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Higher education preparation and decision making trends among international students

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Editor's Note

The publication timeline for *College & University* is such that I am writing this editor's note in early April, just before the AACRAO Annual Meeting. As I reviewed the program to plan my schedule at the meeting, I couldn't help thinking that so many of the sessions would make excellent article topics for *C&U*. If you've presented at the Annual Meeting, or another conference, consider turning your presentation into an article for *C&U*!

This edition contains three research-focused articles. Krishna Bista examines how international students obtained college information when they were in their home countries and how that played into their decision-making process.

Brian B. Gibbens, Mary A. Williams, Anna K. Strain, and Courtney D. M. Hoff compare student performance in biology courses before and after the switch from quarters to semesters at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities. Student performance was assessed by examining grade distributions, point totals, and scores on archived exam questions.

Kristen Albright Waters reviews the history of teleworking and research on the benefits and challenges it presents, identifying information managers should know before developing policies for teleworking.

This edition's Forum section includes several timely articles. Monique Perry provides pragmatic strategies for addressing the expectations of students in the Millennial generation.

Stephen J. Handel offers ten interesting observations on the significant changes that have occurred in college admissions during the past decade.

Ashley D. Edwards and Rodney L. Parks recount the experiences during the transition to college of five undergraduates who had sustained traumatic brain injuries while in high school and suggest steps institutions can take to enhance the college success of students with such injuries.

Kenneth McGee describes the important role that the financial aid office plays in the achievement of institutional enrollment management goals and provides examples that can assist financial aid offices in supporting those goals.

We have several book reviews in this issue. James Steen reviews Robert Zemsky's, *Checklist For Change: Making American Higher Education a Sustainable Enterprise*. Matthew Fifold reviews *Remaking College: Innovation and the Liberal Arts*, edited by Rebecca Chopp, Susan Frost, and Daniel H. Weiss, and *The Student Loan Mess: How Good Intentions Created a Trillion-Dollar Problem* by Joel and Eric Best. Janelle Perron Jennings reviews *New Directions for Higher Education: Codes of Conduct in Academia*, edited by John M. Braxton and Nathaniel J. Bray.

I recently was asked by a friend for examples of innovative Registrars and innovative practices in Registrar's Offices. I gave him several examples, based on presentations I've attended, conversations I've had with colleagues, and articles I've read. Several of the people I cited will be writing for upcoming editions of *C&U*. I'd love to hear about innovative practices in your office!

Jeff von Munkwitz-Smith, Ph.D.

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Higher Education Preparation and **DECISION-MAKING TRENDS** among International Students

THIS PAPER EXAMINES HOW INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS OBTAIN INFORMATION ABOUT COLLEGE IN THE UNITED STATES WHEN THEY ARE IN THEIR HOME COUNTRIES. THE FINDINGS REVEAL THAT THE MAJORITY OF STUDENTS VISIT UNIVERSITY WEBSITES TO OBTAIN INFORMATION REGARDING VARIOUS PROGRAMS. STUDENTS ALSO RECEIVE SCHOLARSHIPS AND/OR ASSISTANTSHIPS FROM THE UNIVERSITY, FINANCIAL SUPPORT FROM FAMILY, AND ENCOURAGEMENT FROM THEIR FRIENDS AND RELATIVES TO STUDY OVERSEAS. STUDENTS ARE SELF-MOTIVATED TO PURSUE HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES IN ORDER TO OBTAIN BETTER PROFESSIONAL OPPORTUNITIES. THESE FINDINGS WILL HELP COLLEGE ADMINISTRATORS AND FACULTY IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF CAMPUS RESOURCES, INCLUDING ADMISSION AND RECRUITMENT MATERIALS, AND WILL ADDRESS THE CONCERNS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ON THEIR CAMPUSES.

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BY KRISHNA BISTA AND AMY DAGLEY

Today, the United States of America has the highest international student enrollment (819,644 students in 2012–13) of any nation, including the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada (Open Doors 2013). Students around the world view the United States as a land of opportunity. Their choices to attend U.S. higher education institutions are associated with a wide range of factors, including scholarships and other financial assistance, relatives, and bilateral exchange programs between home and host universities (Kolster 2014, To *et al.* 2014). Students from China (28.7%), India (11.8%), and South Korea (8.6%) dominate international student enrollment in the United States, but emerging trends show increasing enrollment by students from Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Mexico, and Brazil (Open Doors 2013).

