

Case study of international education at a Hispanic Serving Institution

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ABSTRACT

The United States (U.S.) is the top destination for foreign individuals who wish to pursue higher education. Because of this trend, the U.S. has seen healthy international student enrollment in its post-secondary education system. The year 2018 however saw a decline in international education enrollment across all degree levels throughout the U.S. (Redden, 2018). This decline continued further into 2019. While the U.S. suffered a continuous decline, other developed countries saw a moderate-high increase in international student enrollment.

To glean perceptions of the decline among higher education stakeholders, a qualitative study utilizing phenomenology was conducted (Patton, 2015). This study contributes to the much-needed analysis of international education stakeholder perceptions including students, faculty and staff. A single case representing each of these stakeholders was purposively selected from a population all of whom currently work and learn at an urban Hispanic-serving institution in South Texas. This study shares the lived experiences of all three stakeholder groups, and their unique perceptions surrounding the challenges of maintaining student engagement and enrollment in international education.

Keywords: higher education, international education, student enrollment, phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

International education models in countries around the world seek mutual benefit through knowledge creation and sharing. Nicholls (2018) found that the perceived superiority of education, university ranking, academic program ranking, and safety were the predominant factors enhancing the United States (US) as the most popular destination choice for international students. According to the Migration Policy Institute, there are 3.5 million international students in the world pursuing higher education, and 1.1 million of those are hosted by the U.S. itself (Zong & Batalova, 2018). However, in late 2017, a decline in these numbers started to occur and the trending decline continued throughout 2018. Enrollment of new international students went down by 6.6 percent in U.S. during the 2017-18 academic year and continued to drop an average of 1.5 percent in the fall semester of 2018 (Redden, 2018). The U.S. experienced a decline in international students in 2018 while Canada saw a 16 percent increase in international education enrollment in the same year, which had been preceded by a 20 percent increase the year before (Redden, 2019). However, in a more recent survey, “the number of new international students also decreased for the third straight year, but the 0.9 percent decline in new international enrollments in 2018-19 was smaller than declines of 6.6 and 3.3 percent reported the two years prior” (Redden, 2019). In fact,

The total number of international students in the U.S. actually increased slightly, by 0.05 percent, due to a 9.6 percent increase in the number of international students participating in optional practical training, a program that allows international students to stay in the U.S. to work for up to three years after graduating while staying on their student visas (Redden, 2019).

Additionally, while recent policy changes on immigration have changed, according to Allan Goodman, CEO of the Institute of International Education (IIE) (as cited in Redden, 2019),

Everywhere I travel, talking with parents and students, the No. 1 concern they have is about cost. U.S. higher education is expensive -- it is more expensive than other countries. I'd say there's always a mix of factors that go into deciding who will come, where they'll come, where they'll go, but overwhelmingly that is what is most on parents' minds.

The decline in enrollment of international students in higher education institutions across the United States bring attention to the unshared goals between international students and universities. International student enrollment is contingent upon a set of mutual principles, such as quality education, academic program ranking, safety, employability, and migration schemes (Facchini & Lodigiani, 2014; Nicholls, 2018).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Since 1924, foreign individuals wishing to pursue higher education in the United States, have been required to obtain the F-1 non-immigrant visa through the nation's multiple consular offices worldwide. Nicholls (2018) found that anticipated superiority of education, affordability, university ranking, academic program ranking, and safety were the predominant factors influencing the selection of the USA the most popular destination choice for F-1 students. An F-1 visa allows a foreign national to pursue a postsecondary degree from or conduct academic research at a higher educational institution in the United States of U.S. (USA). This specific

policy pertains to foreign relations, immigration, and education so it has been modified in several ways several times since 1924.

