

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CANADIAN STUDENTS' CHOICE OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to explain the factors influencing Canadian students' motivation for studying in the United States. The United States has continuously been the leader in international students, but is now facing increasing competition from other nations around the world. As one of the top senders of international students to the United States, Canada is of special interest to institutions of higher education in the United States due to the close social, economic, and political ties. International student mobility is influenced by push-pull factors that influence a student's decision to study abroad, and ultimately pull factors from host nations that student's find favorable. To understand Canadian students' motivation for studying in the United States, a study was conducted with a sample of 411 Canadian students at a small private college in Buffalo, New York. The study found statistically significant differences in the importance placed on reasons for not remaining in Canada for higher education, the factors that influence the selection of the United States as a study destination, and student preferences for institutions of higher education in the United States. The study concluded that there are separate push-pull factors influencing Canadian higher education students on the Canada-U.S. border, and that Canadian students are their own distinct group that are neither truly like international nor domestic students.

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INTRODUCTION

Student mobility trends in the past decades have led to an increased number of students participating in international education. Today, more students are studying abroad than ever and there has been an ever increasing competition for international students. The United States has been leading the way as a destination for international students in higher education with 22% of the international student market (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). While the United States has always been a leader in international student enrollment, the nation is now facing increasing competition from other well positioned nations like UK (13%), Australia (8%), Germany (7%), and France (9%). To maintain their competitive advantage educators and administrators in the United States must understand their international student markets and develop appropriate strategies to attract and maintain students. One of the largest segments of international students in the United States comes from Canada. In 2009/2010, the number of international students studying in the United States reached 690,923 students, of which 28,145 students were from Canada (Open Doors, 2010). Canada sends more of their students to the United States than to any other country, and has been continuously one of the United State's top ten source countries for international students. With our close cultural, economic, and geographical ties, why is the United States a destination for so many Canadian students? The answer to this question has critical implications for educators on both sides of the border.

International students, in general, study abroad for a variety of different reasons, these reasons include a home country that cannot meet demand for higher education, students seeking institutions with more prestige or power, or other nations that have institutions that specialize in a desired area of study. Students, especially from developing countries, have found that their country may lack the supply of quality opportunities in higher education that they demand, and they must travel abroad to developed nations for their education. Students from developed nations choose to study abroad due to the increase in globalization and the need for students with a global perspective and experiences (Altbach, 2004). More than 90% of international students are enrolled in countries that belong to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, who attract approximately 45% of the total amount of foreign students worldwide (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007). Studying abroad has become more accessible due to decreased transportation costs and innovations in communications technology. Governments have also realized the economic potential of international students, and have allocated more funds to improve higher education in their country and to increase the number of international students (Altbach, 2004). These skilled and educated students also provide a local labor force that can contribute to research and innovation, and also in any skilled labor shortages (Gribble, 2008).

International students are also often influenced to study abroad by "push-pull" factors (Altbach, 2004; Li & Bray, 2007; Maringe & Carter, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Students are "pushed" abroad due to factors in their home country, and students are then "pulled" by factors in the host country that make it an attractive place to study. Students can be pushed from their home country due to an inability to study in local universities caused by competition or because another country's institutions specialize in a desired program. Students are pulled to the United States as a destination for international study because of the country's reputation as one of the world's best, and most prestigious, academic systems (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

In an effort to understand the factors that influence a Canadian student to specifically select the United States as a study abroad destination this study used a quantitative method to discover the main factors influencing the migration of Canadian students and the specific "push-pull" dynamic between the two nations.

Set against this backdrop four interlinked questions are addressed in the empirical analysis which follows. First, what are the most important "push" factors influencing the movement of Canadian students out of Canada? Second, what are the most influential factors "pulling" Canadian students specifically to the United States as a host country for their higher education? Third, what factors do Canadian students find the most important when choosing an institution to study at in the United States? And fourth, will the Canadian students' decision making process in regards to choice of institution resemble that of a domestic student or an international student.

