students, and higher education institutions. The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education released these findings in a report, to reveal the current data around international student recruitment. Eighty-two percent of the 54 U.S. institutions in the sample reported using commissioned agents (Redden, 2014, para. 20). This amount is much higher than what was previously found in other surveys.

EducationUSA, which is a part of the U.S. Department of State, is a global network that offers international students non-biased information on studying in the United States.

EducationUSA, and the U.S. Department of State are widely known to oppose the use of international recruitment agents. In 2011, previous Branch Chief of EducationUSA, Elizabeth Thornhill, addressed her concerns:

The rush of many schools to enroll international students primarily for economic reasons, and especially via commissioned agency, was potentially overshadowing and ill-serving the national interest that these students receive both a full welcome and a rich educational and cultural experience. In short, the issues surrounding the recruitment and enrollment of international students at our institutions are of national importance and not only for specific institutional welfare. (as cited in NACAC, 2013, p. 3)

Philip G. Altbach, previous director of the Center for International Higher Education at Boston College, is an advocate for EducationUSA and its beliefs in providing objective information to students. With regards to international students using agents to help them in the college admissions process, he argues, “If somebody can’t apply, maybe they shouldn’t be going” (as cited in Redden, 2014, para. 18). Regardless, the Observatory’s report notes that international students in need of help in admissions will turn to agents, even when institutions do not (as cited in Redden, 2014, para. 6).

On the other hand, the U.S. Department of Commerce promotes the exportation of goods and services, which includes the exportation of knowledge-based services, such as education. International students provide a substantial amount of revenue to the U.S. economy. The U.S. Department of Commerce actually classifies higher education as one of the top service sector exports in the country (as cited in Tan, 2015, p. 2).

The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) previously took a firm stand against the use of commissioned-based agents because of the possibility of partnership problems. In 2011, NACAC convened a Commission on International Student Recruitment, to address the controversy surrounding the use of commissioned agents. “The commission was comprised of individuals representing a diverse range of institutions, perspectives, and interests to acknowledge the complexity and breadth of the issue” (NACAC, 2013).

The issues considered by the Commission included: “An exploration of institutional policies and practices for the recruitment of international students in light of well-established principles for admission practice; obstacles institutions face in the recruitment of international students and ways in which such obstacles can be addressed; federal policy challenges facing US institutions wishing to engage in international recruitment” (NACAC, 2013).

In the fall of 2013, NACAC released the consensus of the Commission in a full report, which publicly announced that it would permit colleges and universities in the United States to use agents in international student recruitment, as long as they follow guidelines to ensure transparency and ethical standards (NACAC, 2013).

The American International Recruitment Council (AIRC) was formed to promote the ethical use of international recruitment agencies. Mitch Leventhal, one of the founders of AIRC, says, “You can see there is a continuum, and there’s a life cycle that institutions go along as they professionalize. We’re at the early end, but I think in about six or seven years, we’ll look a lot like Australia and the United Kingdom” (as cited in Redden, 2014, para. 23).

International Student Recruitment Strategies

Higher education institutions across the United States employ a variety of international student recruitment strategies. The information made accessible through organizations such as AIRC and the Association of International Educators (NAFSA) provide hard data and specific strategies currently used in international student recruitment, which can be applied in any higher education institution.

AIRC created a framework (2012) concerning ethical and transparent standards, in order to certify agencies around the globe. AIRC’s principles act in accordance with NAFSA’s Guidelines for Ethical Practices in International Student Recruitment (NAFSA, 2006). Numerous higher education institutions use these standards to develop and maintain ethical partnerships with international recruitment agencies.

Furthermore, NAFSA highlights the many ways that international student recruitment can be approached. These strategies include traveling abroad to recruit students, networking opportunities to develop contacts, and working with a variety of international constituents.

NAFSA provides its members an entire list of resources, depending on the particulars and desired outcomes for higher education institutions. The organization provides an online course to their members, which demonstrates ways to employ cost-effective recruitment strategies that do not require leaving campus, frequently referred to as ‘armchair recruitment’ (NAFSA, 2016).

NAFSA’s Guidelines for Ethical Practices in International Student Recruitment (2006), specifically speak to the importance of ethical practice in community college recruitment. One strategy that NAFSA recommends is to have an international presence and send a representative from the college abroad to meet with prospective students and their parents. Presenting information on the variety of educational opportunities at the institution “lends credibility to the institution and assures prospective students and parents that the institution is genuinely interested in attracting and nurturing international students” (p. 11).

NAFSA recommends taking certain steps to implement ethical recruitment practices in community colleges. As it relates to agent relationships, NAFSA suggests developing a contract outlining the partnership, which should be evaluated regularly. On the institutional level, student feedback should be collected on the services that the agency provided. Agents should also be asked to visit the campus, so that they are able to speak to prospective students about the institution on a higher-level. It is important for the college to have direct access to prospective students, in order to communicate with them about the institution (NAFSA, 2006, p. 12).

Bohman (2010) conducted a qualitative case study, which examined the recruitment strategies of a suburban-based community college located in the mid-western region of the United States. The study initially investigated international students’ decision-making process to attend a U.S. community college, when international student recruitment was completely inactive in the institution. Subsequently, after hiring a full-time recruiter in 2007, the institution observed

a significant increase in international student enrollment, which nearly doubled in a three and a half year period of time. This demonstrates that taking on a more active role in international student recruitment within an institution's recruitment plan can lead to an increase in international student enrollment.

