

Exploring the Decision-Making Process of International Students: Factors Influencing their Choice of US Colleges

Erkan Acar¹

USA International Education Consulting LLC, FL

Abstract: The United States is the top destination for international students seeking higher education. These students encounter various factors that shape their decisions throughout the college application journey. This research aims to pinpoint the main variables that influence international students' choices to study in the US. Important factors include the reputation and rankings of universities, tuition costs, geographic location, personal recommendations, unique connections, and the complexity of the admissions process. Despite facing challenges like strict immigration policies and lengthy visa application procedures, US universities continue to attract students due to their global prestige and the numerous opportunities they provide for personal and professional development. The study sheds light on the preferences and considerations of international students when choosing colleges in the US. By doing so, it offers valuable insights for higher education institutions to improve their support services and refine recruitment strategies, ultimately enhancing the experiences and outcomes for international students.

Keywords: International students, US colleges, decision-making process, higher education

The decision to pursue higher education abroad is a significant milestone in the lives of so many international students today (Chen, 2016; Jafar & Legusov, 2021; Wu, 2020). Among these countries, the U.S. has been mentioned as a popular destination for undergraduate education for international students in recent years because it also has a variety of academic programs, the best institutions in the world, and possibilities to equip students for personal and professional development. The research notes that choosing a US college, which can be a clouded and multi-faceted affair, is caused by factors that are different from one person to another. The analysis will consider the decision-making process of international students and the impact of these factors on the US institutions in their recruitment and support of this student body. This research is meant to illuminate the determinants at play in the selection of U.S. colleges by international students with specific emphasis on the rankings of the schools, the reputation of the institutions, the location of the schools, and costs as the most influential determinants.

Quite a few students in the American education system come from other countries, and this fact is a good thing because these students not only bring variety in culture but also contribute to the economy of the country. The United States continues to be a popular choice for foreign education, with over a million enrolled international students, or approximately 5% of the entire student body. The massive cultural map laid out on the colleges in the U. S. is represented in the 227+ countries that these students bring. Traditionally, China and India have been far-ahead

¹ Corresponding author; is the founder of USA International Education Consulting LLC. E-mail; eacar@usainternationaleducation.com. <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8670-708X>

countries in the list of those having a greater number of international students. Still, now, the current situation has shown an inclination toward other countries having greater importance for international students, both from China and India (Hanson, 2021). The USA still gets talent from abroad as it is an established center of education with great universities, resulting in opportunities that lead both to professional and personal growth. However, disadvantages include immigration laws and visa processing that do not always work in students' favor (He & Hutson, 2018). Moreover, foreign students promote the academic environment through intellectual debates and cross-cultural interactions with Americans (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013). International students are a vital part of academia going to the future and opening the prospects for the global world to South America to be the dominant power in vessels of higher education globally.

Reputational and ranking factors are important considerations for overseas students when making decisions. Numerous factors, such as academic reputation, teacher expertise, research output, and student satisfaction, are frequently used to rank and evaluate US institutions. It is a common practice for international students to use these rankings when evaluating the quality and reputation of various universities (James-MacEachern & Yun, 2017). The institution's higher ranking or good image could affect the perception of the educational quality and future employment prospects, which would have a great influence on the decision-making process among international students, as the role of the institution has been recognized as an important factor.

Besides the colleges' rankings and reputation, the geographical facts (e.g., location, climate, etc.) are also crucial factors for international students. The location can influence students' preferences with respect to attraction centers, job opportunities, or a preferred lifestyle. In other words, some students may prioritize colleges located in major cities while others may prefer institutions in more quiet settings, closer to nature or specific industries (Kosmaczewska & Jameson, 2023). Accordingly, it is natural that one of the international students' important criteria in the selection process is the question about the location of the establishment in relation to their interests, career goals, and health.

The financial aspect is a significant consideration for international students when they finalize their decision with respect to college selection. Tuition fees, cost of living, and availability of financial aid or scholarships greatly impact the decision-making process (Singh, 2021). The affordability and potential return on investment play a crucial role in choosing a US college. Accordingly, international students calculate the potential costs of the college as well as the region where they will spend their time while they are studying.