On this note, the remainder of our paper is organized as follows: The next section discusses the literature review on globalization of higher education. The next section describes the data and methodology and gives a descriptive snapshot of the main characteristics of the sample followed by the results of the survey on Canadian student population. This paper concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of the survey results, research limitations, and future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cross border education has become an important mode for globalizing higher education, while knowledge has become an international good that can transcend national boundaries. Higher education has become a service to be traded across borders and attracts a market from all over the world. Demand for cross border education has increased because of globalization and the increasing employment opportunities in

multinational corporations and foreign countries (Varghese, 2007). Varghese (2007) notes that institutions of higher education are institutions with dual characteristics; they are both national and international. The content and knowledge shared is universal and international, while the ownership, organization, and culture have always been national. Globalization in education can take many forms. First, there can be a cross-border supply of educational services, like online distance education programs, where students do not even need to leave their country. Another form of globalization is the consumption of educational services abroad, which is what this study focuses on, where students physically cross the border for educational purposes. The commercial presence of a provider in another country, such as in the form of branch campuses, is another aspect of international education. Twinning and franchising arrangements between institutions in the developing and developed world are collaborations that institutions are considering to increase their international impact. Finally, globalization in higher education can be seen in the exchange and mobility of professors and employees from one nation to another through academic partnerships or to teaching opportunities at branch campuses (Varghese, 2007).

The international market for higher education has many variables that affect international student mobility. There are strategies employed by home governments to organize this flow of students seeking to study outside their home nation (Bourke, 2000). Some of these strategies include funding arrangements, accreditation and new educational offerings. Since some nations lack the capacity for certain higher education opportunities, governments may select to fund students to study in a specific country. Accreditation is another important aspect of international higher education, since the recognition of the host country's credentials is a vitally important factor when deciding to study abroad. Accreditation is a tool used by home governments to have an influence on student flows. Accreditation and the recognition of education degrees from overseas institutions are blurred by political circumstances and can significantly impact the flow of students from one country to another (Bourke, 2000).

Currently there are many factors influencing student flows in international education. Some of the most prominent factors include cost of education, academic superiority in host nation, student experience, language proficiency, employment opportunities, and lack of educational opportunities in home country. (Varghese, 2007; Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007; Mpinganjira, 2009) Varghese (2007) found that influential factors for international education include cost of education, since some countries have higher tuition levels applied to international students compared to domestic students.

Language proficiency, another important factor, may explain why regional flows may be high, especially in North America and Western Europe. Perceived academic superiority of the institution in the host country is seen as a significant factor since international students traditionally move from less developed countries to more developed countries for their education. Many students also find the acquisition of foreign language and culture an influential factor in deciding to study abroad. The opportunity for employment is a major reason to study abroad; whether because study abroad enhances credentials, or the student plans on staying in the host country after completion of their study.

Research conducted by Cubillo *et al.*, (2006); Chen, (2008); Soutar & Turner, (2002); Shanka *et al.*, (2005), has found that international student's have an extensive and complex decision making process when deciding to study abroad. The decision making process consists of personal reasons and motivations for studying in a foreign country, encouragement from significant others, country image effect, proximity of host institution, the institution's image, recommendations from friends and colleagues, and an evaluation of the program. Many studies (Chen, 2008; Cubillo *et al.*, 2006; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Shanlm *et al.*, 2005; Soutar & Turner, 2002) have looked at why international students decide to study abroad, and the factors that influence their choice of institution, but few have looked at the migration of students from one specific country to another. While the United States and Canada share a border, strong economic ties, and cultural similarities, there have been surprisingly few comparative studies in education that center on these two nations. It may have been previously thought that these

nations were too similar, that a study between the two would not be useful (Skolnik & Jones, 1992). With the largest percentage of Canadian international students going to the United States, it would be imperative for those on both the American and Canadian sides of the border to understand why this movement occurs. American colleges and universities must identify the factors that contribute to Canadian student movements to the United States and employ this information in their strategic policies to attract and retain such students. Internationalization and the use of international marketing have had great influence on students' choices of study abroad destinations (Chen, 2008), so by segmenting the market, American universities can tailor their marketing approach to Canadian students more effectively. Canadian colleges and universities can use such a study to understand how they can retain students.