Factors Influencing the Decision to Study Abroad

Despite the fact that community colleges are now actively working to attract international students, Bohman (2014) points out, "Little is known how these active efforts influence international students' decisions to attend a community college" (p. 710). Thus, Bohman conducted a study to investigate international students' decision to enroll in U.S. community colleges.

In this study, Bohman examined which particular recruitment factors were critical to international students' decision to attend a community college. In his research, Bohman chose to examine the same mid-western community college that he analyzed in his 2010 study. Bohman conducted on-campus interviews with two sets of three international students. The participants interviewed in this study were enrolled in an academic program other than English as a Second Language (ESL). All participants noted the prominent benefits and critical factors in selecting a community college, such as transfer options, smaller class sizes, and substantial financial savings.

During the years of research that Bohman had conducted through a variety of studies, all of which focused on international student recruitment in community colleges, he developed the Bohman International Student Community College Decision Model (Bohman, 2010), which illustrates the four steps involved in international students' decisions to attend a community college (see Appendix A).

The primary stage in Bohman's model takes place when an international student makes the initial decision to study abroad. Secondly, in Bohman's destination phase, an international student narrows down their options and decides where they want to study. For international student recruiters at community colleges, one of the important stages for recruitment is in this phase. It is in this stage that the potential exists for community colleges to actively recruit international students.

Education agents play a big role in the next step, as the international student determines which type of school to attend. Bohman (2014) explains, "Often at this point, students may turn to expert sources such as Study USA centers or employ an educational agency to facilitate the process" (p. 716).

In the fourth and final step, international students advance to the school selection phase. In this phase, students decide which specific school to attend. Bohman states, "The influence of the community college itself at this point in the decision making process cannot be overstated; because at this stage, students have narrowed the possible schools" (p. 717).

Overall, the research that has already been conducted in the field helped to guide this study. However, it has become apparent that there is currently little to no information on the use of education agents in Sweden, especially as it relates to promoting U.S. community colleges. One of the main goals of this study is to close the gap in research, while making a substantial contribution to the field.

Methodology

Qualitative research methods were used in this study, in order to explore Swedish education agents' personal perceptions of the community college system in the United States, their experiences in marketing community colleges in Sweden, and the factors that may lead to

or prohibit the success in recruiting Swedish students for community colleges in the United States.

Data Collection

Representatives from each of the six main agencies in Sweden were identified and asked to take part in this study. The researcher sent an email invitation to fourteen prospective participants, requesting their participation (see Appendix B). Eight participants decided to take part in this study, coming from five of the six Swedish agencies.

Preliminary surveys were given to all of the participants, all Swedish agents who are familiar with the U.S. higher education application process and specialize in U.S. higher education consultations (see Appendix C). The preliminary surveys asked for basic information, such as name, age, gender, country of citizenship, name of company, location of company (city, region), year their agency was founded, the number of years the agent has personally been working in the business of college counseling, and any personal experiences they may have had studying abroad.

Interviews were conducted with each of the eight participants, and focused on the participants' experiences in promoting community colleges in the United States (see Appendix D). All eight interviews were administered over the telephone and were constructed with open-ended questions, elaborated through reflective questions and deeper discussion.

Furthermore, an analysis of the agents' marketing tactics was completed. This included a content analysis of the agency websites, individual webpages for their institutional partners, online/digital marketing, and social media presence. Each agency's marketing packages were examined, and it was noted which basic marketing strategies were offered to their partners, and which were not offered at all.

A review was completed of relevant studies in journals, books, and scholarly magazines, offering information on the use of education agents, international student recruitment strategies in U.S. higher education institutions, and research conducted on what motivates international students to study in the United States, specifically in community colleges.

Participant Selection

There are six main agencies in Sweden, all of which work with community colleges in the United States. The participants who took part in this study came from all but one of these agencies. No more than two participants were interviewed from any one agency, to ensure that the data collected was not influenced by an individual agency. At the time of the research, each participant was currently working for a Swedish agency, familiar with the U.S. higher education admissions process, and specialized in U.S. higher education consultations with Swedish students.

Data Analysis

The interviews were first transcribed, and then the collected data was evaluated to explore agents' experiences in promoting U.S. community colleges. Common themes emerged through data evaluation and were recorded as such. Marketing tactics, including online promotional materials and agency websites, were also analyzed to provide methodological triangulation to this study.

Limitations

The researcher recruits international students at a community college in the United States; therefore personal bias acts as a limitation of this study. Moreover, the researcher has an ongoing, professional relationship with each of the participants who took part in the research, as

well as the agencies that they represent. These existing relationships had the potential to influence the results of this study.

However, specific measures were taken, in order to minimize the effect that these existing relationships would have on this research. For example, prior to agreeing to take part in this study, the participants were formally told that their decision to participate or not to participate would not harm or enhance their working relationship with the researcher or the researcher's institution in any way.

The questionnaires and structured interviews used in this study were uniformly designed and executed, in order to assure the accuracy of the research outcome. Additionally, as personal bias is nearly unavoidable in this particular situation, the researcher ensured that reflection was an element included in the qualitative research design. Time scheduled for reflection after each interview enabled the researcher to observe the ways in which the interviews were conducted and consider the effect that personal bias could have had on the results.

Presentation of Data

Participant Information

Eight participants took part in this study, six males and two females, all of whom were born in Sweden. The participants' ages ranged from 25 to 38. The participants' personal number of years in the business of college counseling ranged from one to 12 years. All but one of the participants studied abroad. The participant who did not study abroad did have extensive international travel experience, having visited many countries. One of the participants studied for one year at a community college in the United States.