After surveying more than a hundred F-1 students in USA, Rao (2017) proffered that the main learning challenges among them are insufficient writing competency, non-participation, and conception capabilities. Writing academic papers, access to mentoring, and augmenting class participation, are found to be the prime learning needs. With marginalized international student populations having a greater educational service need than domestic students due to their vulnerability to drawbacks and gaps in socio-economic systems, Kools, Chimwaza and Macha (2015) are hopeful that educational leadership training and interprofessional understandings aligned with culturally appropriate diversity can promote cultural competency for said population. Higher educational professionals with universal abilities and capacities in student affairs areas can influence and help facilitate internationalization involvement on campuses through policies and programs, and the only thing stopping them is a lack of self-awareness of being appropriately informed and equipped with the paraphernalia and understandings to engross international education agendas (Mazon, 2010).

ATTRACTION OF AN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Using a social capital theoretical framework, Ortega (2011) studied the relationship between immigration and educational opportunities and predicted mutually beneficial outcomes. Findings included recommendations on policy design such that higher educational institutions and associations play the role of facilitators to enhance mutual benefit of the relationship. Both education as well as employment opportunities attract international students to developed nations. Facchini and Lodigiani (2014) identified employer-driven schemes and migrant-driven schemes as the two systems of policies that attract international students to the West. They find that migrant-driven structures, such as those popular in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, are more operative in cumulating the skillfulness of the immigrant population. However, Wang (2018) did a critical analysis of the current Express Entry immigration system in Canada, which necessitates overseas citizens to provide an Expression of Interest and then be invited to apply for Canadian permanent residency, and claimed that this system of immigration is endangering international students' chances of becoming permanent residents. Orrenius and Zavodny (2012) examined the differentiation between economic gains as a result of globalization and public concerns of immigration. Immigration reforms can be influenced by how public perceptions affect governmental policy making, how the global economy dictates labor market, and how both of those occurrences are inter-connected.

The emerging area of international higher education as a division of student affairs is portrayed as an invaluable asset in cohesive research and studentship. Studying its increasing development in the practice of various student life arenas, Roberts (2014) proposed a change from instructional to collaborative themes for best results in innovations in international student affairs. But with more responsibilities comes lesser autonomy, especially in education. McNamara and O'Hara (2008) pointed out that even though regulatory policies on educational services and service providers have increased, it is imperative that internal evaluation and self-assessment practices are maintained within academia. As policy evaluation becomes a separate field from policy creation or implementation, the complexity of the process needs to be understood and customized for specific circumstances.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

To avoid a decline in intellectual human capital similar to that which the United Kingdom experienced in 2014, when it saw a 29 percent decline in international enrollment (Hawthorne, 2018), it is important for the United States to understand the complexity of the international student issue and the many contributing factors relative to recent declines in US international student enrollment. According to Redden (2019), it's not a one size fits all problem noting that:

Overall trend lines for international enrollments in the U.S. varied across institution types. International enrollments increased by 1.2 percent at doctoral universities and by 2.1 percent at baccalaureate colleges, while master's level-institutions reported a 1.3 percent decline. The biggest drop was at associate-level institutions, where total international enrollments fell by 8.3 percent in 2018-19.

An analysis of present stakeholder perceptions is required to inform policy in international higher education at the institutional, state and federal level in order to maintain the United States as a top destination for international students and researchers.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to contribute to the needed analysis of international education stakeholder perceptions. The three key actors in higher education include students, faculty and staff. A single case representing each of these stakeholders was purposively selected from a population all of whom currently work and learn at an urban Hispanic-serving institution in South Texas. In terms of exploring the challenges of international education, the purpose of this study was to glean the lived experiences of all three stakeholder groups, and their unique perceptions surrounding the challenges of maintaining student engagement and enrollment in international education.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

A phenomenological case study research design fit best with the qualitative inquiry and allowed the researcher to learn and interpret the meaning that participants embrace about the decline in international education enrollment, through their lived experiences (Bernard, 2002). Purposive sampling was used to recruit stakeholders who are involved with international education (Erlandson, Skipper, Harris, & Allen, 1993).