A "push-pull" model has been developed to understand student mobility trends. Push factors are those that operate within a student's home nation and initiate a student's decision making process to study abroad. Pull factors operate in the host country and make the country more attractive to international students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The theory was developed by McMahon (1992) in a study of international student's from 18 developing nations and their movement to develop in the 1960s and 1970s. The push model suggested that student flows were dependent on economic factors and the degree of involvement of the sending nation in the world economy, educational opportunities found in the home nation, and social and cultural factors like the priority the developing country puts on education.

The pull model from the study suggests that the student is pulled to a nation due to the size of the host country's economy relative to that of the one in the home nation, economic links between the two nations, and political factors like the host nation's political ties to the home nation. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) identified six push-pull factors that have an impact on the decision to study abroad. These factors include knowledge and awareness, recommendations from family and friends, cost issues, environment issues, social links, and geographical proximity. Knowledge and awareness was measured by four items that included student's access to information on the host country, level of knowledge student has of the host country, quality of education of host country, and the recognition of host country's qualifications.

The decision to study abroad is an involved process that includes the initial reason to study abroad, the choice of host country, and the choice of institution. Cubillo et al. (2006) set forth a theoretical framework that analyzed the different dimensions of the international student's decision making process. The main factors the study identified in the international student choice process included personal reasons, country image effect, institution image, and program evaluation. Country image which includes cultural distance, social reputation, academic reputation, cost of living, immigration procedures, and time to earn a degree, had a direct and positive relationship with the purchase intention of the student. It is clear that there exists a well-defined body of evidence on students' choice decision and offer insights into the problems of consumer choice models, however, insufficient research exists on the challenges faced by small private institutions in recruiting and attracting foreign students in the United States. The main purpose of this study is to understand the controllable and uncontrollable factors influencing Canadian students choice of a small private institution given the high involvement nature of college choice decisions.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

In light of the foregoing literature, the overall study objective was to determine the key factors in the decision process of selecting a higher education institution in the United States by Canadian students. The research subjects were comprised of Canadian students enrolled at D'Youville College, a small private institution located in Buffalo, New York which is located within half a mile of the border between United States and Canada. Convenience sampling of 411 Canadian students enrolled in the various programs offered at D'Youville College was utilized.

The entire population of Canadian students at D'Youville College was invited to participate in the study through campus email. The email contained a link to a landing page with a web survey. Follow up emails were sent one and two weeks after the initial email with the survey invitation to remind potential participants of the survey to obtain an acceptable response rate. The purpose of the study was to understand factors influencing Canadian students' decision to study in institutions of higher education in the United States. The survey was designed to examine the various influences, including any push-pull dynamic. The survey, in three different sections, looked at factors influencing Canadian students' choice not to study in Canada, factors influencing their decision to study in the United States, and factors influencing their choice of institution in the United States.

In each section of the survey, participants rated certain factors known to affect student mobility, derived from the literature review, on how important they were in their decision making process. The survey had response categories based on a four-point Likert Scale from 1 (not considered in decision) to 4 (very important to my decision). In each section, the participants were asked to select the most influential factor in their decision, and an open-ended question was employed to discover any additional factors that may have been considered when choosing the study at an institution in the United States rather than one in Canada.

To analyze the data collected from the survey, this study employed the Chi-Square Goodness of Fit test to evaluate whether there were statistically significant differences between the identified factors. Frequency tables were used to illustrate respondents' responses to each question. SPSS was employed to collect, organize, and calculate the data. The survey was started by 104 respondents, with 87 useable complete surveys, which resulted in a 21 % response rate.