Table 2

Participant Information

Agency	Participant	Gender	Age	EXPERIENCE			
				Years Working in the Industry	Studied Abroad	Studied in the United States	Studied at a U.S. Community College
Agency 1	Participant 1	Female	Mid 30s	9 years	Yes	Yes	No
Agency 2	Participant 2	Male	Late 20s	5 years	Yes	Yes	No
Agency 3	Participant 3	Male	Early 30s	1.5 years	Yes	No	No
	Participant 4	Female	Mid 30s	4.5 years	Yes	Yes	Yes
Agency 4	Participant 5	Male	Early 30s	4 years	Yes	No	No
	Participant 6	Male	Mid 30s	1 year	No	No	No
Agency 5	Participant 7	Male	Late 30s	12 years	Yes	Yes	No
	Participant 8	Male	Mid 20s	1.5 years	Yes	Yes	No

Note. Table displays the demographic information collected from the study’s participants.

One of the participants had actually studied at a community college in the United States. That particular participant spoke about the personal experiences, which led them to their current position in the industry. “After my studies, I was looking on the agency website, and I saw an ad for a adviser position... Since I worked with one from this agency as a student, it appealed to me... So I decided to apply, and I ended up here.”

In the interviews, each participant began by describing some of the general factors that influence Swedish students’ decision to study abroad. The participants conveyed the main elements that they believed to impact students’ decisions, which included weather, word-of-mouth, and cost. According to the participants, all of these factors have a substantial amount of influence on the location a Swedish student selects, as well as the type of U.S. institution the student chooses.

Table 3

Swedish Agents' Views on Factors Influencing Swedish Students' Decision

Factors	Percentage
Weather/Location	28%
Word of Mouth	28%
Affordability	28%
Housing	11%
Admission Requirements	6%

Note. Percentages display the instances in which each factor was mentioned by one of the participants, during the interviews.

Benefits

Three key benefits were revealed through the interviews conducted with the participants. Affordability was the primary advantage mentioned. Second, the participants stressed the convenience of community colleges having reasonable admission requirements and a relatively easy admissions process. Finally, the value of using a community college as a pathway to a four-year institution was considered quite significant.

Affordability. There is an organization in Sweden, which distributes government funds to Swedish students who wish to study abroad. The National Board of Student Aid or *Centrala Studiestödsnämnden* (CSN) awards financial aid to Swedish students in grants and loans (CSN, 2014). The average amount that a Swedish student is awarded through CSN is comparable to the costs of attending most community colleges in the United States. Potentially, this funding would cover almost everything, from tuition to living expenses.

All participants interviewed stated that the number one benefit of attending a U.S. community college is the affordability. One participant noted that as the dollar increases in strength, more and more Swedish students are realizing that studying at a U.S. community college is actually quite cost-effective.

The best option for students, financially, is to go to a community college and complete two years of higher education at a very reasonable price. And community colleges are becoming even more appealing to Swedish students, now that the exchange rate is so high.

Admission Requirements. Each participant mentioned the fact that U.S. community colleges have a fairly simple admissions process, with reasonable admission requirements. Community colleges in the United States have an open enrollment policy and accept all students who have the equivalent of a high school degree and meet the English proficiency requirement, as described by a participant:

If a student is struggling with the academic side and doesn't have very good grades, or they didn't score high enough on their test scores, we tell them that a junior college is a very good option. Mainly because there is not as much pressure academically, and it is also easier to get into those schools because they have lower admission requirements.

Four of the participants specifically noted that there is no minimum grade point average (GPA) required for admission, and students are not obliged to take a college entrance exam, such as the SAT or ACT. One participant stated, "Going to a community college will open the doors for a student who didn't study that hard in high school, but still wants the opportunity to get a higher degree."

Generally, as three of the participants pointed out, the English proficiency requirement for most community colleges can be fulfilled a number of ways. Normally, they said, an English language proficiency exam must be completed, such as the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) or IELTS (International English Language Testing System), and the minimum scores accepted in the majority of community colleges are much lower than what is required for admission to four-year institutions in the United States. In many cases, as one participant explained, Swedish students can fulfill the English proficiency requirement by scoring high enough in their secondary school English courses and submitting those grades to the community college.

Pathway to University. Seven of the eight participants mentioned university transfer options as an advantage of attending a community college. They stated that U.S. community colleges are a great starting point for international students who wish to earn their four-year bachelor's degree in the United States. Attending a community college allows international students the chance to explore a variety of academic options, while they complete the first two years of their degree. One participant explained during their interview:

If a student is not sure what they want to study, or they have the intention of getting into a really prestigious school, which they may not get into otherwise, then they can use a community college to take all the foundation courses and complete the first two years of their degree. Community colleges are sort of a stepping-stone for students.

All but one of the participants indicated the importance of providing transfer options for degree-seeking students. The participants continued by stating that it is advantageous if a community college offers international student support in addition to university transfer assistance. Two of the participants specifically mentioned the value of articulation agreements,

also referred to as transfer agreements or two-plus-two agreements, which a number of their community college partners share with universities across the country.

Four of the participants elaborated even further, by observing that fact that community colleges help international students by providing an easy transition into college life and allowing for adaptability to higher education in the United States. As one participant pointed out, after spending the first two years in a community college, a Swedish student has already demonstrated their ability to successfully integrate into a completely different culture, while simultaneously working towards a degree in the United States. Along with the progress made in their language skills and a proven college-level academic performance, that degree-seeking student would then be an exceptional candidate for any four-year institution.

Disadvantages

In each interview, the participants were asked about the perceived disadvantages of attending a community college in the United States. Each of the participants struggled to answer this question. Three participants said that there were no disadvantages. One of those participants said, “I don’t really see any big disadvantages.” Yet another answered, “I don't see any disadvantages to be honest with you. I think it's obviously a good thing.”