The majority of international students attend U.S. colleges and universities in California (111,379), New York (88,250), Texas (62,923), Massachusetts (46,486), Illinois (39,132), and Pennsylvania (37,280) (Open Doors 2013). (Research does not reveal the precise factors that limit international students' attendance at institutions in other states.) U.S. colleges and universities have improved the resources they make available to international students—

for example, English as a Second Language (ESL) programs specifically for Chinese and Saudi Arabian students (World Education Services 2012).

International exchange programs between U.S. universities and those in foreign countries are another recent trend. Given budget cuts and increasing competition, U.S. institutions “compete hard for talented and self-funded students” (World Education Services 2012).

Despite increasing international enrollments in U.S. postsecondary education, there are challenges related to cost, distance, visa complexity, and competition for students and colleges (Marklein 2011). The potential to recruit more international students exists, but U.S. institutions have not established themselves as leaders among their competitors: A few universities in the United Kingdom and Australia (*e.g.*, the University of Buckingham, Central Queensland University) have international student populations that constitute more than 50 percent of their total enrollment. According to the World Education Services (2012), effective recruitment practices—including recruiting agents and liberal immigration policies for visas and traveling—are the primary causes of high enrollment at these institutions.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how international students obtain information about their chosen programs of study while in their home countries; what fac-

tors motivate them to enroll at U.S. institutions; and what challenges they encounter as they prepare to study abroad.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Push and Pull Factors

International students choose particular programs and locations in the United States for a variety of reasons, including relationships with other students, family and peer influences, local and national policies, and other motivational factors.

Essentially, “push” and “pull” factors influence international students’ decisions related to studying overseas. The push factors “operate within the source country and initiate a student’s decision to undertake international study” while the pull factors “operate within a host country to make that country relatively attractive to international students” (Mazzarol and Soutar 2002, p. 82).

“Push” factors include the availability of financial aid, high-quality education, cutting-edge educational and research facilities, the opportunity to gain international experience, and a favorable environment for improving English language skills (González *et al.* 2011, Rounsaville 2011, Wilkins & Huisman 2010). “Pull” factors include the quality of education, high institutional rankings, better employment prospects, opportunity for improving English-language skills, and post-study opportunities (Rounsaville 2011, To *et al.* 2014). Kolster (2014) found that international students specified the prestige of higher education systems and research, globally accepted degrees, usage of English, and political influence in the world as the top factors that attracted them to study in the United States. Less important factors were reasonable living costs, international study environment, affordability of tuition, and work opportunities in the host country during study and/or after graduation (Kolster 2014).

Motivation Factors

For many self-funded students, tuition costs, visa expenses, application fees, and travel and other daily living costs are major concerns (Rounsaville 2011). It is natural for international students to seek financial support from their host universities, though this trend is more prevalent among graduate than among undergraduate students. For example, Indian graduate students who enroll in master’s

and professional degree programs often work on campus to offset tuition costs (Fischer 2014).

International students pursue education abroad not only to gain international experience and a degree, but also for the opportunity to remain in the host country and find employment (Lasanowski 2009, Rounsaville 2011). According to Lasanowski (2009), the key factors affecting international student mobility are educational affordability, programs in which instruction is in English, and opportunities for employment and migration in the host country. In addition, countries in which English is the primary language are popular because of perceptions of a better quality of education and a better job market.

Role of Educational Agents

Many higher education institutions in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia enroll international students with the assistance of special recruitment service providers—*i.e.*, commission-based agents or consultants (World Education Services 2012). Use of these third-party agents has become an emerging phenomenon in higher education. Although third-party recruitment agents help students find colleges, some of their business practices have been found to be “highly dubious and sometimes illegal” (World Education Services 2012, p. 15). Use of third-party agents to recruit international students purely for the sake of an institution’s financial gain and agents’ overcharging parents and students for their services not only have made newspaper headlines but also have elicited concern about academic standards. Altbach (2011) argues that “agents and recruiters are impairing academic standards... and many of these operators—although it is not known how many—have authorization to actually admit students, often based on murky qualifications” (p. 11). Such agents “charge partner colleges \$2,500 for each student client who ends up enrolling” (Hoover 2011, paragraph 8) and also charge the student while assisting with college selection and visa preparation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- How did international students obtain information about their universities’ programs when they were in their home countries?

