

Recruiting Farther UPSTREAM

*U.S. Institutions Are
Exploring New Opportunities
Among International High
School Students*

BY VICKI VALOSIK



SHILIN WANG knew from an early age that she wanted to go to art school. So when, during the summer before her freshman year, her mom brought up the idea of leaving her hometown of Shanghai to go to high school in California, she jumped at the chance. “I had been thinking of it for a while since I knew I was going to be an art student in the future and that I would have more opportunities to do that in America,” says Wang.

Bolun Li, who grew up in Beijing and is now a freshman business and finance major at Duke University, had entrepreneurial ambitions even before coming to the United States four years ago to attend a prep school in Massachusetts. He credits his teachers for his freedom to explore his own interests and for their help as he started a business to teach other teenagers how to invest and manage their own finances. “I’m a big believer in flexibility of curriculum,” says Li, “and that’s where Chinese education sort of lacked at that time.”

The decision these two students made to leave their home countries for a high school education in the United States is one that hundreds of thousands of families are making. As the growth in the number of international students enrolling at U.S. universities has slowed, the number of international students in secondary schools more than tripled between 2004 and 2016, according to the 2017 Institute of International Education report *Globally Mobile Youth: Trends in International Secondary Students in the United States, 2013–2016*, reaching a record high of nearly 82,000 students.

The overwhelming majority of these students entered on longer-term F-1 visas, the report found, indicating that they intend to seek a U.S. high school diploma en route to enrolling at a U.S. college or university. That’s good news for institutions looking for new sources of international students, but as experts and leaders in the field point out, there are challenges as well as advantages.

Potential and Reality

According to data from the Institute of International Education, about 75 percent of international students who are seeking diplomas at U.S. high schools are from Asia, and mostly from China. And a 2013 report by the financial firm KPMG cited survey research by China’s Hurun Research Institute showing that there were more than 1 million Chinese people with a net worth of the equivalent of at least \$1.6 million for the first time, and that 85 percent of Chinese millionaires planned to send their children abroad for school. Among billionaires, the proportion cited was 90 percent.

The eventual goal is a U.S. college degree for their children, says Elisa Lellios, director of admissions at EduBoston, a placement agency for Chinese students coming to the United States, and the thinking is that giving students a chance to ramp up their language and intercultural skills in high school will boost their chances of admission to a prestigious U.S. university.

Attending a U.S. high school provides Chinese students the “opportunity to learn and improve their English before it is such high stakes in the university experience,” says Lellios. “They are learning about the culture, getting over the idea of homesickness, learning to be independent, and also making themselves competitive with U.S. domestic [college] applicants.”

Professor Christine Yeh, whose research at the University of San Francisco’s School of Education focuses on the experiences of Asian youth in the United States, notes that the cultural gap is one that needs bridging for many Chinese students who hope to be successful at U.S. universities.

For example, unlike in U.S. classrooms, where asking questions is both normal and expected, “It’s actually considered disrespectful in many Chinese classrooms to ask questions because it can imply that the teacher didn’t explain the material well,” Yeh says. One high school Yeh worked with provided a workshop to help students become more comfortable speaking up in class. “Teachers came in and explained why it was important to ask questions and talk in class, and then the students practiced. ... It significantly changed how students approached class.” Even small steps, like arranging desks in circles instead of rows and providing students with participation grades, have proven effective in encouraging classroom discussion, she says.

The precollege language training and classroom culture orientation may indeed give students an academic advantage when they’re in college, but they don’t necessarily give them an edge when applying. In fact, Bryant Priester, director of international admissions and recruitment at Purdue University, which has the third largest Chinese student population of any university in the United States, is not convinced that Chinese students with U.S. high school educations fare any better during the college admissions process.

“We’ve had students who have gone to high school in the U.S. and have done amazingly well and we’ve had others who struggled to make the adjustment to college,” says Priester. “So when we are looking at applications we are looking for the best students regardless of whatever sort of education system that they’ve been a part of.” Of the 302 Chinese freshmen to arrive at Purdue in fall 2017, he notes, 73 of them had attended high school in the United States.

That’s not to say that attending an expensive private U.S. high school is worthless to an international secondary student hoping to succeed at a U.S. university.

Priester says one of the most important things schools can do for international students is thinking about “how to get international students to communicate on a meaningful basis with American students. Not just a ‘Hey, how you doing?’ but a ‘What is life like for you?’” and the ability to look beyond religion, race, or gender. “High schools that are able to do that will give international students a significant advantage, regardless of where they are located,” he says.

Creating a Straight Pipeline

To be sure, U.S. colleges and universities are not passively waiting for these Chinese and other students with U.S. diplomas to knock on their doors. Institutions have minted affiliations with preparatory schools, and in some cases even created their own in an effort to funnel students directly from their secondary programs into their postsecondary programs.

