

In hunt for students, Business Schools go global

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U.S. B-schools are casting a wider net in search of international students. Forget China and India. Think Nigeria, Vietnam, and Kazakhstan.

From her home base in Uruguay, Tuck admissions officer Kristine Laca has become a cheerleader of sorts for Dartmouth University's Tuck School of Business (Tuck Full-Time MBA Profile) in Latin America. She is a frequent visitor to countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Peru, stopping in each at least four times during the critical fall admissions season. Fluent in Spanish, she holds information sessions, attends MBA fairs, and conducts admissions interviews with prospective students in their home cities. She has also developed relationships with local MBA advisers and testing centers, allowing the school to broaden its reach. It's a new approach for Tuck, says Laca, and one that is markedly different from the sporadic way many U.S. business schools approach recruiting in the region, "parachuting" in for events once or twice a year.

"What we decided was going to make a difference was having the ability to have more of a continuous presence in the various Latin American markets, and quite frankly that entails a lot of travel," said Laca in a telephone interview from her home in Uruguay just a few hours before she set out for a whirlwind recruiting week in Argentina and Brazil. "By being down here, speaking the language, and connecting with students more frequently, I've discovered nuances in the market that help us be more effective in our outreach."

In an economic climate where many foreign students are increasingly reluctant to come to the U.S. for graduate school, many admissions officers are rewriting the rules of international recruiting. With enrollment at U.S. graduate schools down by double digits this fall from heavyweights like India and South Korea, according to a recent survey by the Council of Graduate Schools, admissions officers at business schools say they are trying to cast a wider net during the busy fall recruiting season. They're traveling to new countries in regions such as Latin America and Africa, starting programs geared at attracting students from developing economies and enlisting an army of students and alums to promote their schools and host admissions events back in their home countries. Some schools, including Tuck, are taking these efforts a step further, placing admissions officers on the ground year-round in key markets like Latin America and the Middle East. It's all part of a larger effort to ensure that business schools in the U.S. continue to attract students from foreign countries in what is becoming an increasingly crowded market, admissions officers say.

"Care and feeding"

"I think the international market takes some care and feeding right now because there are so many options that students have and there is so much uncertainty with the ability to work in the U.S. and finance the MBA," says Rosemarie Martinelli, admissions director at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business (Booth Full-Time MBA Profile).

One of the traditional ways U.S. business schools have approached recruiting abroad is by signing up for MBA fairs, which allow schools to visit a number of countries in a condensed one- or two-week time period. While that's still happening in oversaturated markets such as India and China, it's happening less as schools focus their attention on untapped markets. This year, for example, the number of U.S. schools attending MBA fairs in Indian cities like Hyderabad is down 5% over last year, while attendance at fairs in Delhi and Mumbai is flat compared with last year, according to the QS World MBA Tour, one of the largest MBA fair organizers.

Many admissions officers are instead shifting their travel dollars to emerging markets in Asia such as Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City and Malaysia's Kuala Lumpur, which saw U.S. B-school attendance jump 166% and 100% respectively this year over last, says Nunzio Quacquarelli, managing director of the QS World MBA Tour. A handful of U.S. business schools are even making their way for the first time to more far-flung destinations such as Kazakhstan and the Philippines. QS led an Africa Tour for the first time last year, visiting Johannesburg, Nigeria, Kenya, and elsewhere. Only European business schools went last year, but several U.S. business schools are expected to sign up for the Africa tour this spring. Plans are also underway for QS to organize a trip to Saudi Arabia for the first time this year, Quacquarelli says.

"I think that because the Indian market has been so plentiful to U.S. schools in recent years, deans have given a direction to schools to perhaps deprioritize Indian recruiting to get balance with other regions of the world," Quacquarelli says.

At the Boston University School of Management (Boston Full-Time MBA Profile), Admissions Director Christopher Storer says he is trying to focus more of his recruiting dollars on the Middle East, at the behest of recruiters who say they are looking to hire more students from the region. His staff has already been to Dubai twice this fall, and he will soon be going on a second trip to Cairo. Other schools, such as the University of California at Los Angeles' Anderson School of Management (UCLA Anderson Full-Time MBA Profile), are spending more time travelling in Latin America. The school usually only does one tour of Latin America each year, but this year it will be doing two, says Mae Jennifer Shores, Anderson's admissions director.