- What were the motivating factors for students to study in the United States?
- What were the major challenges students encountered while preparing to study in the United States?
- Did students receive reliable information from the educational agents who helped them prepare for their overseas study?

RESEARCH METHOD

The research was conducted using a mixed methods approach to ensure the quality of responses and to strengthen the findings; words, pictures, and narratives add meaning to numbers (Johnson and Christensen 2014). This approach offers fuller, deeper, and more meaningful answers to research questions and increases the ability to generalize study findings (Johnson and Christensen 2014). Data were collected using online surveys and face-to-face interviews during the spring 2014 semester.

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

The target population of this study was 273 international students enrolled at a small university in the southern United States. To protect the identity of the institution, the university is referred to in this article as “Southern University” (SU). An online survey was distributed to the target population of 273 students; 161 responses were returned for a 76 percent response rate. Students did not receive any incentive to complete the survey. The survey was used to collect quantitative data and was written in English; semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data. All students ($N = 273$) received an e-mail invitation to participate in a 30-minute face-to-face or a 60-minute group interview; seventeen students agreed to do so. Participants were offered a \$10 incentive to participate in a group interview and \$20 to participate in an individual interview. Four group interviews, each consisting of two or three students, and eight individual interviews were held. Interviews were audiotaped and were subsequently transcribed. The researcher analyzed the transcribed responses using Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña’s (2014) descriptive codes (e.g., words, phrases, or sentences related to the major themes). This provided insight into the specific content and quality of international students’ study abroad preparation and related experiences.

INSTRUMENT AND VARIABLES

The online questionnaire consisted of five parts: pre-departure preparation (8 items), motivational factors (6 items), challenges during preparation (2 items), the use of educational agent services (7 items), and demographic questions (8 items). Students were asked to indicate the degree of their experience on a five-point Likert scale on which one indicated “strongly agree” and five indicated “strongly disagree.” Survey items were informed by examination of the literature (Hagedorn and Zhang 2011, To *et al.* 2014, World Education Services 2012).

To collect qualitative data, the researcher asked between ten and fifteen semi-structured interview questions, depending on participants’ responses; each interview lasted approximately 20 to 25 minutes. The script for the qualitative interview was informed by the literature (To *et al.* 2014, WES 2012).

RESULTS

Demographic Information

Demographic data from the online survey indicated that 56 percent of the 161 international students were pursuing undergraduate degrees, 25 percent master’s degrees, 13 percent doctoral degrees, and 6 percent were enrolled in non-degree programs. The majority of participants reported a grade point average of 3.0 or higher. Approximately 26 percent of students reported that they were assisted by agents during their preparation for overseas study, and 73 percent were not assisted by agents. Eighty percent of participants were unmarried, 16 percent were married, and 4 percent did not identify their relationship status. The average age of participants was 24 years. The top four programs of study in which international students at SU were enrolled were business studies (28%), biology (15%), pharmacy (12%), and computer science (7%). A few international students were pursuing degrees in education, the arts, and the humanities. The top five countries of origin of international students at SU were Nepal (12%), China (8%), Nigeria (8%), Saudi Arabia (6%), and South Korea (6%). Qualitative data were collected from seventeen participants (10 females and 7 males) from thirteen countries; three were graduate students, and fourteen were undergraduate students.

Pre-Departure Information Collection Process

Eighty-one percent of participants reported that they had visited the university's website and programs of interest from their home countries. Similarly, 74 percent were encouraged by their parents to study in the United States. During pre-departure preparation, 55 percent of students contacted their admissions staff members and professors to inquire about programs, and slightly more than 50 percent reported that they applied to more than one university. Forty-one percent of students also attended study abroad seminars in their home countries that were sponsored by the U.S. universities or the U.S. Educational Centers. Overall, 81 percent of international students reported that they were well-prepared to pursue higher education in the United States.

