

International, Inaccessible, and Incomplete: A Texas Case Study of International Student Websites

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ABSTRACT

As the number of international students attending U.S. higher education institutions has declined 2 consecutive years (Saul, 2018), several institutions are exploring ways to increase international student interest. In Texas, the sociopolitical climate has become increasingly anti-immigrant (Watkins, 2017), leading many international students to question whether study in the US is feasible and safe. As institutional websites have been found to be important sources of international student information (Huang & Bilal, 2017; Taylor & Bicak, 2018), this study examines international student information on all public, 4-year institution websites in Texas. Findings suggest international student materials are difficult to read, are rarely translated, and lack basic information such as cost and housing information. Implications for future research and practice are addressed.

Keywords: access, admissions, application, Internet, institutional websites

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the Texas Legislature has threatened to cut funding to public higher education, forcing institutions to find new ways of raising revenue, supporting educational programs, and helping Texas students enroll, persist, and graduate from Texas institutions of higher education (Watkins, 2017). However, Texas is far from the first state to experience threats to state funding, as other states such as Wisconsin, Ohio, and Illinois have witnessed multiyear budget cuts (Marcus, 2017), requiring these states to raise revenue through tuition dollars in the form of recruiting and admitting greater numbers of international students (Saul, 2018).

Along with threats of budget cuts to public higher education, Texas is also feeling the effects of a national immigration climate that has rendered the US a less hospitable and inviting climate for international students, “leading a lot of families to really take a step back and wonder if the US is really a good place to go for their education” (Glum, 2017, para. 5). As a result, during the 2016–2017 academic year, U.S. colleges and universities experienced a decline in international undergraduate and graduate applications and enrollments for the first time (Saul, 2018). Recently, the Institute of International Education reported that international student enrollment declined for a second year in a row during the 2017–2018 academic year (Redden, 2018). However, recent research has explored another element of the international student choice process that may be influencing international students’ decisions to attend U.S. institutions.

In a study of international undergraduate students, Huang and Bilal (2017) found that many international students often feel confused when navigating institutional websites, a very common source of information for prospective international students. These students claimed institutional websites were difficult to read and often lacked critical information necessary for application to the institution, such as housing information and minimum TOEFL requirements. In related research, Taylor (2018) found international undergraduate information on U.S. institutional websites—such as admissions materials and application instructions—to be written in high, difficult English reading levels and rarely translated into languages other than English.

Focused on TOEFL scores specifically, Taylor and Bicak (2018) also found that the presence of publishing minimum TOEFL scores on institutional websites predicted international student enrollment numbers with statistical significance ($p = 0.02$). This finding means that simply publishing an institution’s minimum TOEFL score for unconditional acceptance may lead to greater international student enrollment numbers, while an absence of such information may lead international students to feel “an institutional website lacks information necessary to apply to a U.S. institution of higher education (Taylor & Bicak, 2018, p. 64). As a result, even though Texas institutions in particular exist in a combative, hostile educational environment, especially for international students and immigrants (Watkins, 2017), these institutions of higher education may not be publishing the most informative and accessible websites for international students.

This study examines international student websites published by public, 4-year institutions of higher education in Texas ($n = 43$) to learn whether critical international student information is available, readable, and translated into languages other than English. Expanding upon research suggesting institutional websites are often incomplete and confusing for international students (Huang & Bilal, 2017) and difficult to read and rarely translated into languages other than English (Taylor, 2018), this study will inform institutions of higher education hoping to facilitate a more equitable admissions process for international undergraduate students in Texas and beyond.

METHOD

The research team established the sample of 43 public, 4-year institutions in Texas, as these institutions are in danger of budget cuts during the next legislative session, yet it is these types of institutions that international students most frequently attend in Texas (Watkins, 2017). Moreover, given the hostile political climate facing international students and immigrant students in Texas specifically (Saul, 2018), the research team deemed it appropriate to examine institutions in Texas to learn if their websites were as informative and accessible as possible.

The research team used the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System to locate all public, 4-year institutions in Texas, and then used the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board website to locate all institutional websites. Then, the research team used the web-embedded search tool on each institution's website and entered the terms "international students" to locate the information necessary for international undergraduate students to apply and enroll in a public college or university in Texas.

The research team employed quantitative linguistic software to calculate the length of the text and four common readability measures to learn of the English readability level of the material, including the Automated Readability Index, the Gunning-Fog Index, the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Test, and the Simple Measure of Gobbledygook (Taylor, 2018). These English-language readability measures all examine a different element of the text, with the Automated Readability Index serving as a sentence structure measure, while the Simple Measure of Gobbledygook primarily focuses on word choice within sentences. All four measures calculate the English reading level of a text by providing a grade-level estimate of difficulty, meaning a text measured at the 12th-grade level would require a reader to possess a 12th-grade level of English fluency or have matriculated through 12 years of English-only curriculum and instruction. In addition to readability level, the research team explored each website to learn if the institution had translated any international student information into a language other than English, as Taylor's (2018) study found that less than 5% of 335 four-year U.S. institutions provided international student content in a language other than English.

