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The “Redirecting” of International Students: American Higher Education Policy Hindrances and Implications

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Abstract

International student mobility in higher education has gained currency as an important topic in today’s global, political, and economic environment. United States postsecondary institutions are working to expand their international student population to increase revenue and diversity. The current higher education and economic context has produced a “global war” to identify, recruit, and matriculate talented students who have become more mobile when selecting postsecondary education destinations. Thus, in order to provide a clear picture of the current status of international student migration to the United States, we sought to understand the following: 1) prestige as a determining factor in the selection of studying abroad for non-Americans living outside the United States; 2) federal and state financial influences that directly affect institutions’ abilities to enroll foreign students; 3) implications for postsecondary institutions in the United States; and 4) implications for scientific, cultural, and economic advancement for the United States.

Keywords: International students, migration, financial influences, higher education

As the political and economic world becomes increasingly globalized, students are gradually becoming more mobile as they select postsecondary education destinations. Thus, higher education mobility becomes increasingly important as institutions gravitate towards internationalization in response to globalization (Altbach, 2004; Altbach & Knight, 2007). The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2013) defines international students as those students who have crossed a national or territorial border for the purpose of education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin. Given this definition, there were two million international students enrolled in postsecondary institutions of higher education around the world in 2001. By 2009, that number increased by 65% to 3.3 million students (Institute of International Education, 2010). This trend will likely continue unabated as international student growth is expected to reach 8 million by 2025 (Fischer, 2009; Guruz, 2011).

American postsecondary institutions have been the destination of choice for many international students (Lee, 2010). Of the 3.3 million international students, 21% were enrolled on

U.S. campuses (Institute of International Education 2010). When compared to the total enrollment in higher education, international students accounted for 723,277 or less than 4% of the US total enrollment figures in higher education during the 2010-2011 academic year (Institute of International Education 2011, Open Door Fast Facts). Although this is a small fraction of total enrollments in American higher education, this is still a sizable and growing number that warrants further examination.

With the perpetual influx of international students into U.S. higher education, it is paramount that recruiters, student affairs professionals, and public policy makers understand American higher education's appeal, international student experiences on U.S. campuses, and the policy implications associated with growing international student populations. Therefore, the four aims of this paper were to better understand: 1) prestige as a determining factor in the selection of studying abroad for non-Americans living outside the United States; 2) federal and state financial influences that directly affect institutions' abilities to enroll foreign students; 3) implications for postsecondary institutions in the United States; and 4) implications for scientific, cultural, and economic advancement for the United States.

To limit the scope of the research, we will concentrate on those students who obtain undergraduate and graduate degrees from U.S. public and non-profit private postsecondary institutions. In addition, various factors related to migration will not be explored as they are beyond the scope and influence of U.S. policy-makers. These include economic, societal, religious, and personal factors that influence a student's decision to leave his or her country to obtain a postsecondary education. We acknowledge that international students may not always look to study abroad for educational purposes; however, that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Literature Review

Historical Context

12th Century Student Migration – Bologna and Paris. International mobility of students is not a new phenomenon (Altbach 1998, Guruz, 2011; Haskins, 1957). Universities have historically been international organizations located within a given nation (Altbach, 1998), resulting in student migrations as early as the Middle Ages (Haskins, 1957). Students have long migrated from various regions to attend medieval institutions such as Bologna and Paris in the 12th century (Altbach, 1998; Guruz, 2011; Haskins, 1957). By the 12th century, students at Bologna came from all over Europe and numbered in the hundreds (Haskins, 1957). Guruz (2011) concludes, "A look at the nations in the two oldest universities, Bologna and Paris, clearly shows the international character of the medieval university and the degree of international mobility that existed centuries ago" (p. 153). This trend was not limited to Bologna or Paris. As universities were being established throughout medieval Europe, there was a rise in student migration from various regions to these new centers of learning.

19th Century Student Migration – Germany. In the mid-19th century, a large concentration of international students migrated to German universities to conduct serious scholarship and research (Altbach, 1998; Veysey, 1965). Veysey (1965) indicates two other reasons why students flocked to Germany. First, studying in a German research university was considered prestigious. Royce states, "England was passed by. It was understood not to be scholarly enough. France, too, was then neglected. German scholarship was our master and our guide" (as cited in Veysey, 1965, p. 130). Students prized the ability to conduct cutting-edge research wherever their research took them. As a result of this academic training, many of those who were educated in Germany obtained faculty positions in major American research institutions (Altbach, 1998; Rudolph, 1961; Thelin, 2001; Veysey, 1965). Eventually, American colleges wanted to emulate

German universities to obtain the prestige that came with serious scholarship (Rudolph, 1961; Thelin, 2001; Veysey, 1965). Second, the cost of studying in Germany was one-third the expense of Johns Hopkins and other peer research universities institutions in the United States (Rudolph, 1961).