However, two disadvantages eventually surfaced during the interviews of the other five participants. The disadvantages noted were the absence of an American college experience and lack of on-campus housing.

Absence of American College Experience. Half of the Swedish agents interviewed for this study noted that the major disadvantage of attending a U.S. community college is the lack of the typical American college experience. Swedish students are usually quite active on U.S.

campuses and are keen to participate in extracurricular activities, outside of the classroom. One participant spoke about this disadvantage in their interview.

I think one of the disadvantages is that usually students won't get that full American college experience at a community college. Clubs, sports, sororities and fraternities are usually absent from community college campuses. It is rare when a community college can offer that, if at all.

Another participant noted that this may lead to the absence of having a sense of belonging, and Swedish students could experience a loss of attachment to the community college. They observed that once any student transfers from a community college to a four-year university in order to complete their degree, the student usually feels a stronger sense of camaraderie towards the four-year institution where they ultimately receive their bachelor's degree.

On the other hand, the experience of attending a community college, and then transferring to a university upon completion of their associate's degree, could actually be seen as a benefit. One participant explained that attending a community college first would allow a Swedish student to undergo the unique adventure of having two very different college experiences. "If a student starts at a community college, and then transfers to a university, they will get two different student experiences. They will get the experience of both a community college and a university."

Lack of On-Campus Housing. The second disadvantage, which four of the participants mentioned in their interviews, was the observation that community colleges in the United States usually do not offer on-campus accommodation to students. Putting in the time and effort to search for a place to live in a new and unfamiliar country can be very strenuous. The

participants noted that the act of seeking out accommodation close to campus can cause unnecessary stress to a student and is a major disadvantage for a community college. One participant explained, “Most community colleges don't offer housing. Students find it discouraging if they have to put more effort into actually finding a place to live without on-campus accommodation.”

Marketing U.S. Community Colleges

A content analysis of the agents’ marketing tactics, which included an analysis of each of the agency’s websites and online promotional materials, was completed prior to conducting participant interviews. All of the agencies had a company website. Four of the five agencies had individual pages for each of their institutional partners, which were categorized by continent or by country, not by institutional type. Therefore, the community college partners were grouped with all other partner institutions and not in their own category.

Three of the agency’s partner websites were offered in both Swedish and English. Furthermore, two of those websites included student stories on their partners’ pages, which illustrated personal testimonies of Swedish students who studied at some of their partner schools, as well as photos taken of those students on-campus.

The analysis also indicated the role social media plays in digital marketing. All agencies had a strong presence on their Facebook and Instagram pages. On these social media pages, there were posts and updates made by the agencies almost daily, promoting the services offered, details on upcoming events, and showcasing some of their institutional partners.

The interviews confirmed this assessment. The participant interviews concluded with questions detailing each participant’s marketing strategy in promoting U.S. community colleges. Effective marketing strategies were reported, and then the difficulties and challenges were also

addressed. All participants mentioned the importance of digital marketing. The participants all referred to the benefit of online marketing campaigns, such as Google's online advertising program, Google AdWord, in order to drive traffic to their respected websites and social media pages.

Effective marketing strategies brought up by each agent also included hosting education fairs in Sweden's three most populated cities, Stockholm, Gothenburg, and Malmö. Moreover, one of the agencies interviewed stressed the significance of targeting cities north of Stockholm, Sweden's capital. As Sweden is such a saturated market when it comes to agencies, the participant claimed, it is important to have a presence in the cities that would not get much attention otherwise. The participant explained, "We decided to target cities in the north of Sweden, because it's an untouched market. We don't want to be where all of the other agencies are located." The agency that this participant represents specifically focuses on targeting northern Swedish cities, such as Umeå, which is located approximately 320 miles from Stockholm.

One participant noted that the fairs that the agencies host themselves can attract up to hundreds of student attendees. Furthermore, the participant explained, "Students who attend these fairs all come with the desire to study abroad." The participant also noted that a lot of these student attendees come to the fair with their parents. Although Swedish students are quite independent in their selection process, that participant declared, "If a student comes with a parent, that student is usually quite serious about deciding to study abroad. When parents are on-board, it always results in an application."

All of the persons interviewed said that the reason why parents do not play a large role in the process correlates to the fact that Swedish students have the option to apply financial aid

through CSN. Therefore, they said, Swedish students do not usually rely on their parents to fund their studies.

Apart from hosting their own education fairs, all participants explained that there are regional education fairs in Sweden that agencies can opt to attend along with their institutional partners. As the agencies pay a large fee to participate, they charge a smaller fee to the institutional partners who wish to join them. The largest of these education fairs, which was mentioned in each of the interviews, is the SACO (*Sveriges Akademikers Centralorganisation*, Sweden's Central Organization of Academics) Fair, held every fall. The fair is held for one day in Malmö and then for two consecutive days in Stockholm. These fairs attract many students, as stated on the SACO website. "SACO student fairs are the largest educational fairs for post secondary studies. Almost a third of all final-year students in the whole country visit for inspiration for their choice of studies" (SACO, 2016). Two participants mentioned that similar exhibitions take place on much smaller scales, including the Nolia fair in Umeå.

All of the participants agreed that involvement in these fairs is a good way for community colleges to explore the market and gauge interest. In terms of quantity, these fairs generate a large number of student attendees. One participant noted that although the quantity is immense, the quality of students is usually not as significant. This is because, the participant explained, most high school students in the area are actually required to attend these fairs, and secondary schools provide student transportation to and from the fairs. The participant noted that as the students are required to attend, only a few attendees actually have the desire to study abroad.