Some institutions aren’t even waiting for students to grab their diplomas: “Early college” programs and community colleges with high school completion programs are also attracting significant numbers of Chinese students. The High School Completion Plus Program at Green River College, a community college in Auburn, Washington, allows students to skip up to two years of high school and

begin taking college-level classes, graduating after about two years with both a high school diploma and an associate degree that is transferable to a four-year university.

Ross Jennings, senior director of international education at Green River College, says that although the high school completion program was originally started for American students, it has become very popular among international students, particularly those from China: Of the 600 Chinese students at Green River College, about 40 percent are in the High School Completion Plus program. Jennings believes that the program, which can save students both time and money, is particularly appealing to students from China because of the structure of secondary education there, with the final year dedicated to preparation for the National Higher Education Entrance Examination. “So, for students who know they are going to be studying abroad,” says Jennings, “they can relieve themselves of that extra very stressful year and come directly to us.”

International student recruitment has also helped Green River and other community colleges in Washington state avoid some of the pain associated with shrinking state budgets. The colleges have received some pushback, given their mandate to serve the local

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communities, but Jennings points out that the international program at Green River, which charges international students more than double what domestic students pay, benefits the entire student body. "We have a little more money on campus now that we can use to support all of our programs so we don't have to increase tuition for our domestic students or cut classes as much as we might otherwise. Keeping class sections open is a huge benefit."

But he adds that the benefit is not just financial. "A lot of our domestic students tell us they really like having international students here because they have interesting perspectives," he says. "They provide us a window on the world that we wouldn't otherwise have."

It was that global window that Bard College at Simon's Rock was seeking three years ago when it began recruiting international students to its early college program, says Sophie Mettler-Grove, assistant director of admissions. The early college model provides advanced students with the opportunity to skip the last year or two of high school and jump directly into its four-year college. Mettler-Grove believes the program is attractive to Chinese students because starting and finishing college early carries a level of prestige, and also because Chinese students and parents are looking for a "more intentional and purposeful academic environment," and at younger ages.

The scope of the international program at Simon's Rock is still modest, but of its 33 international students, half of them are from China. Mettler-Grove says they are focusing now on recruiting from additional countries because it is important to "maintain diversity within our diversity." With such a large market of available students from China, many schools are grappling with finding just the right balance.

Alternatives at Home

Chinese families, however, are starting to reconsider the costs related to sending their children to the United States, which can be upwards of \$100,000 a year for private high schools by the time you count living and travel expenses, says Kason Park, president of EduBoston. Meanwhile, Chinese high schools and universities are improving all the time—an annual ranking of national higher education systems finds that China's is consistently among the world's most rapidly improving—and families now have more and sometimes better options close to home, including English-speaking schools and schools that operate on the British or U.S. system.

One of these options includes private U.S. schools that have opened branches in China, such as Saint Paul Preparatory School, which is based in St. Paul, Minnesota, and now has sister campuses in Beijing, Shanghai, and Yantai. John Belpedio, principal of the Minnesota campus, says that many Chinese parents who send their children

to high school in the United States like that their children are taught to think within the framework of the Western system, but don't necessarily like the results in terms of preparing their children for careers in China. He explains that students who leave their hometowns at the age of 15, or sometimes younger, and remain in the United States throughout college miss out on forming relationships with peers that would normally serve as their early professional networks, putting them at a disadvantage when starting businesses or looking for jobs.

Belpedio says that St. Paul's American schools in China provide a solution, enabling parents to keep their children closer to home and allowing students to build those peer networks, while still providing them with a preparatory education for college in the United States. In addition to studying the U.S. curriculum in English, which students focus on in the mornings and afternoons, students must also study the Chinese national curriculum—in Chinese—in the evenings.

This all makes for long days for the students, admits Belpedio, but it also provides them with dual U.S. and Chinese degrees upon graduation—as well as the hope that these U.S.-educated Chinese students will follow their high school studies with an enrollment at a U.S. college or university. ■

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Globally Mobile Youth: Trends in International Secondary Students in the United States, 2013-2016, IIE Center for Academic Mobility Research and Impact: <http://bit.ly/2w5AX4q>

Administering Youth Exchange 3rd Edition: The U.S. High Schools' Guide on International Student Exchange, Council on Standards for International Educational Travel: <http://bit.ly/2h05sFJ>

"Chinese high school to American university: The effects and outcomes of international college preparation programs," doctoral dissertation by Jiayi Hu: <http://bit.ly/2xHESEz>

"More and Younger: Outbound Student Mobility Among Chinese High School Students," *World Education News and Reviews*: <http://bit.ly/2z6Ukxg>

"The Use of Agents in Recruiting Chinese Undergraduates," *Journal of Studies in International Education*: <http://bit.ly/2zV3Pgc>

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Global Reach of China Luxury: A KPMG study: <http://bit.ly/2z7QHY2>

"What Do International High School Students Mean for U.S. Higher Education? Six Key Takeaways," Institute of International Education blog post: <http://bit.ly/2gZNCm3>