Recommendations from various sources, including friends, family, and alumni, hold considerable sway in international students' college selection process. Recommendations can provide valuable insights into the academic programs, campus culture, and student experience. Receiving recommendations from experienced and knowledgeable individuals regarding the higher education system, college culture, lifestyles, social life in the US, etc., greatly impacts the decision process for college choices (Acar, 2022a).

Moreover, the existence of friends or relatives who have been to or are in a US college in the past or now can matter greatly in the decisions of international students in terms of which college to pick. Instead of just focusing on the academic reputation of a university, students base their decisions on it. The mentioned private connections give them the way of safety and joy, which will thus play the function of the obstacles of getting used to a different climate (Kirmayer, et al., 2009; Tavares, 2021) Such connections also lower the stress before and during such an experience (Durak, 2024). International students with the aforesaid intimate relationships with a particular college may be more inclined to submit an application, secure in the knowledge that they will have

a safety net to fall back on as they journey through the complexities of the college experience in the US.

Furthermore, the complexity of the US college admission procedures can significantly affect international students' choices. There are complex procedures for admission, and unfamiliarity with the overall application process can impact the students' decision for some specific colleges that require more complex requirements. The admission process requires a range of documentation, such as standardized tests (e.g., SAT, ACT), English language proficiency tests (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS), personal essays, letters of recommendation, and transcripts that have been evaluated, answering the colleges' specific questions, resume, application platforms usage, interviews, etc. Navigating these procedures can be daunting for international students, particularly if unfamiliar with the US educational system (Bound et al., 2020). Such complexity of the admission process can deter some students from applying to certain institutions, while others may seek support from educational consultants or agencies. Acar (2022a) notes that since there is no central application system for every single college in the US, students may hesitate to follow different platforms to complete their applications. Further, especially competitive colleges expect more documentation and procedures from the applicants and such requirements may impact international students' decisions greatly.

This study explores how various factors, including college rankings, reputation, location, costs, recommendations, special connections, and admission procedure complexity, influence the decision-making process of international students when choosing US colleges; this study offers practical insights regarding international students' priorities and considerations when planning their higher education in the US. This provides U.S. colleges and universities with practical strategies to engage more effectively with international students. When schools understand what drives students' choices, they can apply better strategies for reaching out to them. Such better strategies also promote a smooth and more effective transition of international students to US colleges.

Theoretical Foundation

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) ideas form the basis of Cultural Capital Theory, which sheds light on how international students pick US colleges. This concept suggests that people build up cultural resources through their upbringing and schooling over time, which shape their decisions, actions, and chances to move up in society. When we talk about the international student movement, cultural capital covers more than just book smarts. It also includes language skills, people skills, and cultural know-how that shape students' thoughts and aims about studying abroad (Yosso 2005). International students often come from different educational and cultural backgrounds, bringing varying levels of cultural capital that affect their college choices.

Take students from countries with strong school systems, for example. They might lean towards schools with top-notch academic reputations because they see these schools as steppingstones to doing well in both social and work life (Marginson et al., 2010). Conversely, students from less represented or sidelined backgrounds might not have access to cultural capital. This lack can make it tough for them to get their heads around the ins and outs of applying to US colleges and to pick schools that fit them well (Garriott, 2020).

Research Questions

1. How do various factors, including rankings, reputation, location, costs, recommendations, special connections, and admission procedure complexity, influence the decision-making process of international students when choosing US colleges?
2. How much does Bourdieu's definition of cultural capital influence foreign students' perceptions, inclinations, and decision-making processes when they choose US colleges?

Literature Review

Schools' Ranking and Reputation

When choosing US institutions, international students consider the reputation and rankings of the schools very carefully. They also serve as yardsticks for students to compare different universities. According to Welch and Li (2021), US institutions are frequently ranked based on factors such as student satisfaction, faculty expertise, research output, and academic reputation. Higher rankings, along with a good school name, might affect how future international students look at academic excellence and potential job prospects. Hence, they are crucial in the decision-making process.

