

**Positivistic vs. Humanistic Emphases in Admissions and Student Affairs Research:
International student perspectives**

Abstract

As international students within American institutions of higher education (IHE) have become a permanent fixture on college campuses, it is important now more than ever to understand their diverse array of needs. In addition, it is imperative for universities to provide all students, including international students, a space to express their true feelings, fears, and concerns. Applied and academic research is a major component of meeting intention with action. As international students make the life-changing decision to pursue their educational careers abroad, it should be a top priority of universities to do everything they can to not only recruit students from around the world, but also use applied research studies to better understand and serve this often overlooked and misunderstood population.

This article aims to galvanize the conversation on international student needs and concerns within American IHE. An examination of the literature below will highlight areas where further research on the needs of international students should be addressed, and hopefully, call to attention areas for further investigation and improvement. A strong emphasis on positivistic studies on international students within higher education (HE) literature often coincide with limited humanistic research on these same populations. This is seen as problematic and such an imbalance can be indicative of American IHE's profit-driven models of learning.

The research question for this analyses include the following: What patterns and gaps emerge in the literature in regards to this topic? What then does HE research tell us about university efforts to bridge these divides?

The research goals for this study examines an important research gap within HE admissions and student support services literature regarding international student's experiences with American colleges and universities. It also aims to offer constructive feedback for how IHE can help their international student populations thrive in the context of an increasingly divided and combative educational environment within our globalized world of the 21st century.

HE & Admissions

Admission's research and international perceptions

As students in vast numbers are being recruited globally by admissions offices to attend their local universities, effective branding and marketing strategies are key for helping international students justify the various costs associated with pursuing a degree in the United States. There is little doubt that the population which universities are reaching out to is truly global in nature. Interested international applicants from nearly 200 countries will have a wide array of concerns, needs, and perspectives that are as individual and unique as the person applying. The challenge is great for American IHE to garner and keep the attention of overseas applicants for years to come and understand how to best reach them while gaining a competitive edge over their domestic and international competitors.

Naturally then, one would expect to see research in HE admissions that reflects a quantitative as well as qualitative and in-depth analyses (i.e., mixed methods) of the concerns of applicants from all over the world. What trends are emerging in current HE admissions literature that aim to deeply understand important issues of perception among international applicants?

Neoliberal branding strategies

Within recent HE admission's research, there is a large amount of literature on testing-related admissions procedures (i.e., the SAT/ACT) and challenges that colleges face in embracing a more holistic college admissions process. This is becoming increasingly important as American IHE work hard to remain compliant with new state/federal admissions laws in the United States. As a result, emergent themes include college entrance standardized testing and its' effects on underserved and marginalized populations (Chankseliani, 2013; Koljatic & Silva,

2013; Pu, 2013; Santelices & Wilson, 2015), a call for expanded use of “non-cognitive predictors” in the admissions process for all students (e.g., more “holistic” admissions procedures) (Niessen, Meijer, & Tendeiro, 2017; Oliveri & Ezzo, 2014; Sedlacek, 2003), and issues related to affirmative action in student acceptance rates (Berggren, 2007; Stulberg & Chen, 2014; Wang & Shulruf, 2013). These topics look broadly at important issues in HE admissions research. However, they mostly consider domestic concerns within American HE admissions and often group together “international students” into a single and overgeneralized category. Subsequently, these studies overlook specifics about how international student populations within American IHE are impacted by developments in the legal system and the interpretation of laws within admission’s offices.

Within higher education literature which does consider international students in the admissions process, themes once again seem to ignore the actual lived experiences of the students and misses them at a more humanistic level. In my examination, HE admissions research takes on a testing and/or branding emphasis which centers on discussions like the pros and cons of the International Baccalaureate (IB) diploma program¹ (Conley, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2015; Lewis, 2012), challenges universities have in maintain positive reputations as credible and desirable educational spaces as they accept more and more overseas applicants (Tysome, 2003), the influences that immigrant students have on overall higher education costs and affordability (Watzman, 1990), and surface macro-level survey studies on international student needs (Tas, 2013).

¹ “Students at International Baccalaureate® (IB) World Schools are given a unique education. They will be encouraged to think independently and drive their own learning, take part in programmes of education that can lead them to some of the highest ranking universities around the world” (International Baccalaureate, 2018).