The Pearson correlation results indicated a medium positive correlation between students who reported, "I checked college/university websites and programs of interest" and students who reported, "I e-mailed university advisors/professors before/during the application" ($r = 0.516, p < 0.01$). Thus, international students who had visited college websites were likely to have e-mailed their future professors or advisors. There were also positive correlations between students who reported, "I checked college/university websites and programs of interest" and those who reported, "I had applied to more than one university for I-20s/admission" ($r = 0.417, p < 0.01$).

When asked about motivational factors for studying in the United States, 88 percent of international students ($n = 126$) reported that U.S. higher education would better prepare them for professional success. Nearly 80 percent reported that they received support from their families; nearly half (47%) reported that their friends influenced their decisions. More than seven in ten (72%) ($n = 115$) received scholarships (or fellowships or assistantships) from the university; 30 percent studied at their own expense; and only 15 percent received support from their home country's government.

A Pearson correlation indicated small positive correlations between students who reported, "My friends influenced my interest to study in the United States" and those who reported, "I received a scholarship or fellowship to study in the United States" ($r = 0.282, p < 0.01$).

Qualitative Data

Findings from the semi-structured interviews confirmed the quantitative findings about how international students received information about SU programs and what motivated them to study in the United States in general and at SU in particular. The majority of the students ($n = 15$) said that the university website was their primary resource for searching for programs of interest. Five of seventeen participants reported that they attended seminars conducted by U.S. colleges and universities and received information from friends who were already studying in the United States. One undergraduate student from Nepal gathered information from the university website, an agent, and a seminar hosted by U.S. colleges in Nepal:

From that website I came to know that there is a Nepali student organization here and...I came to know there is the program that I am interested in.... [T]here [are] a lot of consultancies [agents] back home, and I went there and gathered some more information. I attended three seminars in Nepal that were conducted by U.S. [universities].

An undergraduate student from Bangladesh said he searched for colleges using the Internet. He also sought information from friends already studying in the United States. Six participants received program and scholarship information from athletic coaches or friends who were already playing for an SU team. An undergraduate student athlete said,

I'm from Ukraine, and [SU] is considered...one of the best [programs]. It's...really high-quality education. I think my parents gave a lot of support, and I came for an athletic scholarship. Coaches were looking for me... and...I was looking for a school. I had other options, but I came because of the...connection to coach.

In a group interview, participants from Australia and Canada reported that athletic coaches and scholarships were the primary reasons for their interest in SU, as they were for the student from Ukraine.

Participant 1: It was more of a case of SU choosing me. When I first came here, ...as an undergrad to be on the golf team, I received a scholarship. I actually played a golf tournament back home against

another Australian who was studying at SU, and he helped me through the process. [It] took about 18 months.

Participant 2: SU chose me to be on the water ski team, so I got my first degree with that [scholarship]. [T]he water ski team...sent me stuff, and I chose [to enroll] here because they were giving me a full scholarship.

Participant 3: [The] water ski team...I received [the scholarship] because she was already here, and she is my sister.

In another group interview, an undergraduate student from France shared that she received a scholarship for the water ski team: "I did school in France [for] two years, and they would make you do your two last years in another country....Then I came here for skiing team." Her friend from Finland participates on the same ski team and also came to SU on a scholarship. An undergraduate student from Costa Rica who came to SU to play volleyball and study statistics was fully funded with a scholarship. A graduate student from Belarus received information from his classmates and friends; he came to SU on an athletic scholarship and is pursuing business studies.

Participants reported that their parents, relatives, and friends encouraged them to apply to a degree program at SU. A graduate student from Australia said,

There's [sic] always been rumors that [name of the state] schooling is actually poor and that you can't do much with your degree afterwards, but...I checked with my dad. He didn't think it would be that way.

Similarly, an undergraduate student from Lebanon received college information and program information from his uncle, who worked at the university. This student said, "My uncle teaches at SU...and said I can come over here where he teaches, and that's why I came. I just wanted a new experience, a new culture, just to try a new place."

A few students reported that they enrolled at SU not only because of scholarships and the encouragement of family and friends, but also because of exchange programs between their home universities and SU. For example, an exchange student from Japan said that he received information about the college from his teacher, who distributed the information to the students in her class. Three

students from South Korea reported that they came to SU for a semester as part of an exchange program.

