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Abstract: Many factors motivate Chinese students to study in the U.S. and their decisions of staying or leaving the U.S. after graduation. This study examined Chinese students' choices of the host university in the U.S., and their decisions of staying or leaving the U.S. after graduation.

Keywords: Chinese students, adult students, student mobility

Introduction

International students have become a significant student population in American institutions. There are 974,926 international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities in 2014-2015, and the number is increasing rapidly compared with the number of 886,052 in 2013-2014 (Institute of International Education, 2015). Previous research suggested several factors that motivate those students to study in the United States: (a) some students feel that the prestige of a degree from an American institution is greater than that of one from their local universities; (b) they are also attracted by the life in the U.S.; and (c) many international students choose to study in America because they hope to stay and make a career, and they believe the United States, with a large and diverse economy, is willing to higher well-qualified foreigners and pay higher salaries (Altbach, 2004). The Chinese student population is the leading group among all the international students. The Institute of International Education (2015) reported that Chinese students comprised 31.2% of the total 974,926 of international students in 2014-2015. Factors that motivate them to choose the U.S. as their host country are similar to those that are suggested by previous research. However, what influence their choices of the host college is less known.

Most of the previous research investigates international students by considering them as a whole group, while differences may exist between adult students and traditional students across different countries. Statistics report that there were 8,526 adult students enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions in fall 2012 (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). Those students usually have one or more years away from school before they decide to return to school (Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002). Thus, compared to traditional students, adult students may concern differently when selecting the host college and they may have different plans after graduation. Therefore, this research investigates the differences between Chinese adult students and

traditional students by exploring (a) Chinese students' choices of the host university in the U.S.; and (b) decisions of Chinese students regarding staying or leaving the U.S. after completing their degrees.

Literature Review

There are many factors influencing international student flow. These factors include a lack of access to higher education in home countries, historical or colonial links between host and home countries, a commonality of language, the knowledge and awareness of the host country, the availability of science or technology-based programs, personal recommendations from parents or friends, the geographic proximity of the home and host countries, and per capita income of the home country, and social links from the host countries (Lee & Tan, 1984; Mazzarol et al., 1997). Previous research indicated that students were satisfied with their choices of college and ultimately persisted if their values and beliefs fitted with that institution (Williams, 1984). Moreover, a satisfactory choice would enhance students' opportunities of completing a college degree (Ray, 1992). As a result, previous research concluded several factors that students considered important when selecting the host college: (a) specific academic program; (b) affordable tuition costs; (c) financial aid availability; (d) general academic reputation/general quality; (e) location (distance from home); (f) size; (g) social atmosphere (Bowers & Pugh, 1973; Chapman & Jackson, 1987; Douglas, Powers, & Choroszy, 1983; Keller & McKewon, 1984; Lay & Maguire, 1981; Litten, 1979). Other potential factors include the college faculty, school support services, and safety and security (College Atlas, 2015).

Similarly, those factors affect international students' choices of their host country and host university as well. Park (2009) indicated that international students made their choices of a particular university abroad based on a market analysis that rewards intuitions with a stronger global brand. Besides, Wang (2007) specified that Chinese students would consider environmental factors such as living arrangement and safety when selecting an institution abroad. Compared to traditional students, adult learners choose to continue education often begins with the realization of a need or the identification of interest (Houle, 1961). Houle (1961) also indicated that social reasons (e.g., make new friends, get rid of loneliness) motivate adult learners to return to school. Finally, the desire to gain more knowledge motivates adult learners to continue in education (Houle, 1961). According to previous research, adult learners may concern more about the academic program and social atmosphere when choosing a college.

Three factors would predict international students' future plans about staying or leaving the U.S. after graduation: professional factors, personal factors, and social factors (Han, Stocking, Gebbie, & Appelbaum, 2015). According to Han et al.'s (2015) study, professional factors included career path, treatment in school, job chances, quality of advising, and professional networks; personal factors included parents' education and socioeconomic status; and social factors included the desire to live in the United States, adjustment to American society, and remaining close to friends and family. Previous research suggested that international students intended to find better jobs or gain better job opportunities in the U.S., which was often the main reason that motivated them to stay (Hazen & Alberts, 2006). In addition, compared with their home country, the better quality of living environment encourages many international students to stay in the U.S. (Hazen & Alberts, 2006). However, if international students have strong ties to

their family members in their home countries, they are more likely to return home after graduation (Baruch, et al., 2007; Constant & Massey, 2003). What is more, the maladjustment to American culture, either social life or academic culture, would drive them to go back home (Alberts & Hazen, 2005).

However, limited research examines decisions of international students from a specific country, and limited study investigates this aspect between adult students and traditional students. Therefore, to fill in the gap, a case study was used to explore the differences between Chinese adult students and traditional students regarding their choices of the host college in the U.S., and their decisions of staying or leaving the U.S. after completing their degrees.

