The Hidden Barriers for International Students at Auto-Centric Universities

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The United States has long been the leading destination for international students around the world, welcoming 948,519 of these students in the 2021/22 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2022). International students have been drawn to the diverse range of higher education institutions, from massive state universities to quaint liberal arts colleges and community colleges. The experiences of these students on US campuses vary widely depending on gender, race, ethnicity, class, and an array of individual characteristics. This commentary highlights the experiences of international students on university campuses that were built exclusively for the automobile, called auto-centric development, and how institutions must be aware of these challenges.

Universities in Auto-Centric Development

Much of the North American development pattern post-World War II has been dominated by auto-centric development. This kind of development model puts the automobile at the center of each design choice (Allen, 2021). Structures are spread out, parking is abundant, and street arteries are wide and clear (Marohn, 2019; Speck, 2013). In this environment, housing has also been limited to focus on single-family homes in suburban neighborhoods miles from commercial businesses. Big box stores and shopping malls have replaced traditional town shopping streets. Furthermore, pedestrian spaces, public transport, or biking have been relegated to afterthoughts, as people are expected to drive everywhere.

Colleges and universities cannot avoid the development model of their surrounding communities, even if internal campus design provides solace to the auto-centric sprawl. Newer universities or campus additions that have been built during the post-World War II era often follow a pattern of auto-centric design. The structures around campus are dominated by the car; anyone outside of a car is, at best, annoyed at the unpleasantness or, at worst, in danger of fast-moving vehicles driven by distracted drivers. Besides, a majority of students in the nation's universities are so-called non-traditional, commuting to higher educational institutions where only a small portion of students may live on campuses (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.).

People working on these campuses might not see the limitations that auto-centrism poses to those without a car or who cannot drive. It may not seem like a problem to drive a couple of minutes from campus to a grocery store because this is a normal reality of life in the US. Suburban sprawl is the standard culture. When US citizens arrive on campus, finding the university embedded in auto-centric development is no surprise. However, not every student on campus is from the US, and the car culture that is taken for granted can easily hinder international students who came to campus with diverse expectations.

Undercutting the Push-Pull Model

The Push-Pull Model has been a popular framework for understanding international student flows. It was established by McMahon (1992) to analyze international students using 'push' factors that influence those who leave their home countries and the 'pull' factors that attract them to study in a host country. The main 'push' factors that lead students to leave their home countries center on the lack of economic or educational opportunities, which can stem from divergent domestic educational priorities. The dominant 'pull' factors that attract students to go abroad to specific countries are personal recommendations, knowledge and awareness, financial opportunities, desirable environment, geographic proximity, and social links (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

The Push-Pull Model has been observed in students who have studied in the US. One of the factors that attracts many international students is the multicultural environment in US universities (Hazen & Alberts, 2006). Likewise, university degrees in the US are recognized globally, and many international students seek career advancement, social mobility, and personal growth during and after their studies (Hazen & Alberts, 2006; Lesjak et al., 2015; Urban & Palmer, 2016; Zhou, 2015). The country boasts one of the world's finest higher education systems, with excellent programs in a wide range of fields.

While these 'pull' factors initially bring international students to US campuses, those in auto-centric universities may undercut some of these expectations. Without a car, the multicultural 'pull' of social life in the US limits students to interactions with only those already on campus. Prior to arriving in host countries, many international students do not have a chance to fully understand the transportation options and the high expenses associated with the automobile in social life (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). In terms of the 'pull' factor of career advancement, limited reliable transportation options can hinder international students' ability to expand their social capital and pursue professional development through internships or job interviews (Islam et al., 2022).

Considerations

Higher education professionals may not even be aware of the campus auto-centrism nor the barriers posed to international students. Even administrators, staff, or faculty who are mindful of these limitations may not share the experience of being car-less in a place that demands a car. Hence, it is critical to continuously listen to and engage with international students.

Most universities have services to account for auto-dependency, such as local shuttles, but these can be limited in terms of time and availability. Similarly, these shuttles cannot necessarily connect students directly with their preferred social spaces. Likewise, institutions can offer field trips and organized trips to stores. However, these interactions are purposeful and deliberate, different from the spontaneous interactions needed for socialization and acculturation—they may not be

individualized to meet career development needs, too. These services should be seen as the minimum offerings rather than full solutions at an auto-centric university.

Some innovations have emerged to alleviate the lack of transportation options, such as food delivery and ride-sharing services. However, the sector should not assume international students can afford to use these apps regularly, reflecting the pejorative "cash cow" stereotype (Castiello-Gutiérrez & Li, 2020). Universities could consider partnering with ride-sharing services to negotiate cheaper rates or subsidize a certain number of trips throughout the semester. Another innovation to consider is the proliferation of e-bikes. While universities have successfully piloted bike-sharing programs, it is important to caution international students about riding outside of campus, as roadways in the US can be dangerous for those not in an automobile.

Conclusion

The critique of the auto-centric university is not an attack on specific institutions. Rather, the aim is to highlight the practical barriers faced by international students within the context of the national transportation system and urban development. Some international students may even find advantages in auto-centric universities, with fewer distractions and more time to focus on academic pursuits. Moreover, given concerns about gun safety and general violence expressed by international students and their parents (Allen & Ye, 2021), a more isolated campus with exceptional educational offerings may itself be a 'pull' factor.

Universities are inherently part of a broader system that has been heavily influenced by car culture. However, recent movements have attempted to push back against auto-centrism, such as efforts to build protected bike lanes or remove parking minimums. Universities should actively engage with these local movements to help improve their communities and enhance the lives of international students, even if these changes require long-term vision and planning. In the meantime, those within the institutions working with international students must make extra efforts and considerations to address the limitations faced without having a car.

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