Indeed, the general data collected on international students in HE academic literature often utilizes a quantitative approach, and lacks in-depth analyses of foci such as the unique cultural perspectives of international student applicants -- perspectives that students bring with them from overseas and later become manifest throughout their academic careers in the United States (and furthermore as many of them stay in the United States to work and maybe even become permanent residents, or future American citizens). So why then are universities and researchers alike placing such a large emphasis on positivistic studies and on more general trends in American HE while missing the mark on much needed humanistic research? Studies that can greatly improve the admissions process for both international applicants and the universities alike.

One possible explanation comes from looking at the prevalence of neoliberal globalization in our modern era. As globalization allows for greater interconnectivity in our world through advances in technology, mobility, and communication, a concurrent economic driving force, namely that of neoliberalism, feeds off this malleable and impressionable global environment. Sleeter (2014) describes the concept of neoliberalism within the zeitgeist globalization in the following way:

A restoration of elite power' in which increased privatization and market competition is eroding a sense of the public, linking education more firmly to the needs of large corporations, and facilitating the flow of wealth and power to a small global elite. (p. 85)

In fact, the theories of neoliberalism and globalization can be thought of as existing together within a sort of symbiotic relationship. Clayton (2004) describes how "neoliberalism is a new ideological agenda associated with the new currents of contemporary globalization" (p. 293). In other words, as the world grows closer together, the powerful elite can capitalize on greater

connectedness and create more possibilities for promoting their services to larger audience. I argue that American universities are either directly influenced by these powers or are guilty of being incarnations of neoliberal globalization elitism themselves.

And as people around the world feed off the expanding commodification of services, it brings consumers into closer contact with one another as they become buyers of the same products and services. In some fields, this has become known as the “McDonaldization” of the global market, or in the field of education, as the *banking model of education*. The latter idea, according to Freire (1970), can be understood in the following way:

It is not surprising that the banking concept of education regards men as adaptable, manageable beings. The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them. The capability of banking education to minimize or annul the students’ creative power and to stimulate their credulity serves the interests of the oppressors, who care neither to have the world revealed nor to see it transformed. The oppressors use their “humanitarianism” to preserve a profitable situation. (Kindle Locations 1017-1022)

Profit and power for the elite is fueled by passive and subconscious conformity by its constituents. Their “oppressors” priority is financial success, and as Freire puts it, “humanitarianism” insofar as it leads to continued growth and compliance by those that are put in line. In other words, is recent HE literature on international students, or the lack thereof, a sign of such ideological trends? Academic research which aims to support the voices of the

underrepresented, in the case of this study, international students, may only become a priority if it is demanded by those it most impacts most. However, as we mentioned earlier, the cards are stacked against international students who are in a revolving-door HE system. A system which is designed to allure and draw in costumers, and that which isn't incentivized to document and understand the individual stories of their often-awestruck consumers.

According to some economists, neoliberalism can lead to greater world-wide gaps in wealth distribution by rewarding those who embrace its possibilities and subsequently improve the consumer's chances of social capital while marginalizing those who do not comply (either because of choice or lack of resources). Piketty & Goldhammer (2014) elucidate economic reasons behind the growing divide between the rich and the poor and which can be understood via a simple formula:

The inequality $r > g$ (rate>gain) implies that wealth accumulated in the past grows more rapidly than output and wages. This inequality expresses a fundamental logical contradiction. The entrepreneur inevitably tends to become a rentier, more and more dominant over those who own nothing but their labor. Once constituted, capital reproduces itself faster than output increases. The past devours the future. (Kindle Locations 10000-10003)

According to Piketty's argument, the rich abound in wealth because their rate of return in investments is larger than their output. Little by little, certain individuals expand upon their wealth and have more power when it comes to decision-making situations (which henceforth takes away the wealth of much of the world's population). In the case of American IHE, university endowments, administrator's salaries and benefits, and associated school brand names are gaining strength and momentum by the day as prices for students to attend these institutions,

and the loans that many of them take out to pay for their educations, become costlier by the day. The elite within those well-established systems continue to thrive as those who struggle to pay rent and place large financial burdens on their families struggle to overcome their day-to-day challenges.

In fact, according to McGreevy (2017), the UC Board of Regents got into hot water when they were recently caught in a scandalous fiscal affair:

The administration of the University of California system pays top workers' salaries and benefits significantly higher than that of similar state employees and failed to disclose to the Board of Regents and the public that it had \$175 million in budget reserve funds while it was seeking to raise tuition, a state audit found Tuesday. (para. 1)

As we see here and will discuss in more detail in the next section, American colleges and universities are indeed far from being immune to the influences of neoliberal globalization within their respective institutions. They may proclaim that they have the best interests of the students in mind, but often times, reality paints a very different picture.