By academic level, 23% of respondents were undergraduate, 54% were graduate students, 21% of students were in professional programs, and 2% were doctoral students. The mean age of the respondents was 31.4 years of age with 75% of respondents female and 25% of respondents male. Education, Nursing and other Health related majors were the majority of responses (See Table 1).

Table 1: Majors of Survey Respondents

Major	Respondents %
Education	39.0%
Nursing	17.1%
Physical Therapy	14.9%
Occupational Therapy	6.8%
Interdisciplinary Studies	4.5%
Dietetics	3.3%
Business	2.2%
Physician Assistant	2.2%
Doctoral	2.2%
Biology	2.1%

This table shows the major of the survey respondents with education, nursing and health related majors being the majority of the responses.

RESULTS

From the results of the survey, we can see that Canadian students have their own distinct reasons for leaving Canada, and choosing to come to the United States for educational purposes. The factors that were most important in the Canadian students' decision to study outside Canada revolved around the issue of competitive entry requirements in Canada, broadening personal experience, lack of university places or the inability to get a place in a course the student wanted to study at home (See Table 2). These results are consistent with previous studies including Mazarol and Souter (2002) which found that difficulty finding entry into institutions at home were significant "push" factors in international students' decision to pursue their higher education outside their home country (See Table 2). Like a study conducted by

Mpinganjira (2009), the results of the survey indicated that the enhancement of future employment prospects also was an important reason for studying outside of Canada.

Regarding the decision to study in the United States, the most important factor reported by Canadian students was that the qualifications were recognized in their home country (See Table 3). This result is consistent with the study conducted by Mpinganjira (2009) where students indicated the most important factor when deciding to study abroad was that students were seeking qualifications with worldwide recognition.

The second most important reason for coming to the United States for Canadian students was related to geographical proximity and the ability to commute or easily travel to the United States. This is similar to findings by Wiers-Jenssen (2003) in a study of Norwegian students who studied in linguistically and geographically peripheral European countries, where students indicated that geographical proximity was a significant factor in their choice process. While not one of the most important factors in the selection of the United States as a study destination, knowledge of someone who has studied in the United States was seen as a key factor in students' decision making (See Table 4).

The survey also found that a favorable image of the United States was not particularly important in their decision to study in the United States, and only 1 % of respondents indicated that it was the most important factor in their decision. This seems to conflict with the literature that indicates the significance of country image, though when survey takers were asked if they considered any other countries when looking to study outside of Canada, 86% of respondents answered "no". This indicates that while country image was not consciously an important factor, many students did not consider any other country when deciding to study outside of Canada.

A chi-square test of goodness of fit was performed to determine whether certain factors were relatively more important than others. Preference for the factors in Table 3 was not equally distributed according to our chi-square goodness of fit test, $\chi^2(10, N=87)=217.586, p<.01$. The results of our chi-square test indicate that certain factors received higher rankings statistically significantly more often than others at the $p<.01$ level. This result is interesting because a portion of participants indicated that each factor was very important to the decision process at some level (see table 4) but ultimately, certain factors were statistically significantly more important than others (see table 3).

Table 2: Factors in Decision to Study Outside Canada

Factors	Not Considered	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Unavailability of course at home	32.2%	18.9%	25.6%	23.3%
Broaden personal experience	27.8%	24.4%	32.2%	15.6%
Competitive entry requirements in home country	11.2%	12.4%	20.2%	56.2%
Lack of university places	20.0%	16.7%	32.2%	31.1%
Inability to get a place in course one wanted to study at home	21.1%	13.3%	26.7%	38.95%
Enhance future employment prospects	19.1%	13.5%	28.1%	39.3%
Absence of equivalent domestic Opportunities	35.2%	19.3%	19.3%	26.2%
Other	25.0%	15.0%	20.0%	40.0%

This table presents the factors that Canadian students either consider to be "very important" to "not considered" in the decision process to study outside Canada.