Priorities and Challenges During Preparation

Seventy percent of international students ($n=112$) reported that finances (e.g., scholarships or other financial support) were a top priority in choosing to pursue higher education in the United States. Approximately half of participants reported that the location and reputation of the university were important factors in their choice of which college to attend. More than six in ten (64%) reported that their choice of program was based primarily on their interest and had affected where they applied. Only 18 percent of international students reported that an on-campus job had been a factor. Some students reported that they considered lower tuition ($n=5$), the availability of a water-skiing program at the university ($n=3$), an affordable cost of living ($n=2$), an exchange program scholarship ($n=2$), and participation on an athletic team/program ($n=2$) during their college search.

Similarly, 52 percent of international students ($n=83$) reported that U.S. visa preparation, which included document preparation as well as preparation for the visa interview, was the most difficult aspect of preparing to study in the United States. Participants also reported the following challenges: finding the right university and program (48%), college entrance exams such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language and the Graduate Record Examination (48%), understanding the application process (41%), and collecting required materials for the application package (e.g., letters of recommendation and college admission essays) (39%).

Findings from Qualitative Data

International students were asked to describe their priorities in selecting a program of study as well as the most challenging steps in preparing to study overseas. Students reported that securing a scholarship, preparing for visa documentation, and passing college entrance exams were some of the most difficult steps. An undergraduate student from Ukraine reported that she not only had to prepare for TOEFL exams twice but also had to convince staff members at her home university that she wanted to apply to U.S. institutions without quitting her current program of study:

I had to pass the TOEFL exam. I found that really hard...many students will look for schools that [either] don't have TOEFL or have really low [score requirements]...and...I had to pass it twice. After the first time, I had to take courses...like four-month preparation or something. I had to take the test. [My home university] didn't want to give me my information [e.g., transcript and certificates].... They said, "This is the document we can give to you only if you say that you are done and you quit, but [it's] your choice."... I was trying to find a way I can [get a] copy of my transcripts...it was not the easiest. Here I can request a transcript and they will give it to me the [same] day. It was a really...hard process, so they put me in position that I had to quit...and then I was still not accepted, so I was really afraid for... my future...what I will do.

A Nepalese undergraduate student said that filling out information for college admissions was a major challenge and that agents helped him complete the required forms. "I never filled out any application form before.... Whenever I see like three or four copies of forms, I was kind of surprised.... I went to the consultancy [agent] and got help from different people while filling out the forms."

Role of Educational Agents

Only 26 percent of international students used professional educational agents to assist with their college preparation process. Students reported that they used agents because of their own lack of knowledge about the college application process, U.S. colleges and universities, and the U.S. visa application process.

International students were asked about the quality of information and services received from the educational agents, who operated as non-university-affiliated private counselors for overseas programs. Among the participants who used agents, 15 percent said the agents advised them about foreign countries and college choices, 14 percent received support from agents in applying to college, 19 percent received assistance during visa preparation and counseling, 14 percent thought they were more likely to be accepted by the college(s) to which they applied (with the help of an agent), 14 percent reported trusting the services provided by the agents, and 13 percent asserted that the agents provided correct information about the university.

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a positive medium correlation between students who said, "Agents assisted completing my college application" and students who said, "Agents assisted me in visa preparation and consulting" ($r = 0.616, p < 0.01$). This suggests that international students who used an agent to help them submit their college applications were also likely to receive assistance with the visa preparation process.

Another positive medium correlation was found between students who reported, "Agents provided wrong information" and those who reported, "Agents' service fees were too high (expensive)" ($r = 0.501, p < 0.01$). This suggests that international students who believed an agent provided incorrect information were also likely to pay an expensive fee for an agent's services.

Results from Qualitative Data

Students reported during the face-to-face interviews that they consulted with agents because of their own limited knowledge of U.S. admissions and visa interview processes. Students reported receiving agents' support in completing their college applications, preparing for college entrance exams, and preparing for their U.S. visa interview.