Once all of the appropriate permissions were secured including an approved institutional review board process as well as informed consent of the participants, the researcher conducted purposive face-to-face semi-structured interviews with each of three participants including an international student, a professor who taught international students, and a staff member who served international students (Erlandson, et al., 1993).

Using transcription software, the researcher transcribed each individual interview as soon as possible after the interview, assigning pseudonyms for each participant. The researcher reviewed the data for accuracy by listening to the interviews while reading the transcripts. After all any needed edits were completed, the researcher first analyzed each transcript individually utilizing in-vivo coding (Saldana, 2016). In the first phase of coding, the researcher manually coded the data and employed a qualitative data analysis tool software called QDA Miner Lite to analyze the individual interviews.

In qualitative research, trustworthiness demonstrates reliability of the findings by employing certain procedures. These procedures, in this case, included data triangulation, member-checking, thick description, and peer-debriefing (Erlandson, et al., 1993). This qualitative study was designed to derive thick description from the participants by collecting data on different perspectives. Once the individual interviews were analyzed, to enhance trustworthiness of the study, the researcher sought emergent themes that were shared across the interviews, whether similar or contrasting within participants.

Promoting credibility and enabling future verification was also a priority. Credibility is imperative to qualitative research ensuring participant representation is accurately identified and depicted (Erlandson, et al., 1993). Member checking occurred to allow participants to check transcripts for inconsistencies and to serve as a platform for further clarification. The researcher's goal was to provide an accurate portrayal of what perceptions are and how they are changing.

RESULTS

Upon analyzing participant interview transcripts, individual and overlapping themes emerged highlighting how an international student, a student life professional, and a graduate faculty member are perceiving this recent decline in international student enrollment in the United States. The international student, student life professional, and graduate faculty member who participated in this phenomenological study shared in-depth narratives, based on their lived experiences, about their perceptions towards the decline in international student enrollment in U.S. universities in and since 2018. In this study, participants acknowledged the importance of earning a degree from the United States, both in terms of its brand and overall quality of education. A brief description of each participant along with their pseudonym is provided below. Following those descriptions are the findings of this phenomenological study are categorized under the themes noted.

Participant Descriptions

Ron

Ron is a full-time international graduate student from South U.S. He is pursuing a graduate degree in the field of business. With a skilled background in engineering, Ron wants to become an entrepreneur after graduation.

Amy

Amy is a full-time staff member at the university. She works in student life as a student engagement professional. Before taking on this role, she was a full-time international graduate student from South U.S. at the same university and graduated with a graduate degree in business.

Megan

Megan is an assistant professor at the university. Her roles as an educator and researcher are in the field of computer engineering. As a full-time international graduate student from Asia, Megan pursued her doctorate in the United States.

Disconnect Between Students' and Universities' Aims

The recent socio-political speculations towards changes in the employment and migration schemes in the United States developed pressure (or made it difficult for) for higher educational institutions to maintain and facilitate mutual benefit of this relationship (Ortega, 2011). Hence, international student enrollment dropped in the United States but continued to grow in many other countries around the world.

Ron shared that his selection of the United States for seeking higher education was prioritized around a quality education and work experience, which he successfully obtained during his enrollment in the United States. While increasing complexities and uncertainties in immigration and employment opportunities might deter international students from seeking U.S. as an educational destination, for a student who does not plan to settle in U.S. after graduating, this decline and the perception towards it has no significance. In reference to this, Ron said: "I want to implement the language skills, professional experience and the degree I received in U.S. into my family business and wonderful life back home."

Similarly, Amy, who also came to the United States as an international student, shared that her decision to come to the United States was not only limited to seeking education, but was also extended towards learning the culture and experience the country's customs personally. For Megan, who also came to the United States as an international student, her decision was based on the availability of technical advancements and job opportunities in U.S. While their rationales for seeking higher education in the United States were different, all participants did emphasize their views on the personal, social, and economical costs attached to pursue education abroad. As a faculty member, Megan said:

Many students leave their families, high-paid jobs, and countries to get the best education and experience in the United States. Also, work opportunities after education play an integral part in attracting international students so that they can get practical training after their schooling and can pay off some parts of their hefty education loans. But due to limited apprenticeship, restricted job opportunities and workhours, students doubt their decisions to come to the states.