Historical accounts from the 12th and 19th centuries illustrate early migratory patterns of students pursuing higher education in foreign nations. Given their prestige, institutions in Bologna and Paris, along with those “true universities” established in Germany, held international appeal (Hasking, 1957). For instance, a doctorate from Berlin was considered highly prestigious despite the fact that the cost of completion was lower than at U.S. institutions. Naturally, students from the United States and all over the world set their sights on a German education.

Clearly, student migration in pursuit of higher education is not a new phenomenon. However, as Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, and Rhoades (2006) succinctly state, “Despite that long history of international student mobility, there remains limited research on this topic” (p. 548). However, there is a large corpus of work that explored the internal and external forces that led to student migration in the 12th and 19th centuries, which also emerge as prominent themes today. This time, instead of students heading towards Italy, France, or Germany, the path most traveled leads to America.

The Path to U.S. Higher Education

Much of the preeminence the American universities enjoy today can be attributed to the Second World War, when the U.S. government and policy makers began to fund scientific research projects at universities (Graham and Diamond, 1997). Thelin (2004) states that U.S. higher education experienced a quarter century of prestige, prosperity, and popularity (p. 260). Graham and Diamond (1997) explain that the Nobel Prize can provide a “visible barometer” regarding the rise of academic prestige that would eventually funnel students to the United States. One of the main reasons for this dramatic shift was due in large part to refugees leaving Hitler’s Europe.

In addition to research funding provided by the federal government for the World War II effort, Vannevar Bush’s 1945 report titled, *Science, the Endless Frontier*, advocated for continued research funding to universities, and the Cold War with the Soviet Union provided continued mechanisms for funding allocations (Thelin, 2004). According to Thelin (2004), “The first wave of post-World War II federal research funding leveled off in the late 1950s. It was replenished and then surpassed by a new impetus in 1957 – namely the congressional response to the Soviet Union’s launching of the Sputnik satellite” (p. 280). Having substantial federal funding and attracting preeminent scholars from around the world, American universities became the envy of the world. This produced a shift in the number of students that no longer yearned to go to Europe but remained in the United States for their postsecondary education.

Why Students Leave Their Home Nations for Higher Education

Push/Pull Factors. A variety of internal and external factors contribute to a student’s decision to leave his or her home country in exchange for the pursuit of postsecondary education in another. Many of these factors are related to what is known as the “push/pull” phenomenon (Altbach, 2004; Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). Students are “pushed” out when their home nations lack postsecondary institutions that match their social and academic needs, and pulled to other nations for their postsecondary educational endeavors.

Students desire prestige in a college or university (Lee, 2005; Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, & Rhoades, 2006). The UCLA Higher Education Research Institute's (HERI) Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey, which is administered to all first-year students – international and domestic – at participating four-year institutions, has consistently revealed that academic reputation is a primary factor considered when selecting a postsecondary institution. Students – both international and domestic – want to apply and attend the most academically recognized institution they can. As Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, and Rhoades (2006) observed:

While the reputation of institutions lure domestic and international students alike, status and prestige become even greater incentives when committing to study outside one's home country. In this case, the prestige of studying in our U.S. institutions can serve as an economic pull for many international students. (p. 553)

Students and families conduct a cost-benefit analysis to determine if the benefits outweigh the costs of going abroad. There is no need to leave one's country if there is no perceived return on the investment associated with attending a mediocre institution. Clearly, attending a highly selective institution such as Harvard or Stanford is seen as worth the investment by international families. However, it is also clear that not all international students, just like their domestic American student peers, are attending highly selective institutions. For example, a postsecondary institution in the U.S. that offers a major related to their interests combined with the "American experience" may make a mediocre institution in the U.S. more attractive than a more respected institution in their native country. The social and cultural capital acquired by studying abroad in the United States may ultimately provide a better return on investment, as it may lead to better job prospects once the student returns to his or her native country.