International students as degree consumers

International branding strategies by universities have increasingly become an important topic of discussion in HE admissions research (Gai, Xu, & Pelton, 2016; Rooksby & Collins, 2016). This is not surprising since the revenue which universities receive from international student enrollment is a major source of income, and in some instances, a matter of survival for some institutions (Baty, 2000). It is fascinating to look at the ways in which universities market themselves to consumers all over the world to maintain foreign income sources.

During my own investigation of UCLA from the East Coast of the United States when I was applying to the school, I came across various statistics online showing the universities ranking as a world-class public university in the research, innovation, and technology fields. School-sponsored websites, in particular, instilled in me a sense of awe when thinking about the university, and continually reminded me that becoming a Bruin meant joining a world-class legacy of proud alumni located around the globe. In other words, if I worked hard, got a bit lucky, and ultimately get accepted, then this institution could provide me the cultural, social, and economic capital to enter the ranks of those who came before me. UCLA's main website puts it best:

For nearly 100 years, UCLA has been a pioneer, persevering through impossibility, turning the futile into the attainable . . . this can-do perspective has brought us 13 Nobel Prizes, 12 MacArthur Fellows, more NCAA titles than any university and more Olympic medals than most nations. Our faculty and alumni helped create the Internet and pioneered reverse osmosis. And more than 140 companies have been created based on technology developed at UCLA . . . this is UCLA. These are the grounds of optimism. ("About | UCLA," n.d.) University slogans, school songs, unique color-schemes and designs, school seals, mascots, etc. only further build the branding persona and mystic that makes attending such a university nearly irresistible. Becoming a Bruin means becoming a part of this exclusive community for life!

For American admissions offices, succeeding in the challenge of maintaining and enhancing their university product brand appeals to overseas applicants can help them achieve other goals as well. For example, American universities striving for greater internationalization on their campuses requires them having more international students and connecting them closely with their domestic peers (ACE, 2015; Glass, Wongtrirat, & Buus, 2015). But while universities

try to achieve such aims, do international students feel that they are receiving the same kind of care and attention during the overseas application process than their peers applying domestically? At any point, do they feel as if they are treated like products or mere certificate or degree consumers? Or do applicants feel that universities are meeting their unique and individual needs as best they can, and efforts such as internationalization, are aimed at them just as much as their domestic peers? According to related literature, a large research gap on overseas applicants within the admissions process are indeed under-examined when it comes to humanistic research. Meanwhile, as mentioned previously, research efforts are abundant that aim to increase short and long-term university profits (e.g., neoliberal emphases and profit-driven models abound).

However, I believe that greater communication between applicants and admissions offices can pave the way for more humanistic research to be conducted and allow for a more successful transition of international applicants to American IHE. Properly guided applied and academic research can allow host universities to more precisely understand the individual needs and concerns of its international populations before they arrive at their respective institutions and better support their educational experiences more holistically. In turn, international applicants are setup for transitional success within institutions that work hard at understanding these populations before they even step foot on campus for orientation. For universities who can succeed in such changes, I believe it will have great long-term impacts on the reputations and brand names of universities who carry the mantra that success is and should always be defined by placing the needs and success of students beyond mere profit margins.

An appearance of humanism and security can thrive in good times, but when reality hits, such as in a traumatic event like the deadly shooting that occurred on UCLA's campus in 2016, the mirage of international applicant or student support will quickly dissipate and leave

underserved students feeling disillusioned and marginalized. Doors didn't lock, alert systems left international students not knowing what to tell their loved ones overseas, and Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) office became inundated with requests for support that they struggled to meet, for example. With the latter point, many international students don't have an equivalent CAPS system in their countries and so are unaware of what such services offer. Moreover, many international students don't understand that its confidential and so want to avoid using these service for fear of someone from home finding out that studying abroad in America is causing them to go "crazy."

A university that is sincere in its intentions and efforts in the good times, can survive in solidarity as a true and untied campus community in the hard times. As we explore HE student affairs research, do we find similar neoliberal patterns? What themes in current research on international students and student support services emerge in the literature, and what does it tell us about the current priorities of American universities? We will examine these questions in the next section.