Two participants mentioned promoting their institutional partners through regionally themed agent events. These fairs, which take place in the spring, are a smaller form of an agent-

hosted education fair that focuses on institutional partners located in specific countries. There is a North American event and an Australian event, for example. The participants who spoke about these regionally focused events said that they are not as successful as other forms of marketing, such as the use of social media.

These events are not overly important, I would say. We're based in Stockholm, but not a lot of our students are from Stockholm. Students reach out to us after seeing online advertising mostly, like Facebook ads. And I think a lot of them just come through Google. Then they come to our website, and they can contact us via our website. So there will be quite a few students that we don't even meet the person... They look at the online profiles and ask us about specific schools... That is actually more important to the students than being able to meet the college representatives in person.

In complete contrast, a participant from a different agency takes a more personal approach. Initially, they meet with the student face-to-face or on Skype, if the student cannot physically visit one of their offices. Several meetings will be scheduled thereafter, to counsel the student through the decision-making process. The participant said that one-on-one meetings with students allow agents time to present community colleges as an alternative to universities. The personal time spent on counseling each student has a huge impact on the students' decision, the participant noted.

The same participant explained that after the student makes their decision on where to study, the student is personally assisted throughout the entire application process, as well. In their interview, the participant explained the process of working with a typical Swedish student who wants to study abroad.

We provide workshops in all of our offices for our students. If a student wants help with the application process, the visa process, the CSN funding application, or has any questions... We guide them as much as possible. We also have different Facebook groups, to get them in contact with other students who will be starting in the same semester... It makes their transition a bit easier and smooth. We also have a pre-departure seminar at our offices. It's the most basic information, you know, like what they can do with a student visa, what they can expect... and it allows them time to ask us questions. We also try to follow up with our students, approximately two to three months after they've been at the college or at the university. Usually we don't hear that much from the students, which, in most cases, means that they are having a good time and are really enjoying themselves.

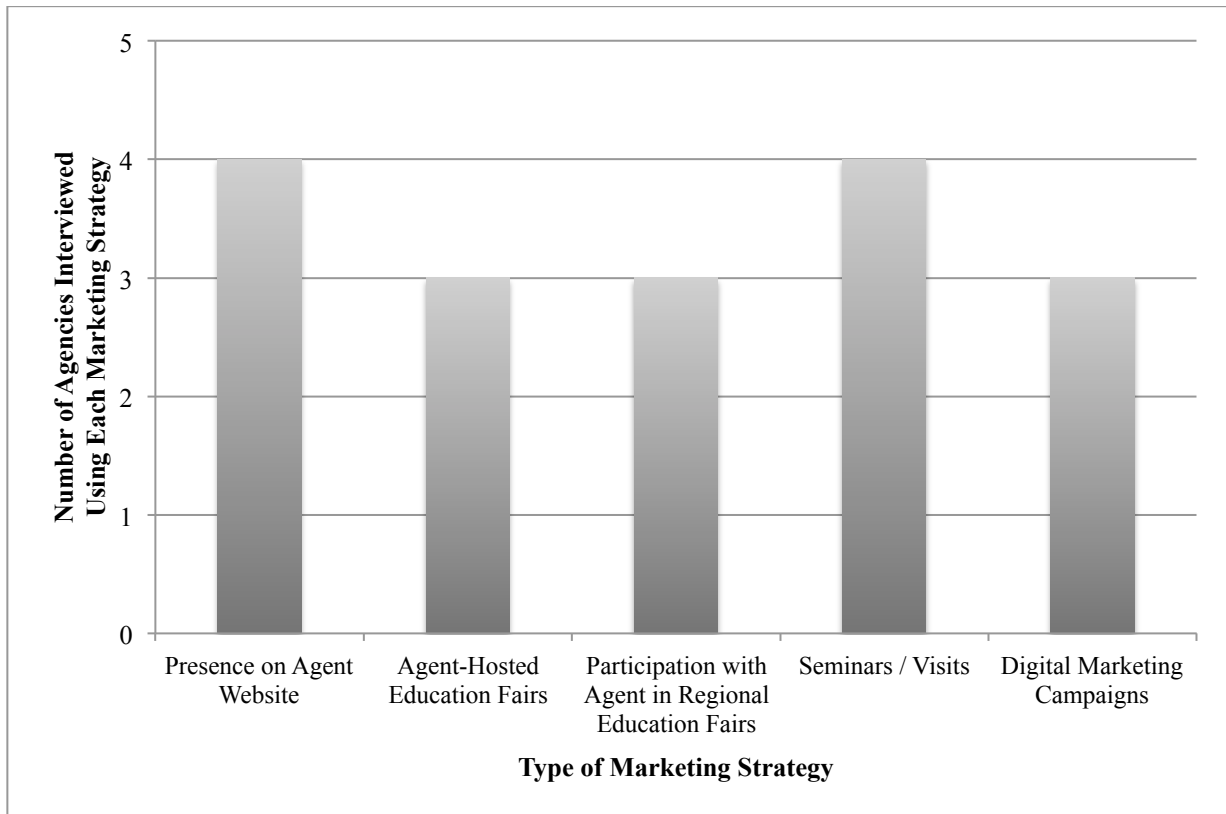
Lastly, all but one of the participants mentioned seminars and visits to secondary schools as another marketing activity that they offer to their partners. One participant said that this is especially important for community colleges, as it allows them personal access to Swedish students and the ability to enrich their understandings of the education system in the United States. The participant spoke of the advantages of using this marketing tactic.