Therefore, as students are "pushed" out of their home countries, they are also "pulled" by other nations with distinguished institutions and programs that match their needs. Most students from less developed and/or southern hemisphere nations have less access to world-class postsecondary institutions in their home countries (Altbach, 2004; Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). Indeed, the majority of such institutions are concentrated in developed and English speaking nations (Altbach, 2004; Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009) primarily located in northern hemisphere nations (Altbach, 2004; Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). It is not surprising then that the primary destinations for most international students are concentrated in three select regions – Australia, Europe (United Kingdom and other western European nations) and North America (Canada and United States). Given that the United States hosts approximately two-thirds to three-quarters of the world's preeminent universities (Rosovsky, 1990) and consistently boasts the highest number of ranked institutions in the top fifty worldwide (Times Higher Education World University, 2013), the U.S. also receives the largest number of international students annually.

A second factor contributing to the "push" is that many students find it difficult to gain admission to their home countries' premier institutions due to discriminatory admissions practices or limited capacity. Macfarlane (2011) states that in Malaysia, preferential treatment is given to the Malay majority while ethnic Chinese Malaysians experience discriminatory or limited access. For example, Malaysian postsecondary institutions have preferential admission standards towards Malays over Malaysian Chinese students. As a result, Chinese students are "pushed" out because they are denied admission to their national institutions because of their ethnic background.

In addition to having limited access based on ethnicity, many developing nations simply do not have the infrastructure necessary to admit all qualified students (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). The two largest nations in the world, China and India, cannot accommodate student demand for higher education within their borders. In addition to being the two most populated nations in the

world, this is one of the reasons why China and India rank first and second in the number of students sent to postsecondary institutions in the United States (Guruz, 2011). Due to lack of access to domestic opportunities and the high demand for international students in foreign nations, many students find it easier to gain admission to top postsecondary institutions abroad.

Third, many institutions in developing nations do not have resources (e.g., research labs, funding, libraries, and staffing) comparable to the top world-class institutions in developed nations (Horta, 2009; Marginson and Sawir, 2006). Domestic students are “pushed” out from their countries and “pulled” to developed nations as they gravitate towards resource-rich institutions (Marginson and Sawir, 2006) – like those in the U.S.

Finally, many institutions in less developed nations may not offer the academic programs (e.g., engineering, forestry, and education) that their students wish to study. Following this “push,” students are again “pulled” to U.S. institutions given that they offer the largest selection of institutional programs and types in the world (Altbach, 2004). Furthermore, unlike many developing nations, English speaking institutions like those found in the United States and United Kingdom have graduate level programs not commonly available elsewhere (Guruz, 2011).

Why the United States? The United States is the number one destination of choice for most international students (Altbach, 1998; Altbach, 2004; Guruz, 2011; Lee, 2010) for several reasons. First, international students have an advantage when they return to their home countries having earned an American degree and gained American experiences (Guruz, 2011) as such qualifications and experiences are highly prized by governments and the private sectors (Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, & Rhoades, 2006). For example, many current and past presidents and prime ministers of nations around the world have been educated at elite postsecondary institutions in the United States (Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, & Rhoades, 2006). It seems possible that any experience in an American institution - including those institutions that are not considered top-tier - could be valuable. Indeed, an Indian student may decide that attending a lower ranked institution in the United States is a better long-term investment than attending a highly ranked institution in India due to their exposure to the United States and the subsequent benefits.

U.S. institutions are not only sought-after by elite families; students, in general, covet bachelors, masters, and Ph.D. degrees from American institutions (Altbach, 2004). International students today view American institutions similarly to the way that American students viewed German universities in the mid to late 19th century. German universities had prestige that U.S. institutions simply could not compete with at the time, which led to many Americans crossing the Atlantic to study in Germany. Today, students cross the Atlantic and Pacific to enroll at U.S. colleges and universities to earn a degree that will, in their view, increase their human capital and allow them to compete in a globalized economy and also increase their personal income.

A second important point to remember is that due to the United States’ hegemonic power, the vast majority of commerce and business worldwide is conducted in English (Guruz, 2011). Altbach (2004, 2006) and associates (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009) suggest that English is today what Latin was previously in the academic world. English is the most commonly studied language in the world (Guruz, 2011), and a large number of nations whose official language is not English are introducing degree programs where all work is conducted in English. This includes new programs and degrees within Germany, France, Mexico, and Italy that are conducted in English (Guruz, 2011). This also explains the appeal of migrating to English speaking nations to attend higher education institutions. Of the top seven national destinations for international

students, four are English speaking – United States, UK, Canada, and Australia (Institute of International Education 2011, Open Door Fast Facts).

Finally, the presence of international students appears to correlate with presence of international faculty. That is, institutions with a large number of international faculty also tend to have a large number of international students (Lee, 2010). In addition, international students gravitate towards students and faculty who originate from their home nations within the United States (Lee, 2010), so it is no surprise that institutions with large numbers of international faculty also have large numbers of international students.