A “push-pull” model (McMahon, 1992) of international education flow was referred as a theoretical framework in this study. According to McMahon (1992), in the push model, the student flow is influenced by the level of economic wealth, the degree of involvement of the developing country or the home country in the world economy, the priority placed on education and the availability of education opportunities in the home countries. In the pull model, the student flow depends on the relative sizes of the student’s home country economy compared to the host country, economic links between the home and host country, political interests of host country in the home country and support from host country for international students such as scholarships or other assistance and links between home and host countries.

Methods

A case study using individual interviews was conducted to investigate (a) Chinese students’ decisions when choosing a host university and their decisions of staying or leaving the U.S. after graduation, and (b) differences of decisions between adult students and traditional students. A total of 11 Participants, including 4 males and 7 females, were from different departments including Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) and non-STEM fields in a larger southeastern research institution in the U.S., specifically they are from majors including computer science, statistics, electronic engineering, MBA, economics, chemistry, and industrial design. The length of time that participants have stayed in the U.S. is from 1 to 4 years. Their ages range from 23 to 30 years old with the mean of 25.8. Four of them were categorized as adult students. They are 25 years old or above and had previous full-time working experience before they returned to campus. While the rest were categorized as traditional students.

Students are divided into adult and traditional student groups based on their age and whether they had previous full-time working experience. Questions in protocols of interviews were designed based on the analysis of the previous related studies. The data collected from the interviews were coded and transcribed. The transcriptions of the interviews were then analyzed. IRB approved this study.

Results

Choosing the Host College

To narrow from a broad perspective, the research questions asked participants for what reasons they chose their current university. The results show that most of the Chinese students noted that this college town is a quiet and safe place to study and live in.

Adult Students

Scholarship/Fellowship. Scholarship and fellowship that is offered by this university is the primary motivator for adult students. One adult student mentioned that she decided to study at this university because it "...offered me the most scholarship." Similarly, another adult student stated that he chose this university because it provided him a "graduate assistant position." However, none of the traditional students mentioned about scholarship or fellowship as a motivator.

Less living expense. Compared to large cities, the cheaper living expense is a significant reason that motivates adult learners to attend this university, as one participant mentioned that this college town is "cheaper to live in." Adult students are usually economic independent, and they afford their living expense themselves. Therefore, they may be more cautious on finance management. As a result, they would pay more attention to living expense when making the decision of a host university.

Other reason. Family reunion is another inducement. One adult student mentioned that he chose this university because his wife is studying at this university.

Traditional Students

Academic/University world ranking. The ranking of the academic programs and the university is a primary concern for most of the traditional students while choosing the host university:

"[this university] is one of the most fitting school for me to achieve [my study] ... It's a science based school and the programs in the engineering school has a fairly good ranking in the U.S..."

Similarly, another student said:

"in that time [when I was applying this university], the rank was within the first 100 in the [U.S.] university ranking. I thought I could receive high quality education, and the studying experience [here] would help me become more competitive in workplace in the future."

Exchange program with home college. Besides ranking, several participants stated that they chose this university because they joined the exchange program between this university and their home colleges:

"When I was in China, I have heard [this university] is a traditional South American university with beautiful scenery... [and] its Agricultural College is famous all over the U.S. Coincidentally, my university in Shanghai has [an] exchange program and my major also belongs to Agricultural field. So, I didn't hesitate to come here."

Another student expressed a similar answer:

“I chose here because I had an interview opportunity from here, [which is] a friend-university of my university in China. It’s easy for me to communicate with the professor [and] who is my advisor now.”

One participant also mentioned that she chose this university because “[its] graduate school held info session in my undergraduate school.” Therefore, it seems that the cooperation or connection of the host university and home college play an important role in students’ decisions. **Other Reasons.** Traditional students may also refer to others’ suggestions while selecting the host university. One participant mentioned that “a senior student who graduated from our college [study at this university]. She and my professor encouraged me [to] choose [this university].” The geographic proximity may also affect students’ choices. One student noted that, “the local climate is pleasing and is pretty much similar to where I was originally from.” Finally, the public security and the living environment of this college town were also factors that concerned most by traditional students when making the decision.

Staying or Leaving the U.S. after Graduation

Answers were similar between adult students and younger students. Most of the participants desired to gain some working experiences in the U.S. after graduation, and finally they would go back to their home country.

Working experience. Working experience in the U.S. is the primary motivator that pushes Chinese students to stay after graduation. Several participants expressed their desires to “have some working experience before going back.” One student also noted that obtaining international working experience would make her more competitive:

“I will work in America for a few years... then go back to China, [because] I want to get international work[ing] experience.”

Better living and working environment. A better living and working environment is another major motivator. Some of them considered “America is a better place to live and work.” One student in industrial design specified:

“...maybe [work] in America for several years. There are more design companies and top product corporations [in the U.S.]. People have more serious attitude towards industrial design. Design here [is] value[d] much more than [being valued] in China.”

