

Leading the Many, Considering the Few - University Presidents' Perspectives on International Students during COVID-19

Sarah Maria Schiffecker^{1*}

¹*Texas Tech University, USA*

*Correspondence: sarah.schiffecker@ttu.edu

Abstract

In challenging times, successful leadership becomes even more important, yet also harder to achieve. COVID-19 has confronted the world with a crisis of never-before-seen proportions, impacting all aspects of modern life. University leaders around the world had to react quickly in order to lead their institutions during these times of uncertainty. One part of the student population was and is particularly vulnerable with campuses shutting down and global travel coming to a rather abrupt halt: international students. This comparative case study will illuminate how university presidents from five different countries are informed in their perceptions of the international students on their campuses during the COVID-19 crisis. Ultimately, important policy implications informing how higher education leaders can navigate global crises while simultaneously best serving their international student populations will be informed.

Keywords: higher education leadership, university presidents, international students, comparative case study, COVID-19

Introduction & Literature Review

Successful leadership in higher education is much discussed, yet hard to achieve. The challenges and difficulties presented to educational leadership are only amplified in situations of crisis. Many studies have attempted to capture the hardships of leading a higher education institution (HEI) through difficult times and crises of various sorts (Gigliotti, 2019; Fortunato et al., 2018; Smith & Hughey, 2006).

Received October 3, 2020; revised November 7, 2020, and December 1, 2020; accepted December 4, 2020; electronically published January 31, 2021

Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education

December, 2020, Vol. 12, No. 6S1, pp. 104-111.

DOI: 10.32674/jcihe.v12i6S1.3034

© 2020 Journal of Comparative & International Higher Education. All rights reserved.

Brennan and Stern (2017) point out that “crisis leadership requires not only making decisions but also communicating them in ways that help to maintain a leader’s (and an organization’s) legitimacy and credibility” (p. 121). Guiding an institution through difficult times is hence not the sole responsibility of university presidents in situations of crisis. They also carry the badge (and burden) of representing their institutions.

The 2017 ACE report on college presidents mentions campus diversity and inclusion as one of the top priorities of HEI presidents, stating that more “than half of presidents reported that racial climate on campus was more of a priority than it had been three years ago” (ACE, 2017, p. 46). Unfortunately, there is still a dearth of research on presidential responsibilities towards the international community and internationalization of the campus (Sullivan, 2011), with even fewer studies on those responsibilities during a crisis. With the presidents’ role as the moral leaders of their institutions (Brown, 2006), their perceptions of all campus groups carry significant weight for all HEI practices, routines and strategies. A global crisis like COVID-19 disproportionately affects international students due to travel restrictions, visa issues and other amplified challenges. It is especially in situations like this that the spotlight is on educational leadership.

International students, despite the global trends of internationalization within global higher education (McNaughtan et al., 2019), have an ambivalent role on US college campuses. On the one hand, they are often perceived as threats, fueled mainly by right-wing authoritarian forces and a desire for social dominance (Charles-Toussaint & Crowson, 2010). The US visa system confronts international students with a significant number of hurdles and difficulties (Urias & Camp Yeakey, 2009), reflecting this apprehensive stance on bringing in an international student population. On the other hand, the role of international students in the US is often one of ‘cash-cows’. Besides generating an increased tuition income (Cantwell, 2019), they simultaneously boost the local economies. According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), international students contributed as much as \$45 billion to the US

economy and were involved in the creation and promotion of more than 450,000 US jobs in 2017. Having an internationalized college campus hence definitely has economic incentives. Another positive effect of attracting and recruiting international students to come study in the US is the trend towards a globalized higher education under the flying banners of the claim to produce global citizens. Excelling globally and successfully participating in the global market has become a crucial aspiration and goal of higher education institutions around the globe (Rumbley et al., 2012).