Regarding international undergraduate application materials, the research employed a binary coding strategy to analyze what information is apparent on each institution's international student website. These variables included an international student admissions webpage, minimum TOEFL scores for admission, application fee, cost of attendance at the institution, visa information, housing opportunities, and if there was contact information for international students to engage with if they have a question during the application process. These information categories emerged from the data and were informed by the lived experiences of members of the research team who are currently international students studying in the United States, as well as extant research focused on information useful for international students seeking U.S. institutions (Huang & Bilal, 2017; Taylor & Bicak, 2018).

FINDINGS

The length, readability, translation, and web accessibility of international undergraduate application materials on institutional websites can be found in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Length, Readability, Translation, and Web Accessibility of International Undergraduate Application Materials on Texan Institutional Websites (*n* = 42)

	Length (in words)	Readability (by grade)	Translation
Average	607	14.3	12.2%
High	2,067	19	
Low	49	10.3	
<i>SD</i>	438	1.9	

Note. One institution in this study’s sample did not enroll international undergraduates in 2016–2017 (Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center).

Findings in Table 1 illustrate that average international undergraduate admissions materials at public, 4-year institutions in Texas are written above the 14th-grade reading level, only 12% of institutions provide non-English translations of international student admissions materials, and the average length of admissions materials are over 600 words long. As a result, public, 4-year institutions in Texas may be publishing inaccessible websites for international students whose first language is not English, possibly deterring non-English speakers from exploring these institutions, applying, and enrolling.

International undergraduate application information present on Texan institutional websites can be found in Table 2 below.

Table 2: International Undergraduate Application Information Present on Institutional Websites (*n* = 42)

Type of Information	% (<i>n</i>)
International student website	85.4 (35)
Application fee amount	75.6 (31)
Application deadline date	87.8 (36)
Housing information	21.9 (9)
Visa information	80.5 (33)
Email/contact information	68.3 (28)
Minimum TOEFL scores	97.6 (40)
Cost of attendance	51.2 (21)

Note. One institution in this study’s sample did not enroll international undergraduates in 2016–2017 (Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center).

Findings in Table 2 suggest 85% of institutions publish an international student admissions webpage. This was a surprise in the findings, as the research team anticipated that all public, 4-year institutions in Texas would publish a separate international student admissions page as part of their institutional website. Moreover, 21% of international student admission webpages included housing information for international students, 68% included contact information, and 51% provided cost of attendance information specifically for international students.

As much of this information is critical to inform international student choice, public, 4-year institutions in Texas may not be providing international students with enough information. Although international students may seek housing (21.9% of the sample) or visa information (80.5%) on other websites, institutional websites may want to include this information to provide international students with the most complete information possible.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Our findings suggest public, 4-year institutional websites in Texas are potentially difficult to navigate for international students and may lack crucial institutional information that would likely inform an international student's choice to attend a public institution of higher education in Texas. Given the Texas sociopolitical climate is unwelcoming to international students and immigrant students (Saul, 2018; Watkins, 2017), institutions in Texas that may want to welcome international and immigrant students may not be providing these students with clear communication to facilitate the undergraduate admissions process. Although international students may seek housing, visa, and cost-of-living information elsewhere, institutions may be making the information-seeking process more difficult for international students by failing to consolidate international student information in one place, possibly leading to a less stressful exploration experience.

While institutions of higher education usually require international students to demonstrate 12th-grade level English proficiency evidenced by minimum TOEFL scores, the findings of this study suggest international admission materials at public, 4-year institutions in Texas are written at a higher, 14th-grade reading level and are rarely translated into languages other than English. Moreover, several international student webpages lacked basic international student information such as housing opportunities, cost of attendance information, and minimum TOEFL scores for admission. This linguistically inaccessible and incomplete information may create additional barriers for international students to navigate the admissions and enrollment process at public, 4-year institutions in Texas. As a result, institutions across the country should ensure that their international student communication is simple, informative, and translated into other languages, thus rendering institutional websites inclusive, welcoming, and easy to navigate.

Ultimately, the sociopolitical climate in Texas may already be deterring international students and immigrant students from the higher education system in Texas. Consequently, institutions of higher education should reevaluate their international student webpages to ensure that they are providing the most transparent, accessible admissions process possible.

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