Amy added, in terms of lack of financial empowerment while attending a university in the United States:

You cannot work because you are not a United States citizen and they really enforce a lot of policies which limit where and how much you can work. If your intentions are to work, you need to ask permission from the educational institution's international education department.

Impact on Classroom Enrollment and Experience

Participants also spoke about curriculum and instructional methods and the impact of those relative to playing a key role in international student enrollment success and statistics around completions, etc. The participant narratives noted factors such as course offerings and limited course options, requirements for a certain percentage of face-to-face instruction for international students, and the need for instructors to include the instructional needs of international students. Speaking to the decline in international student enrollment from a faculty perspective, Megan said:

Due to decrease in student enrollment, we (department) have to cancel certain courses in computer science department and which obviously means that faculty will not have courses to teach.

Amy also shared her perspective, both as a former international student and as a current staff member:

Anticipated decline in enrollment frequently led to face-to-face classes being converted into online classes during my management degree which hindered my goal to connect with diverse populations in class through face-to-face conversations and to build a network of professionals from different countries, including the United States. This lack of direct experiences with diversity in classroom/university does not help international students to transform from youth to adults.

Effect on Sustaining External Funding Sources

In terms of how potential continuation of a decline in international student enrollment could negatively affect other areas of higher education, participants explained how decline in enrollment makes it difficult for academic and research professionals to pursue grant funding and retain research projects, which in turn, makes it tough for higher educational institutions to implement their vision into practice. Megan said:

Due to the dependency on international admissions in the science and engineering disciplines, decline in enrollment in master's and doctoral programs causes our department to cancel classes and grant funding for research is taken away.

Along those same lines, Amy shared her unit's struggle to meet their professional goal towards diversity & inclusion. According to her:

International students help student life departments satisfy diversity and inclusion requirements, which brings us funding. At least 70 percent of the population at a specific annual event is international students, so a decline in their population would force us to cancel the event. That would hurt us in maintaining diversity, inclusion and multiculturalism requirements which are key for the core success of university student unions.

U.S. academia is increasingly valuing diversity and inclusion among students and other personnel and programs. With a decline in international student enrollment in 2018-19, and then a continuity in the same for 2019-20, U.S. universities will find it difficult to justify programs and funding for many student affairs agendas.

CONCLUSIONS & SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

International education is an asset for global citizenship as it calls for free exchange and full collaboration. Continuation in this decline potentially could adversely affect the macroeconomics of the United States. A high percentage of top-tier researchers, doctors, scientists and doctoral students come from outside of United States, so if this decline continues, the absolute advantage and competitive edge that United States has over other countries, in terms of intellectual and human capital, will suffer. This study not only shines lights on the potential and benefits of international education, but also brings together key stakeholder perspectives from the most important actors of higher education: students, faculty and staff.

Finally, the significance of these stakeholder perspectives on international education lies in the fact that this analysis of the challenges of international student enrollment in higher education may constructively influence reconsideration of policies and programs in order to nurture and promote international education in U.S. Policies and culture on institutional and governmental levels need to be reshaped to view international education through an asset-based lens for mutual benefit of U.S. as the top provider of international education and international students. Freire's (2000) work on critical consciousness and critical pedagogy seeks liberation in terms of making existing systems better. Employing the construct of praxis as a means of reflection and action applied onto social, political, cultural, and institutional structures in order to transform them, this study provides reflective perceptions from stakeholders (Freire,2000). This reflection creates dialog among stakeholders and decision-makers, which eventually results in action; action that transforms existing systems, which in this case is focused on international higher education.

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