Table 3: Most Important Factors in Decision to Study in the United States

Factors	Response (%)
Qualifications recognized at home	51%
Geographical Proximity	14%
Ability to commute or travel easily to the United States	13%
Vale of degree in economic market	10%
Know someone who studied there	5%
Intention to migrate to United States after degree completion	5%
Favorable image of higher education in the United States	1%
Common language	0%
Prior connection or historical ties to country	0%
Ease of visa formalities	0%
Other	1%

This table shows the most important factor in the Canadian students' decision making process to study in the United States. Responses were statistically significantly different from a uniform distribution at the $p < .01$ level.

Table 4: Factors in Decision to Study in United States

Factors	Not Considered	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Favorable image of higher education in the US	37.5%	20.5%	29.5%	12.5%
Common Language	29.1%	12.8%	31.4%	26.7%
Geographical Proximity	3.5%	7.0%	27.1%	62.4%
Know someone who studied there	17.4%	15.1%	40.8%	26.7%
Qualifications recognized in home market	2.3%	2.3%	21.8%	73.6%
Value of degree in economic market	11.7%	8.1%	29.1%	51.1%
Prior connection or historical ties to the country	64.0%	20.9%	7%	8.1%
Intention to migrate to U.S. after degree completion	53.5%	19.8%	17.4%	9.3%
Ability to commute or travel easily to U.S.	6.9%	4.6%	25.3%	63.2%
Ease of visa formalities	25.6%	9.3%	31.4%	33.7%
Other	62.5%	0%	0%	37.5%

This table shows the factors Canadian students' consider to be "very important" to "not considered" as part of their decision to study in the United States.

Regarding selection of an institution, the respondents indicated that the institution having the desired program of study was the most important factor, with another significant factor being the quality of education (See Table 5). A chi-square test of goodness of fit was performed. Preference for the factors in Table 5 was not equally distributed, $\chi^2(8, N=87)=63.651, p < .01$. The results of our chi-square test indicate that certain factors received higher rankings statistically significantly more often than others at the $p < .01$ level. The second most important factor in choice of institution was location of the institution. While not selected as the most important factor in their selection of a particular institution, a significant number of respondents indicated that favorable scheduling options and grade requirements were key factors in their decision making process (See Table 6).

Table 5: Most Important Factor in Choice of Institution

Factors	Response (%)
Have desired program of study	34%
Location	16%
Have favorable scheduling options	15%
Quality of education	14%
Grade requirements	8%
Reputation	3%
Interaction with faculty and staff	3%
Recommendation from family and friends	3%
Availability of financial aid	2%
Other	0%

This table presents the most important factor considered by Canadian students' consider to be most important in their choice of institution. Responses were statistically significantly different from a uniform distribution at the $p < .01$ level.

Table 6: Factors in Decision to Study at D'Youville College

Factors	Not Considered	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Very Important
Have desired program of study	2.3%	1.1%	5.7%	90.1%
Reputation	10.3%	5.7%	31.1%	52.9%
Have favorable scheduling options	14.9%	8.1%	21.8%	55.2%
Availability of financial aid	47.8%	24.2%	14%	14%
Interaction with faculty and staff	30.2%	8.2%	30.2%	31.4%
Location	4.5%	2.3%	19.3%	73.9%
Quality of Education	3.4%	1.2%	26.4%	69%
Grade Requirements	9.3%	2.3%	37.2%	51.2%
Recommendations from family and friends	20.9%	9.3%	32.6%	37.2%
Other	77.8%	0%	11.1%	11.1%

This table shows the factors Canadian students consider to be either "very important" to "not considered" in their decision process to study at D'Youville College.