A crisis like the one we're currently facing with COVID-19 amplifies already existing organizational tendencies in practices and routines. International students represent a "vulnerable student population" (Sherry et al., 2010, p. 33) in general, leaving them even more vulnerable in situations of crisis. With international students as part of the campus community facing a unique set of challenges (Andrade, 2017; Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016; Heck & Mu, 2016; Pottie-Sherman, 2018; Wu et al., 2015), a global crisis brings about a whole new additional set of difficulties (Chen et al., 2020; Demuyakor, 2020; Dennis, 2020; Hope, 2020; Jang & Choi, 2020; King et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020).

With an extensive existing research corpus focusing on educational leadership during crisis (Fortunato et al., 2018; Gigliotti, 2019; Smith & Hughey, 2006), there is a dearth of studies looking specifically at how university leaders perceive their international campus communities in crisis situations and where they get the information informing those perceptions. The purpose of this study is to hence and to illuminate how university presidents from five different countries are informed in their perceptions of the international students on their campuses during the COVID-19 crisis. In order to do so, the two following research questions will be answered:

1. Where do university presidents get information on the international campus community?
2. How do presidents' perspectives of supporting international students align with known best practices for supporting international students?

Methodology

In order to provide guidance to the limited research existing on this topic, Grounded Theory will be employed in order “to move beyond description and to generate or discover a theory” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 82). The methodological approach of a comparative case study was chosen to answer the two research questions because of its “flexibility to incorporate multiple perspectives, data collection tools, and interpretive strategies” (Blanco Ramirez, 2016, p. 19). Through the comparative aspect of the case study employed, it is possible to develop “an in-depth analysis of a case” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 14) on multiple national levels. This allows for comparative conclusions that would not be possible by looking at merely one single case (Lieberson, 2000).

Data will be generated through qualitative interviews with university presidents from five countries in the presidents’ respective native languages (i.e. German, English, Chinese, Spanish, and French) in order to provide multiple perspectives allowing for a comparative scope of the study. A content analysis of the themes brought up by the presidents during the interviews will focus on who and what informs the university leaders’ perceptions of their international students’ wants and needs during a global crisis such as COVID-19.

Proposed implications

The results of the study will produce policy implications informing how higher education leaders can navigate global crises while simultaneously best serving their international student populations. Knowing where university presidents turn to obtain information about a specific group of the campus population and how that information influences their perceptions of the needs that a particular group has, can help optimize future practices not only in situations of crisis but within the operational context of higher education institutions in general.

Author Note

Sarah Maria Schiffecker is a first year doctoral student and Research Assistant in the Higher Education Psychology and Leadership program at Texas Tech University. Her academic background is in Cultural and Social Anthropology, Slavic Studies (University of Vienna, Austria) as well as Foreign Languages and Literatures (Texas Tech University). Her research interests lie in international higher education and educational leadership.

References

- American Council on Education (ACE). (2017). *The American college president study 2017*. American Council on Education, Center for Policy Analysis.
- Andrade, M. S. (2017). Institutional Policies and Practices for Admitting, Assessing, and Tracking International Students. *Journal of International Students*, 7(1), I-VI.
- McNaughtan, J., Louis, S., García, H.A., & McNaughtan, E. D. (2019). An institutional North Star: the role of values in presidential communication and decision-making. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 41(2), 153-171.
- Baklashova, T. A., & Kazakov, A. V. (2016). Challenges of International Students' Adjustment to a Higher Education Institution. *International Journal of Environmental and Science Education*, 11(8), 1821-1832.
- Blanco Ramírez, G. (2016). Case studies. In Catherine Marshall, & Gretchen B. Rossman (Eds), *Designing Qualitative Research* (6th ed.) (pp. 19-20). Sage Publications.
- Brennan, J. A., & Stern, E. K. (2017). Leading a campus through crisis: The role of college and university presidents. *Journal of Education Advancement & Marketing*, 2(2), 120-134.
- Brown, D. G. (Ed.). (2006). *University Presidents as Moral Leaders*. Praeger Publishers.