When our community college partners get to meet the students first-hand, it makes it a whole lot easier for us to promote the school to those students. They feel confident about their choice when they have met somebody from the college. We always want our partners to come visit, because visiting us and meeting with our students is the most impactful form of marketing.

These seminars provide college representatives the opportunity to explain the concept of community colleges to Swedish students, while showcasing the highlights of their particular institution.

Table 4

Marketing Strategies Used by Agency Participants



Note. Table displays the researcher’s findings, after completing a content analysis of the agents’ marketing tactics, including an analysis of each of the agency’s websites and online promotional materials.

Difficulties and Challenges

Primarily, all of the agents stressed that the principal difficulty in marketing U.S. community colleges is that Swedish students are completely unfamiliar with the concept of

community colleges. One participant explained that Swedish students usually have no preconceived notions whatsoever.

I don't think that they have any clue, to be honest with you. It's definitely not like Americans, who sometimes view community colleges as having lower standard and think that it's for less qualified students. I think that it also has to do with how we present the community colleges, because they just don't know. I don't think they are aware of the sort of stereotype of community colleges that America has.

All eight participants said that process of explaining the higher education system in the United States to Swedish students is a very important task. One participant noted, "Some Swedish students think that community colleges are pre-university. Usually they do not have an understanding at all. But our role is to explain this to our students." All of the participants declared that the way in which Swedish education agents present community colleges to their students is especially crucial because of the lack of understanding.

Agent Recommendations

The interviews were concluded with the participants' suggestions on how to successfully explore the Swedish education market, in order to increase the number of Swedish students studying in U.S. community colleges. The participants were asked which recruitment strategies they would recommend to a U.S. community college international student recruiter, who was new to the Swedish market and interested in recruiting there. All of the participants stated that working with an agency is key. Therefore, they said, seeking out agency partnerships throughout Sweden should be the first priority.

Additionally, each agent echoed the importance of building those agency relationships. One participant said, "It is so important to have open communication and provide support. You

should have an in-country presence and a lot of patience to develop strong agent relationships.” Each of the participants confirmed that this advice is not only limited to community colleges, but all institutions working with agencies should understand how important it is to have a strong working relationship with their international partners. Another participant offered some detailed advice:

Definitely use an agent in Sweden. That would provide you with someone who is an expert in the market. It’s going to take some effort, and it’s going to take some time, but you should have a presence in the market, as well. So I think you need to be active, you need to be seen, and eventually that number will increase.

Another agent recommended, “You need to work closely with the agent. And, of course, you should have good communication with the agency, like setting clear goals and set clarifications.”

Apart from timely responses and regular communication, providing support was also mentioned as a being essential to build a strong agency partnership. One of the participants described this type of agent support.

It is important to send updated marketing materials to all of the agency offices.

Institutional representatives should also schedule online training sessions with agents on key selling points. They should make sure that the agency is accurately representing their institution.

This evidence proves that Swedish agents have set expectations with regards to institutional partnerships. Building and nurturing these partnerships, the participants agree, is key to success. Moreover, agents hold the same standard with their community college partners, as they do with four-year institutions.

Discussion

Conclusions

This study clarifies the role that agents play through marketing community colleges in the Swedish education market and recruiting Swedish students to U.S. community colleges. The research indicates that working with Swedish agencies is a valuable marketing strategy that should be used by U.S. institutions to recruit Swedish students.

The agents were all aware of the benefits of attending a U.S. community college, such as affordability, simple admissions process, and university transfer options. Disadvantages were also noted by each agent, and included the absence of experiencing a quintessential American college experience and lack of on-campus housing.

The marketing tactics that the five agencies used ranged in size and scope. The marketing strategies brought forth in this study included having a presence on agent websites, online advertisements, agency-hosted education fairs and events, regional education fairs, student seminars, secondary school visits, and one-on-one meetings with students and their parents. Evidence revealed that each agency used a different marketing approach. Some of the agents focused on digital marketing tactics, including social media. Other agents focused on demonstrating a more personal approach, in order to take advantage of face-to-face time with prospective students.

The research revealed one principle difficulty in marketing community colleges to prospective students. Swedish students are unfamiliar with the education system in the United States, including the concept of community colleges. All of the participants concluded that the way in which Swedish education agents present community colleges to their students is especially crucial. The participants agree that by explaining the U.S. education system to

Swedish students during their decision making process, as well as discussing the key benefits of attending a community college, would result in an increase of prospective applicants.

The evidence suggests that parents generally do not play a large role in the decision-making process. The collected data implies that Swedish students do not usually rely on their parents to fund their studies, as students can apply for funding through CSN.

It was reported that recruiters must demonstrate patience while developing an in-country presence. The evidence proves the importance of building strong partnerships between institutions and agency partners. Agents expect timely responses, regular communication, and reliable support from their institutional partners, in order to build a strong and lasting working relationship. These key factors may lead to or prohibit the success in recruiting Swedish students.

Practical Applicability

The results of this study can be used by U.S. community colleges, in order to develop successful international student recruitment and marketing strategies in Sweden. This research reveals the ways in which Swedish agents view U.S. community colleges, and how they portray U.S. community colleges to Swedish students. The research indicates how community colleges can work with Swedish agencies to develop working relationships and maintain strong partnerships.

Additionally, this study provides researchers, faculty, and staff at community colleges in the United States with insight on how U.S. community colleges are perceived by Swedish students and their parents.

Furthermore, recruitment departments in all higher education institutions throughout the United States should use this study to examine the Swedish recruitment market. The agencies'

recommendations brought forth in this research provide market intelligence from a unique perspective.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study only scratches the surface of the research that still needs to be completed. For example, it would be beneficial to conduct a similar study, but expand the pool of participants. By interviewing a few participants at every Swedish agency, it would add statistical validity to the research.