Public Policy

Higher education mobility becomes increasingly important as institutions gravitate towards internationalization in response to globalization (Altbach, 2004; Altbach & Knight, 2007). Knight (2004) defines internationalization as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions of delivery of post-secondary education” (p. 11). With the increased presence of international students in the United States, there are various policy issues that may motivate or hinder institutions from accomplishing their goals of enrolling and serving these students. From a public policy standpoint, there are economic benefits for purposefully recruiting and enrolling international students into public universities within the United States. These include increased revenue and student diversity.

Increased Financial Revenue. A major public policy incentive is the potential financial gains associated with large international student enrollment. Santiago, Tremblay, Basri, and Arnal (2008) state that many nations are charging “full-fees to international students to generate trade benefits” as part of their economic development strategies. For example, they report that in 2004 education was the third biggest export in New Zealand, generating 2.2 billion NZD, while international students in the United Kingdom contributed nearly 5 billion to the economy in tuition and spending.

The same holds true for U.S. institutions. International students increase revenues for American institutions and boost the U.S. economy. In 2010 alone, international students contributed nearly \$21.2 billion to the U.S. economy (Institute of International Education 2011, Open Door Fast Facts). Francisco Sanchez of the U.S. Commerce Department recently stated that his primary job is to double U.S. exports within the next five years and to promote American higher education to international students as a vehicle to achieving this goal. He asserts, “Higher education is among the country’s top 10 service exports, right between environmental services and safety and security” (Sanchez, 2011, April 3). As a result, in 2011 the U.S. Department of Commerce coordinated a delegation of 56 U.S. colleges and universities whose sole purpose is to recruit international students to American campuses (Fischer, 2011).

California and New York, the two states with the largest number of international students, are examples of how states benefit financially from hosting international students. During the 2007-2008 academic year, the state of California received a total of \$2.45 billion, while New York received \$1.90 billion in direct and indirect money (Douglass & Edelstein, 2009). Other institutions are forging formal agreements to promote their state institutions by cooperating in international recruitment efforts. For example, 16 postsecondary institutions in the state of Mississippi have collaborated to form *StudyMississippi* in which each institution pays annual fees of \$500 to collectively recruit international students (Fisher, 2011, April 3b). These fees are a small price to pay as international student tuition is higher at both public and private institutions, which increases revenue for the institution.

From an institutional standpoint, the increase of international students is a positive one for several reasons. First, public colleges and universities are receiving less federal and state financial support, and donations have decreased due to the economic fiscal crisis (Oliff, Palacios, Johnson, & Leachman, 2013). Taxpayers are less likely to want to increase their taxes to support public higher education and state legislators/policy makers are cutting fiscal support of colleges and universities to balance the state budget (Oliff, Palacios, Johnson, & Leachman, 2013). As their public financial support continues to diminish, U.S. postsecondary institutions are looking for other sources of revenue.

One of the primary ways public institutions may increase their revenue in the short term is by increasing their international student population. International students pay a higher tuition rate than their U.S. peers. In the 2011-2012 academic year, the University of California-Berkeley's incoming freshman class had 28% out-of-state students – many of whom were international students. In-state students paid \$32,635 in tuition and fees, room, and board, while out-of-state students paid \$55,513 per year for similar packages (McMillan, 2011). With the looming 1 billion dollar in budget cuts, many UC campuses are facing tough decisions: cut faculty and staff or increase out-of-state students at the expense of in-state students. In a recent press release, the University of California Office of the President (UCOP) declared,

UCLA simply could not absorb more than the \$125 million shortfall it already faces. Without the fee increase, UCLA would need to cut an additional \$29 million, the equivalent of replacing 168 ladder-rank faculty with lecturers, cutting 324 staffers, or replacing 1,268 California students with out-of-state students who pay the full cost of their education. (McMillan, 2011).

Fiscal challenges result in pressure to increase the number of international students at public institutions to compensate for lost state fiscal support.

Second, many institutions are committed to increased student diversity, which often leads to the purposeful recruitment of international students. Researchers have concluded that international students add diversity and provide native students an opportunity to interact with foreign students in a way that promotes global understanding (Bevis, 2002; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Harrison, 2002). Not only do international students bring language diversity, they also bring diversity in culture, politics, religion, ethnicity, and worldview. Interaction among domestic and international students promotes cultural understanding and dialogue. It is not surprising that exposure to diversity has been shown to increase student outcomes (Smith, 2010).