Home culture and the link of family and friends. Though most of the participants preferred to stay in the U.S. after graduation, they decided to return to their home country finally. There are several factors that pull them to go back. The main factor is the culture and family connection. Many students expressed that they felt more conformable with their home culture and they have responsibilities to take care of their parents:

“...home country is the first choice because I get used to the environment better and I can have more time to care about my parents.”

“[I will go back to] my home country. Because in my country, I feel more comfortable and not that pushed... everything goes more easily... and my parents and friends are in home country.”

“I plan to find a job [in the U.S.] first. After I gain enough [working] experience, I will go back to my home country...because that's where my family and friends are, and I don't want [to] be apart from them.”

“[I will go back to] home country...not only because I get funding from the home country...I also feel better to live close to my family.”

One participant also mentioned that marriage is another force that drives her to go back:

“I'm not planning to marry a foreigner... [so] it is difficult to find a right person from my home country to marry with [in the U.S.]”

Other Findings

When asking about factors they concerned most while living in this college town, words such as “living expense,” and “health and dental expense” appeared many times among adult students. Whereas, “how to make friends,” and “living condition” were mentioned several times by traditional students. This finding indicated that adult students pay more attention to living issues, while younger students concern more about their social lives.

Another interesting finding is that when asked about difficulties when living in the U.S., most of the adult students noted that understanding the insurance and medical system was the most difficult part, and to find a job after graduation ranked the second. However, to manage personal finance is the primary difficulty for traditional students, followed by getting a credit card and finding on-campus employment. Finally, when asked about the most and least like things while living and studying in the U.S. most of the adult learners stated that they enjoyed the freedom, especially no censorship on information in the U.S., and the efficient campus facilitates and supports, while some of them expressed worries that most of the benefit policies are only for U.S. citizens. Whereas, for most traditional students, they enjoyed the better environment and the cheaper price while shopping, yet they did not enjoy the food in the U.S. In addition, they considered lives in the U.S. are boring because of the less entertainment. Furthermore, several students noted that the culture difference in entertainment is another obstacle. One student mentioned that “...many American students are big fans of football games...[and] they usually hang out or throw a party to watch the game together, but we don't get interest from those activities.” Similarly, another participant said, “I had no idea especially my American friends were talking about some TV shows or celebrities.”

Conclusions

Results mirror previous research that students consider academic program, school reputation or rank, and financial aid availability as the primary factors when selecting the host college (Bowers & Pugh, 1973; Chapman & Jackson, 1987; Douglas, Powers, & Choroszy, 1983; Keller & McKewon, 1984; Lay & Maguire, 1981; Litten, 1979). To be more specific, the present study indicated that adult students would pay more attention to financial aid availability and

living expense, whereas traditional students concern more about the rank of the college, living environment and public security. Since adult learners usually have a clear goal of returning to school, such as to seek for specific knowledge and certain skills (Houle, 1961), they may not pay much attention on whether the college is famous or not. Meanwhile, because they are independent on finance (Offerman, 2011), they focus more on whether school would provide financial aid or not. Additionally, the exchange programs and the connection of host university and home college also influence their decisions. Similar to previous studies that geographic proximity of the home and the host countries may affect international students' choice (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002), findings also suggested that students choose a host university based on the climate similarity.

Similar to previous studies that many professional factors are the primary motivator that drives international students to stay, while personal and social factors are motivators that drive them to return to home countries (Han et al., 2015). The present study suggests that most of the Chinese students prefer to gain working experiences in the U.S., while the strong ties with families/friends and the familiar home culture are reasons that drive them to go back home.

In addition, traditional students care more about living condition, social life, and entertainment, while adult students pay more attention on American policies and school facilities. These findings indicate that adult students usually think more mature and practical than traditional students, and they are more satisfied with things that can truly help and support them.

As a result, it may be beneficial to Chinese students if universities and colleges may consider (a) providing programs to help Chinese students learn job searching and applying skills in the United States; and (b) providing programs to help younger students build connections with local students, to experience local culture, and to improve campus facilities, as well as providing more supports for adult learners. It is expected that this study will lead to a better awareness of Chinese students' choices of the host university and their decisions after graduation. It is also hoped that this research can enlighten higher education professionals with practical ideas and plans to create a better campus environment and climate to serve this growing population.

There are several limitations. Firstly, the small sample size at a specific university cannot represent all the Chinese student population. Secondly, the small sample size of adult students and traditional students is not representative. For example, the age ranges from 23 to 30, which cannot represent adult students' concerns who are older than 30 years old. Therefore, a quantitative study with a large student sample is needed in order to further investigate this population's decisions and to provide thorough suggestions for higher education professionals. In addition, more participants from different majors and cultural backgrounds can be investigated to examine further differences among them.

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