Additionally, it would be beneficial to explore the reasons why Swedish students end up selecting a community college in the United States as a place to study abroad. In this study, the participants described the general factors that they believed to impact a student's decision, which included word-of-mouth, weather, and cost. However, it would be advantageous to conduct a study to illustrate the students' perspective.

Current Swedish students studying in U.S. community colleges would need to be surveyed for this type of research. By researching the specific factors that influence Swedish students' decisions to study abroad, the study would provide distinctive evidence to international student recruiters and help in developing a solid recruitment plan in Sweden.

The evidence collected in this particular study clarifies the role that agents play through marketing community colleges in the Swedish education market and recruiting Swedish students to U.S. community colleges. The research proves that Swedish agencies have set expectations with regards to institutional partnerships and that working with Swedish agencies is a valuable marketing strategy, which should be used by U.S. institutions to recruit Swedish students.

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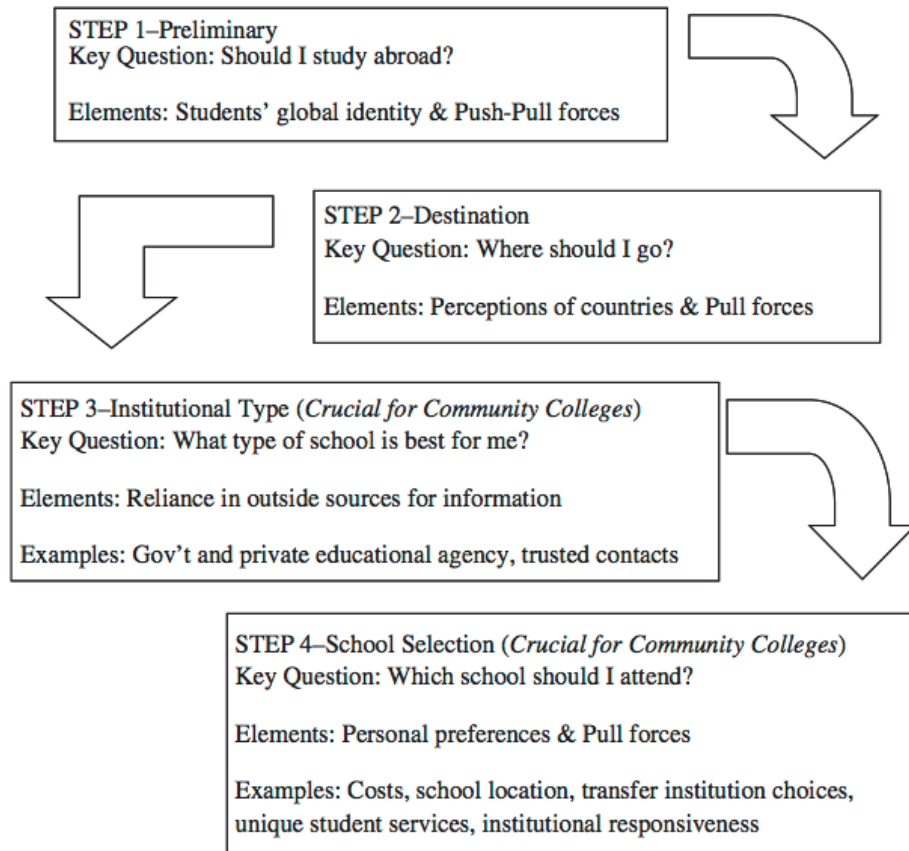
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Appendices

Appendix A

Bohman International Student Community College Decision Model



Bohman, E. (2014) Attracting the world: Institutional initiatives’ effects on international students’ decision to enroll. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 38(8), 710-720.

Appendix B

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Promoting U.S. Community Colleges in Sweden:
From the Perspective of Swedish Education Agents

This form provides information for you to consider before taking part in a research study titled *Promoting U.S. Community Colleges in Sweden: From the Perspective of Swedish Education Agents*. Research studies include only individuals who choose to take part. Read this information carefully before making a decision. Ask the Researcher to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand.

The person in charge of this research is Ashley Marie Sansotta, Manager of International Student Recruitment at Hillsborough Community College. This person is called the Researcher or Principal Investigator. She is conducting this research as a requirement for the completion of the Master of International Education Program at the School for International Training (SIT) Graduate Institute.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study is to:

- Explore Swedish education agents' perspectives of the community college system in the U.S., their experiences in marketing community colleges in Sweden, and the factors that may lead to or prohibit the success in recruiting Swedish students for U.S. community colleges.
- Use the collected data to develop a comprehensive study on agents' experiences in promoting U.S. community colleges, to find out how community colleges are perceived by Swedish students and their parents in order to better understand the Swedish recruitment market.

Study Procedures

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to:

- Answer a brief questionnaire, which will ask you for basic information (such as your name, age, years of experience in the industry, etc.). This preliminary questionnaire will take approximately five minutes.
- Take part in a telephone interview that should last no longer than one hour. The conversation will be recorded using a voice recorder, or a voice recorder instrument/capability on a laptop.

Total Number of Participants: Six to twelve total individuals will be asked to participate in this study.

Alternatives: You do not have to participate in this research study. There are no consequences if you decide not to participate. Your decision to participate or not to participate will not harm or enhance your relationship with Hillsborough Community College, nor the SIT Graduate Institute, in any way.