HE & Student Affairs

Student Affairs's research and international student support services

For university students, various forms of violence affecting college campus communities can impact their psychological, emotional, and physical health as well as their overall lived experiences in higher education (Flannery & Quinn-Leering, 2000; Guerette & Caron, 2007). As we mentioned before, international students have additional challenges, needs, and concerns that their domestic peers do not have.

To elaborate on the previous example about CAPS, in a recent discussion with one of my students from South Korea, she mentioned to me that these types of services aren't often as well established, and in many cases, just nonexistent within her country's HE system. Consequently, she said that her peers from South Korea would rarely, if ever, use these services or know what they are while studying abroad in the United States. Additionally, she mentioned that there exists a stigma associated with mental health services in her country and a fear of being labeled "troubled" by family members. The problem would be further exacerbated if their mother or father found out they were using such services while living abroad in a new foreign environment² (D. Robbins, personal communication, February 6th, 2017). Therefore, international students from South Korea at UCLA might either be unaware that these services exist on their American college campuses in the first place, or just generally less willing to use them here because of fear of stigmatization back at home (e.g., American HE systems are not informing and educating international students about their well-established CAPS services and confidentiality laws that protect student's anonymity while using them).

Among other concerns, there have also been recent reports at UCLA that international students and scholars are being targeted by scammers. In a campus-wide email, the Dashew Center for International Students and Scholars (DCISS) (2017) gave the following warning:

Dear Students and Scholars: The Dashew Center would like to alert you of continued cases of fraud targeting U.S. non-residents and their family members. Reported cases involve individuals posing as immigration and tax officials requesting personal and bank

² It is important to note that CAPS is completely confidential for all students and often provided free of charge by universities. In my investigation, many international students still either don't know about these services or don't consider them a viable option despite their proven effectiveness.

information from non-residents in the U.S. (DCISS, campus-wide email, “[edstudents] Reports of Fraud and Theft Attempts to International Students.” February 16th, 2017)

Student Affairs offices are at the forefront of the challenges to provide much needed individualistic support to all students, and in some cases, more specifically for international students. As America crossed the 1,000,000-person milestone of international students in the United States for the first time during the 2015-16 academic year (UF College of Design, Construction & Planning, 2017), it is important now more than ever to conduct more in-depth qualitative research on this often-underserved population to better address their needs while navigating the American HE system.

The following questions emerge when examining this area of inquiry: What general themes in HE literature related to student affairs research are emergent, and what does it tell us about how universities are trying to address concerns and better understand their international student populations? And to what extent and in what ways are international student-support services on American college campuses, who are often under the auspices of Student Affairs departments, looking for new ways to better improve the international student experience?

Neoliberal patterns continue

Perez-Encinas & Ammigan (2016) emphasize that “while international student enrollment is a key strategy and often the measure for comprehensive internationalization at many institutions, it is important that the support services offered match the needs of this population” (p. 985). UCLA’s Dashew Center for International Students and Scholars for example offers support in the form of student visa compliance assistance, fun and engaging social activities, educational programming, and language classes (Dashew Center for

International Students and Scholars, 2018). Many universities in the United States have their own version of this international student center while trying to meet the needs of its international student populations.

Perez-Encinas & Ammigan (2016) go on to describe how the top-five related assessment companies of student support services, namely The International Student Barometer (ISB), Ruffalo Noel Levitz, Studyportals, National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and the QS Student Satisfaction gather in-depth mixed methods data on international students studying in the United States, and dedicate themselves to using these analyses to support the efforts of students and universities alike (pp. 988-989). Upon investigation of the research produced by these companies, I found that they often use methods which include quantitative large participant surveys about perceptions of international student services on campus while under-emphasizing more open-ended and in-depth qualitative interviewing techniques.

The former method of data collection can be very useful to universities trying to market to international students and gain a broad understanding of their current needs, concerns, and opinions about services while they are a part of the campus communities. However, for international applicants as well as current students, the rich in-depth data resulting from qualitative studies should not be overlooked. It can help a university further humanism a process research that would otherwise be unable to do so with the often-over-presumptive quantitative approach. There is a lot to lose as researchers by ignoring or underemphasizing the individually stories and day-to-day accounts of a key population in American HE whom can easily get lost in the fray of a massive American HE system.