The global campus

One school that has significantly expanded its international recruiting footprint is Duke University's Fuqua School of Business (Fuqua Full-Time MBA Profile). The school now has five new campuses overseas as part of its global campuses network, with staff in Delhi, St. Petersburg, Dubai, London, and Shanghai. This has allowed Fuqua to attend MBA fairs in Abu Dhabi and Cairo, make inroads into smaller regions in China outside of Beijing and Shanghai and to reach new markets within Eastern and Western Europe, says Liz Riley Hargrove, Fuqua's admissions officer. The school was even able to send its Middle East regional director to the QS MBA Fair in Kazakhstan last spring, one of two U.S. business schools in attendance.

"We've been able to tap into new markets in a way that we have not necessarily had the bandwidth to do before," Hargrove says. "Having someone on the ground is key. It gives us more power, you could say, and more opportunity.□"

Some admissions officers are combining forces to reach out to students in new markets. Chicago's Booth School, Dartmouth's Tuck School, the University of Virginia's Darden School of Business (Darden Full-Time MBA Profile), and Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management (Kellogg Full-Time MBA Profile) organized a joint trip to Ghana this year to recruit students, the first event of its kind for the schools. The trip was a chance to get some valuable face time with prospective students, as well as an opportunity to carve out more of a presence in the country, says Booth's Martinelli.

"We've been attracting a pretty strong number of applicants out of Africa, but we haven't spent a lot of time going there beyond having students do events over the holiday breaks," Martinelli says.

Creative recruitment

Schools are also finding new ways to reach out to students. The Tuck School has run a "Student Ambassadors" program for the past three years, where students volunteer for the admissions office when they are back in their home country over school breaks. The admissions office has 80 foreign students participating in the program this year, hailing from South Africa, Mexico, Spain, Brazil, and elsewhere. Students are encouraged to present a business plan to staff on how they want to approach recruiting in their home country and, if approved by the admissions office, are given a budget. One group used its funds to obtain the names of GMAT test takers in its target country and to contact them personally. Others host small group get-togethers and large receptions, says Dawna Clark, Tuck's admissions director. "It's a creative way to have events where admissions representatives don't always have to be there," Clarke says.

In a similar vein, Darden launched a new program this fall called "Admissions City Captains," which enlists Darden 2009 graduates working in 40 cities around the world to help recruit applicants. The captains' responsibilities include interviewing promising applicants, welcoming students at admissions events in their cities, and having coffee with students interested in applying to the program. The program arose because the challenging economic climate was prompting an increasing number of foreign students to return home to work after graduation, rather than stay in the U.S., says Sara Neher, Darden's admissions director. It's just one of the ways the school is trying to innovate when it comes to attracting students from new regions, she says.

"In the past, a larger percentage of our graduates went to New York. Now, they can't go to New York or don't want to go to New York, so they are all over the place, which is really great for us in terms of admissions outreach," Neher says

Tuition Free

New scholarship programs are also helping lure students from more distant countries to U.S. business schools. One of the more innovative ones is the Share Scholarship offered at the Thunderbird School of Global Management (Thunderbird Full-Time MBA Profile). It's a full-tuition scholarship designed to attract foreign students who normally don't have the financial means to come to graduate school in the U.S., says Jay Bryant, Thunderbird's admissions director. Through the program, the school has been able to attract students from developing countries such as Colombia, Jordan, Peru, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe.

"We're seeing students now from countries that we definitely have not seen represented here on campus in a significant amount of time," Bryant says.

Reem Nassar, a 26-year-old Jordanian, is one of a handful of first-year Thunderbird MBA students who received the Share Scholarship this year. Nassar, who did her undergraduate degree in Jordan, says she desperately wanted to attend school in the U.S. but never would have been able to afford it on her own. After working in business development for three years and traveling to many Middle Eastern companies for work, she wanted to obtain business skills that would allow her to bridge the cultural gaps she'd observed between Western and Middle Eastern companies. She was excited when a representative from the Thunderbird admissions office came to visit Jordan, and even more impressed when she learned the school had a program geared toward students like her, she says.

"When I found out I got the scholarship last spring, I almost woke up the neighborhood because I was so excited," says Nassar. "I didn't expect to receive the scholarship because it is very competitive and in all of Jordan, just one student was to be selected. I'm still so excited about it. It is just like a dream come true."

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