An undergraduate student from Nepal shared his experience: "There were so many documents, and I didn't want it to go wrong.... The [service fee] was pretty high compared to what they provided, but...the information was really helpful." Another Nepalese student used an educational agent because he wanted to "make sure that [he did] everything right" for his college application, I-20 (admission documentation), and visa interviews.

An Australian graduate student reported on his experience of using an agent:

I knew there were some external recruiting agencies that would basically collect everything that they needed from you and then distribute it to universities. Again, I didn't do enough research, but it was expensive. [The range is] anywhere from \$1,200 to \$2,000 dollars for their services, and [you're] not guaranteed [admission to] the university.

Students from South Korea reported that their educational agents not only helped them find the right college and programs but also helped complete paperwork for college admissions and visa interviews.

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He didn't know either.



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It's a connection between university and university, so actually I just have to buy the visa ...that's all. They fill in the blanks, so I choose only the dates.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

This descriptive study focuses on how international students at a particular institution in the southern United States decided and prepared to study in the United States. International students reported that they visited university websites and programs while they were in their home countries, contacted international program advisors and professors, collected admission and visa-related documents, and received support and encouragement from their parents to study in the United States. These findings are comparable with those of recent studies conducted in Asian and European university settings (Kolster 2014, To *et al.* 2014).

More than 70 percent of study participants received scholarships or assistantships from the university, financial support from family, encouragement to study overseas, and were self-motivated to pursue higher education in the United States in the hope of obtaining better professional opportunities. Participants shared that on-campus employment, scholarships, and programs of study as well as the location and reputation of the university were their primary concerns when applying. These findings are similar to those of Lasanowski (2009) and Kolster (2014), which indicated that international students are motivated to study outside of their home countries by the availability of scholarships and the quality of education. More than half of the participants in this study reported that the U.S. visa interview and document preparation processes were more challenging than college entrance exam (*e.g.*, TOEFL or GRE) preparation, identifying the “right” college and program, and understanding the application process. Twenty-five percent of participants received support from educational agents in finding colleges, preparing application materials, and practicing for visa interviews. However, the other 75 percent did not receive help from educational agents and instead relied on their own knowledge and resources to navigate the process. Although the agent service fees were expensive, participants reported positive experiences in terms of the quality of information agents provided about college selection, application pro-

cesses, and document preparation for visas and admission. Hagedorn and Zhang (2011) reported a significant trend in Chinese international students’ use of educational agents. Although a few studies (Altbach 2011, Hoover 2011, World Education Services 2012) suggest that service fees are expensive and the services dubious or even illegal, participants in the current study reported that for the most part, agents provided reliable information. Slightly more than 25 percent of participants received financial support from their home countries’ government, but bilateral exchange programs between home universities and SU or special sports-related scholarships also motivated a few international students to enroll. U.S. universities have initiated a fairly large number of international exchange programs. The government scholarship scheme is limited predominantly to student populations from Middle Eastern countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan.

There are several implications for individuals involved in international student affairs. For example, administrators and international student advisors should deepen their understanding of the challenges faced by international students and the resources available to them during their decision-making process in order to develop programs related to international student admission, orientation, enrollment, and retention. International students are primarily concerned with finding a safe place to work and study and the right program. Because international students usually cannot visit overseas campuses prior to admission, they may have depended solely on the information available on institutions’ websites. The current study found that 81 percent of study participants visited the university’s website prior to admission. Administrators and faculty thus are encouraged to post timely and accurate information about their programs, scholarships, and admissions requirements.

These findings must be considered in relation to the study’s limitations. First, the findings are based on the self-reported perceptions of students enrolled at one small university located in the southern United States. Students attending institutions in different cultural and geographical locations may have different perspectives relative to higher education in the United States. Such perceptions may affect their values and beliefs and may influence their preparation for enrolling at a U.S. higher education institution. In addition, this study’s conclusions are based on

how and why a small sample of international students at one university chose the United States as their higher education destination. International students who are digital natives obtain information about college and the U.S. education system not only from the Internet and social media but also from print media—not to mention a variety of social and personal contacts, including friends and family members. Future research should focus on larger student samples from diverse U.S. colleges and universities in order to better understand the needs and challenges of international students while they are in the process of seeking information and making decisions about higher education in the United States.

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