Emergent positivistic-based themes in HE student affairs research include looking broadly at the readiness and ability of colleges to receive and support international students (Andrade &

Evans, 2009; Cho & Yu, 2015; Choudaha, 2016), expectations of student support services and the actual use of them by international students (Hwang, Bennett, & Beauchemin, 2014; Roberts & Dunworth, 2012; Wongpaiboon, 2008), and sources of funding for student support services (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2013). As important as many of these studies are for universities and students, they once again rely on research designs that are too rigid in structure and overlook grassroots experiences and expectations of students. By giving student's a greater voice and active participation in their education experience with more humanistic research, the IHE can get closer to their goal of serving all populations within their campus communities. Within the current structure of these studies, a student may demonstrate a fear of an act of violence occurring on their respective American college campus, but the research doesn't allow us to truly understand *why*.

How then are such disparities in research directly effecting American HE communities like UCLA? What are international students doing themselves to combat feelings of being overlooked, underrepresented, or misunderstood?

International students not getting the support they need

In a recent response to international students at UCLA feeling under-supported, and unnecessarily being grouped together as *international students* (many students feel that this is only one part of their greater identities), the Dashew Center and the undergraduate student government Committee of International Relations “held the first-ever Dashew Community meeting Friday to discuss how to better identify and address issues foreign students face” (Bharanidaran, 2017, para. 2). The meeting came about from a push by international students who feel that the university is often unaware and far-removed from their most important needs

and concerns. Consequently, they are now deciding to take matters into their own hands – including conducting their own survey studies on international student needs as well as engage their peers at the face-to-face level.

The same article later describes why Jack Guo, a former international student from Hong Kong and prior director of the Committee of International Relations, pushed for the creation of this group:

International students have problems that are very different from the problems other students face . . . we see that American students have very few international friends, and even international students tend to group together . . . the committee can research issues like this and help enhance the global education experience . . . while there is a lot of discussion of undocumented student issues, or LGBT issues or black student issues, we see there is a complete absence of discussion of international students . . . I think that is very unfortunate.

(Bharanidaran, 2017, para. 4, 7, 21)

Indeed, it appears that a lack of qualitative data on international students at UCLA is preventing student affairs offices and university administrators from knowing how to offer more acute support to international students. As a result, amidst their heavy course loads and busy lives at UCLA, international students are attempting to bridge this gap themselves.

Ironically, Rhoads and Szelényi (2011) explains how all of this is happening in the context of the city of Los Angeles which is “one of the most globalized urban centers of the world” (p. 119). They later mention how “being foreign-born in Los Angeles, presents a form of identity that paradoxically is both common and unusual, and fraught with personal and professional opportunities and challenges” (p. 119). They also highlight the additional day-to-day challenges that international students at UCLA face as they go about their lives in a foreign environment.

Even though they share commonalities with their domestic classmates, they describe how they bring with them unique experiences which shape how they interpret local happenings at UCLA. And of course, I think it is imperative that we put these prior overseas experiences into context with the additional and current practical, emotional, mental, physical, and spiritual challenges international students face that their adopted foreign HE institutions may not be aware of or understand.

Rhoads and Szelényi (2011) subsequently introduces the concept of the *pluriversity* to make sense of the increasingly complex educational environment which international students attempt to navigate as they bear their unique needs and concerns. They explain it in the following way:

Contemporary universities are situated as breeding grounds for a variety of goals and influences that create vastly different—and in many ways, contradictory—environments across campuses. In fact, it would be more than feasible at UCLA, on the very same day, to attend a class session decrying the commercialization of public universities and to participate in a workshop providing expert advice to young academic entrepreneurs wanting to bring their scientific discoveries to the marketplace. (p. 19)

In this context of the pluriversity, international students at UCLA, many for the first time, are introduced to conflicting ways of seeing the world amidst dominant hegemonies such as neoliberalism (e.g., “a workshop providing expert advice to young academic entrepreneurs wanting to bring their scientific discoveries to the marketplace”) with efforts by universities to recognize and fight for their individual rights (e.g., classes that are “decrying the commercialization of public universities”). Further stress ensues as international students are sorting through conflicting ideologies as they work hard to survive a foreign HE environment in

an extremely competitive academic school like UCLA. The harsh reality for many international students at UCLA is that they are now among others who were also top-achievers in their prior respective educational institutions. Additional stresses of language and cultural barriers, living in a new foreign environment, and so on, further exacerbate various stresses which they are enduring.

The cumulative stresses that international students face combined with a lack of individualistic understanding through peer-reviewed research studies should call American HE universities like UCLA to take more preemptive action in supporting these students. The gaps of understanding are only widened, and international students feel more on their own as ever. With such a large need for in-depth research studies on international student needs why aren't academia and university administrators doing more to support these students?

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