Benefits: You will not benefit directly from participating in this study, but your efforts will benefit international education in a more general way. Specifically, the information that you provide will assist

U.S. community colleges in developing successful international student recruitment and marketing strategies in Sweden.

Risks or Discomfort: There are no known risks in participating in this study, other than those encountered in day-to-day life.

Compensation / Payment: You will not be paid to participate in the study.

Cost: There will be no costs to you to participate in this study.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Your interview will be audio recorded and transcribed, and kept private and confidential. No personal identifying information will be visible on your recorded or transcribed interview. It will be kept in a secure place, on a private and password-protected computer, locked away in the home of the Principal Investigator. Certain people may need to see the study records, such as the SIT Graduate Institute's Institutional Review Board (IRB), but only if requested. By law, anyone who sees your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will ever be allowed to see your records or hear your voice recordings are:

- The Principal Investigator
- The SIT Graduate Institute's Institutional Review Board (IRB)

The Researcher will include the results of the research in a Capstone research paper that is required for her degree program. This study may be published or used for future publications. You will not be identified by name or by the name of your company in this study. Your name and any other identifying information will not be included in any future research. Your audio recording will be erased immediately after it is transcribed. The transcription of your interview will be maintained for three years after the completion of the study. After this period of time, your personal information and interview transcription will be destroyed.

Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You should only take part in this study if you want to participate. You are free to take part in this research or to withdraw at any time. If at any point in the process you decide to withdraw your participation, your information will be destroyed and will be removed from the research. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions you feel uncomfortable about in the questionnaire or interview, survey or questionnaire. If you desire to withdraw completely, you shall be allowed to do so promptly, and without penalty or prejudice to your interests.

How to get answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, before, during, or after the research is complete, please contact the Researcher directly. You can contact Ashley Sansotta by telephone +1 (727) 564-0036 or by email at ashley.sansotta@mail.sit.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may visit the World Learning website and check its policies on Human Subjects Research at:

<http://studyabroad.sit.edu/documents/studyabroad/human-subjects-policy.pdf>, or email the SIT Institutional Review Board (IRB) at IRB@sit.edu.

Statement of Consent: *I have read the above information, I understand its contents, and I agree to participate in the study. I give my consent to be audio-recorded. I acknowledge that I am 18 years of age or older.*

Your Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Your Name (PRINTED): _____

This Consent Form will be kept by the Researcher for at least three years after the completion of the study.

Researcher's Signature: _____

Appendix C

Research Method: Survey Instrument

Promoting U.S. Community Colleges in Sweden:
From the Perspective of Swedish Education Agents

Preliminary surveys will be given to the participants, in order to request basic information from the participants, and should take no longer than five minutes to complete.

Preliminary Survey / Questionnaire

- Name:
- Age:
- Gender:
- Country of citizenship:
- Name of company:
- Location of company (city, region):
- What year was the agency founded?
- How many years have you personally been working in the business of college counseling?
- List any personal experiences you have had traveling or studying abroad.
- Have you studied in the United States?
- If so, did you study at a U.S. community college?

Appendix D

Research Method: Interview Guide

Promoting U.S. Community Colleges in Sweden:
From the Perspective of Swedish Education Agents

Participant interviews will be administered over the telephone, each lasting approximately one hour in length. The interview questions will be constructed in an open-ended manner, which will lead into elaborating through reflective questions and conversation.

Interview Questions

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

- Did you study abroad? If so, where and for how long? If not, what international experience did you have prior to your current position?
- If you studied abroad, did you study in the United States? If so, which city and state? How do you think location played a part in your own experience?
- If you studied in the United States, did you study at a community college? If so, which community college? If not, why did you choose to study in a four-year institution?
- What brought you into this field? What experience(s) led you to your current position?

RELATIONSHIPS WITH CONTRACTED SCHOOLS

- How many partners does your company currently have? How many of those are from each country that you represent?
- Do Swedish students typically choose to study in any particular country more than others? Why do you think that is?
- How many community college partners do you currently work with? How familiar are you with U.S. community colleges?
- Out of all of your partners, how many frequently visit your office in Sweden? How many of those partners are representatives from U.S. community colleges? What do those partnerships look like?
- Have you personally visited their campuses in the United States? How do you think that plays a role in the way you promote a college?

RELATIONSHIPS WITH STUDENTS

- How do Swedish students usually make initial contact with your company? How do they hear about your services (word of mouth, advertising, etc.)?
- From point of contact to going abroad, walk me through the process of working with a typical Swedish student who wishes to study abroad.

- Do most of the students that you work with have a general idea of where they wish to study?
- Do most of your students wish to study abroad for a short period of time, or are they degree-seeking students?
- What are some of the factors that influence most Swedish students' decisions on where to study abroad? Do their parents play a role in the decision making process? Why or why not?
- Approximately what percentage of your students have you sent to community colleges? Do you think that is a high or low amount of students?

MARKETING

- How do you think Swedish students' view community colleges in the United States? Do students have preconceived notions about U.S. community colleges? If so, what are they? Why do you believe that these preconceived notions exist?
- What are some of the benefits of attending a U.S. community college? How do you explain community colleges to the students that you work with?
- What are some of the disadvantages of attending U.S. community colleges? Do you feel that Swedish students are aware of these disadvantages?
- In which ways (marketing, education fairs, etc.) are you currently promoting U.S. community colleges with prospective students? Which strategies seem to work better than others? Why do you think that is?
- What do you see as potential difficulties and challenges in marketing and promoting U.S. community colleges in Sweden? Which marketing strategies are not as successful? Why do you think those strategies are not as effective?
- What suggestions would you have for an inexperienced representative from a U.S. community college, looking to explore the Swedish market?