Canadian students do resemble international students. Canadian students face similar push factors to other international students identified in the literature review. The push factors that are motivating many of the Canadian students are similar push factors to students from other nations studying abroad. These push factors include competition and lack of space in desired program of study. Also, Canadian students are mainly concerned about whether their qualifications obtained in the United States would be recognized in their home market, which is distinctly an international student perspective. On some factors, Canadian students did not resemble international students. Canadian students were not overly concerned with having a common language or the image of higher education in the United States. While these factors were important, they were not selected as most important, where these factors had been identified in the literature review as decisive factors. On other factors, Canadian students took more of a domestic student approach, especially when it came down to choice of institution. The importance placed by the Canadian students on things like location, scheduling options, and grade requirements were all factors more likely to be a main concern for a domestic student. Studies of domestic students choice of institution found that program of study was the most important factor in the choice of institution, which we also found in this study. From the results of this survey we can see that the Canadian students studying in the United States resemble both international and domestic students.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In this paper, we have attempted to understand the various factors influencing Canadian students' decision process in their selection of colleges and universities in the United States. Evidence from a sample of 87 Canadian students at a small private college in Buffalo, New York suggests that the unavailability of desired programs at home, availability of desired programs and the qualification being recognized in the student's home country are critical decision factors in the choice of institutions.

Furthermore, this study indicates that Canadian students are not like traditional international students, nor do they share the same concerns as domestic students. Canadian students studying in the United States are their own distinct group, with unique concerns and trends. Institutions of higher education looking to market towards Canadian students should understand that traditional marketing materials aimed at international students may not be fully appropriate for the Canadian audience. Materials used in the institution's home market for domestic students would not be suitable either. Students on bordering regions may need their own exclusive set of materials tailored to their specific concerns.

The topic of student mobility is one of many possibilities of study. Further study of Canadian students in other bordering regions would add more depth to the subject of student mobility between the countries of the United States and Canada. Other research on student mobility trends between two nations with significant student flows in other parts of the world would greatly add to the literature on globalization in higher education. Student mobility trends differ from country to country and understanding the

movement of students from one country to another will give administrators and marketers in higher education more knowledge of how to meet the needs of their unique student populations.

A limitation of this study is the use of convenience sampling employed during data collection. The data collection was limited to one institution located near the border of the United States and Canada. To obtain results it can be generalized on the factors influencing student mobility between the United States and Canada in border areas, a wider survey, with multiple institutions located in bordering regions should be conducted.

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Survey

The questions below were on a Likert Scale using the following values
1. Not consider in my decision 2. Not an important factor in my decision 3. Somewhat important factor in my decision 4. Very important factor in my decision

Factors influencing decision to study outside Canada

1	Unavailability of course at home
2	Broaden personal experience
3	Competitive entry requirements in home country
4	Lack of university places
5	Inability to get a place in course one wanted to study at home
6	Enhance future employment prospects
7	Absence of equivalent domestic opportunities

Overall what was the most important factor in your decision to study outside Canada?
 Were there any other factors that were not included that influenced your decision to study outside of Canada?

Factors influencing decision to study in the United States

1	Favorable image of higher education in the United States
2	Common language
3	Geographical proximity
4	Know someone who studied there
5	Qualifications recognized at home
6	Value of degree in economic market
7	Prior connection or historical ties to the country
9	Intention to migrate to the United States after degree completion
9	Ability to commute or travel easily to United States
10	Ease of visa formalities

Overall, what was the most important factor in your decision to study in the United States?
 Were there any other factors that were not included that influenced your decision to study in the United States?
 Did you look at countries other than the United States when deciding to study outside of Canada? Yes No

Factors influencing choice of institution

1	Have desired program of study
2	Reputation
3	Have favorable scheduling options
4	Availability of financial aid
5	Interaction with faculty and staff
6	Location
7	Quality of education
8	Grade requirements
9	Recommendations from family and friends

Overall, what was the most important factor in your choice of institution in the United States?
 Were there any other factors that were not included that influenced your choice of institution in the United States?

Demographic Data

Age
Gender
Year of Study
Country of Origin
Field of Study

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