- Cantwell, B. (2019). Are international students cash cows? Examining the relationship between new international undergraduate enrollments and institutional revenue at public colleges and universities in the US. *Journal of International Students*, 5(4), 512-525.
- Charles-Toussaint, G. C., & Crowson, H. M. (2010). Prejudice against international students: The role of threat perceptions and authoritarian dispositions in US students. *The Journal of psychology*, 144(5), 413-428.
- Chen, J. H., Li, Y., Wu, A. M. S., & Tong, K. K. (2020). The overlooked minority: Mental health of International students worldwide under the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 54, 102333. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102333>
- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (5th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Demuyakor, J. (2020). Coronavirus (COVID-19) and online learning in higher institutions of education: A survey of the perceptions of Ghanaian international students in China. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, 10(3), e202018.
- Dennis, M. J. (2020). COVID-19 will accelerate the decline in international student enrollment. *Recruiting & Retaining Adult Learners*, 22(12), 1–7. <https://doi-org.lib-e2.lib.ttu.edu/10.1002/nsr.30639>
- Fortunato, J. A., Gigliotti, R. A., & Ruben, B. D. (2018). Analysing the dynamics of crisis leadership in higher education: A study of racial incidents at the University of Missouri. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 26(4), 510-518.
- Gigliotti, R. A. (2019). *Crisis Leadership in Higher Education: Theory and practice*. Rutgers University Press.

- Heck, R. H., & Mu, X. I. (2016). Economics of globalization in higher education: Current issues in recruiting and serving international students. In R. Papa & F. W. English (Eds.), *Educational Leaders without Borders* (pp. 143-165). Springer.
- Hope, J. (2020). Be aware of how COVID-19 could impact international students. *Successful Registrar*, 20(3), 1–8. <https://doi-org.lib-e2.lib.ttu.edu/10.1002/tsr.30708>
- Institute of International Education (IIE). (2017). Economic Impact of International Students. <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Data/Economic-Impact-of-International-Students>
- Jang, I. C., & Choi, L. J. (2020). Staying connected during COVID-19: The social and communicative role of an ethnic online community of Chinese international students in South Korea. *Multilingua*, 39(5), 541-552.
- King, J. A., Cabarkapa, S., Leow, F. H., & Ng, C. H. (2020). Addressing international student mental health during COVID-19: an imperative overdue. *Australasian Psychiatry: Bulletin of Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists*, 28(4), 469. <https://doi-org.lib-e2.lib.ttu.edu/10.1177/1039856220926934>
- Lieberson, S. (2000). Small N's and big conclusions: An examination of the reasoning in comparative studies based on a small number of cases. In R. Gomm, M. Hammersley, & P. Foster (Eds.), *Case Study Method* (pp. 208-222). Sage.
- Pottie-Sherman, Y. (2018). Retaining international students in northeast Ohio: Opportunities and challenges in the 'age of Trump'. *Geoforum*, 96, 32-40.
- Rumbley, L., Altbach, P., & Reisberg, L. (2012). Internationalization within the higher education context. In D. K. Deardorff, H. de Wit, J. Heyl, & T. Adams (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of International Higher Education* (pp. 3-26). Sage.

- Sherry, M., Thomas, P., & Chui, W. (2010). International students: A vulnerable student population. *Higher Education, 60*(1), 33-46.
- Smith, B. L., & Hughey, A. W. (2006). Leadership in higher education—its evolution and potential: A unique role facing critical challenges. *Industry and Higher Education, 20*(3), 157-163.
- Sullivan, J. (2011). *Global Leadership in Higher Education Administration: Perspectives on Internationalization by University Presidents, Vice-Presidents and Deans* (Doctoral dissertation, University of South Florida).
- Urias, D., & Camp Yeakey, C. (2009). Analysis of the US student visa system: Misperceptions, barriers, and consequences. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 13*(1), 72-109.
- Wu, H., Garza, E., & Guzman, N. (2015). International student's challenge and adjustment to college. *Education Research International, 1*–9.
- Zhai, Y., & Du, X. (2020). Mental health care for international Chinese students affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. *The Lancet Psychiatry, 7*(4), e22.