Policies Hindering International Student Enrollment. Although the United States attracts the highest number of international students, there has been a significant decline in the number of foreign students enrolling at American institutions during the past decade (Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, & Rhoades, 2006). For the first time since 1971, the United States experienced a decline in international student enrollment in 2004 (Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, & Rhoades, 2006). Using data from the American Institute of International Education, Marginson and van der Wende (2006) suggested several reasons for this decline. First, visa concerns post-911 resulted in policies associated with the Patriot Act aimed at monitoring and limiting international students, thereby redirecting students to other nations (Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, & Rhoades, 2006). Second, increasing tuition and living costs raises concerns. When other English-speaking countries offer lower tuition and less rigorous visa policies (the “pull”), the United States essentially *redirects*

international students towards other nations (the “push”). These policies have contributed to a more challenging recruiting environment for U.S. college recruiters.

Discussion

Public Policy Makers

Institutions want the increased revenue and diversity international students bring to their individual campuses, while society benefits from the interaction of sojourner students with American students, which leads to an increase in global understanding. Thus, public policy makers need to facilitate the flow of international students to U.S. institutions by supporting colleges and universities. There are several ways to accomplish this at the federal and state level. First, at the federal level, easing the restriction on student visas that currently impede international students from entering the U.S. would be a major benefit for both students and institutions. This has been a major concern for international families and students who wish to study in the United States. The process is both costly and time consuming. These hurdles have been overcome within other nations such as Australia and Canada, which explains why students are *redirecting* their academic goals to these nations.

Second, public and private institutions should create and establish international student support centers. Indeed, many states have provided monies for the establishment and implementation of centers that cater to marginalized and underrepresented students. Just like their African American, Latino, and Native American peers benefit from their respective centers (e.g., Office of Black Student Affairs or Latinos Student Union), international students also benefit from international student centers. Centers with dedicated professional staff provide a safe and welcoming environment that fosters and promotes interaction and socialization of international students with their domestic peers. Furthermore, international centers can provide student activities and programs geared towards promoting student engagement and involvement among international students. Unfortunately, many postsecondary institutions within the United States experience a lack of institutional support (Kher, Juneau, & Molstad, 2003; Lee, Maldonado-Maldonado, & Rhoades 2006). Kher, Juneau and Molstad (2003) concluded that many postsecondary institutions' international support programs do not cater to foreign students effectively. Many colleges and universities lack international centers or counselors dedicated to advising international students. International students have unique needs. For instance, many may need support in developing their English oral and writing skills. Institutions that do not provide English immersion or do not create a supportive environment through an international center hamper students' campus involvement, which could lead to attrition and ultimately also negative reviews to prospective students and their families.

Loss of Intellectual Capital

There is a possible increase in the intellectual and human capital that international students bring to the state and the nation if these students stay in the United States after graduation. That said, many have to return to their nation of origin due to U.S. immigration laws and/or the requirements that many international students must complete. Many students may, therefore, not be able to participate in the U.S. economy, which results in a loss of intellectual capital. Therefore, U.S. policy makers should consider making policies that would enable international students who graduate from American postsecondary institutions to apply for work visas.

Indeed, the United States can and should try to keep many of the most talented graduates of American colleges and universities. The U.S. economy requires a labor force trained in STEM

fields (Carnevale, Smith, & Melton, 2011), and many of those individuals with STEM backgrounds are international students (Freeman, 2009). Although the current unemployment rate is relatively high, the United States should work to harness the most talented international students to the betterment of the new economy. Failure to do so may negatively affect the U.S. economy in the long term.

Conclusion

The migration of students between countries in the pursuit of higher education is not a new phenomenon. The literature clearly indicates that students traveled far and wide to attend Bologna and Paris in the middle ages, and this trend has not abated. Most recently, American higher education has been a beacon of light for international students around the world. American postsecondary institutions welcome and serve the largest number of international students in the world, and these numbers will continue to increase. However, global competition for international students is growing. Given current immigration policies and rising costs associated with postsecondary study, the United States has begun to lose international students to other nations. The U.S. government should work to support colleges and universities as they continue to increase their international enrollment. Doing so will help ensure that postsecondary institutions graduate citizens who are function effectively within a global society while being accepting of diversity.

Finally, recruiters, student affairs practitioners, and policy makers need to understand how to best serve international students. By providing accurate recruitment information, institutional support once on campus, and policies that better serve international students, it will be possible for the U.S. to remain a worldwide leader in higher education. As Andrade and Evans (2009) conclude, "Supporting this population ensures future enrollments of international students so that the educational experiences of both domestic and international students can be enhanced, and the United States can sustain its ability to remain globally competitive" (p. 44).

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