It is a common practice for international students to check the colleges' rankings when they evaluate their options. College rankings allow students to complete their college lists and compare the alternative colleges. Selten et al. (2020) claim that international students frequently rely on rankings to learn about the academic opportunities, faculty-student ratio, and research output of various universities. Students utilize this crucial information to assess the caliber of education various institutions provide, as these rankings are founded on data and analysis.

Rankings have the additional power to influence how prospective international students weigh university selectivity and competition. Consequently, more applications are sent to universities with higher rankings. Additionally, those schools receive better student applications. The competition for admission to these institutions is fierce, as many students believe that earning a degree from a prestigious university will give them an advantage in their future careers. Additionally, these schools often draw in a more accomplished group of applicants, including those with impressive academic records, notable extracurricular activities, and strong leadership skills (Luque-Martínez & Faraoni, 2020).

Rankings can also tell students what kind of return they can expect on their investment. Rankings often indicate better job prospects and stronger alumni networks, both of which can increase employment possibilities (Davis, 2016). Potential international students do consider institutional prestige when assessing the value of their educational and potential employment opportunities. College rankings are one of the important criteria when narrowing down the college options besides many other factors. College rankings may lead international students for a better conclusion to finalize their college lists however it is important to highlight that such rankings include some subjective inputs like national and global reputation.

In conclusion, clear that international students' decision-making when selecting US colleges is significantly influenced by the rankings. College rankings done by various independent institutions have been used by those students to compare colleges. Since such organizations offer different types of rankings in different categories, such as rankings for specific programs and

majors and rankings by specific locations, international students consider glancing at such rankings when they decide on their colleges.

Geographical Location

The location of the institutions influences international students' decisions regarding their college choice. When they need to narrow down their choices with respect to location preferences, those students consider several facts, including but not limited to cultural centers, job opportunities, lifestyle preferences, climate, and safety.

The distance of a college from or close to a major city or cultural center is an important consideration. Colleges that are located in cities that have lively cultural attractions and neighborhoods tend to attract many international students. Cities provide opportunities to participate in a plethora of cultural activities, experience diverse cuisine, and meet and share experiences with individuals from all walks of life (Van Alebeek & Wilson, 2019). For example, cities like New York City, Los Angeles, and San Francisco are the preferred choice due to the activity in the cultural and art contexts of the city.

Employment availability is another essential component influencing international students' preferences in a college location. Often students weigh how the place aligns with their career goals and how much potential for internships and jobs exists within their industry. Employment prospects are often enhanced by geographic proximity to industry and firms associated with the students' field of study (Musumba, et al., 2011). For example, an international student studying technology may select a college in Silicon Valley to fully immerse themselves in the technology industry.

Lifestyle preference also greatly impacts where students enroll in college. Some students may prefer an urban lifestyle characterized by fast-paced excitement, while others may prefer a more subdued lifestyle or a college closer to nature. When considering an optimal college location, many students consider climate, outdoor recreation activities, and access to nature in their decision-making (Kanbur & Rapoport, 2005). For example, international students who prefer an outdoor lifestyle may be more likely to select a college in an area known for its natural beauty (e.g., Colorado, Hawaii).

Moreover, safety is also important for international students when choosing a college location. Students and families consider the safety and security of the location. Their perception of safety, which encapsulates overall crime rates, level of political stability, and safety on campus, significantly influences their decision process (Musumba et al., 2011).

In summary, international students' decision-making is significantly shaped by the location of a college. Their preferences are shaped by proximity to cultural centers, job opportunities, lifestyle preferences, safety, and individual factors. A college's location can greatly influence cultural opportunities, job can create opportunities around overall student well-being throughout their academic experience.

Costs

When evaluating a college to attend, international students pay considerable deliberation to the cost of studying in the US. The cost of living, availability of financial aid or scholarships, and tuition cost significantly influence students' decision-making process. International students think carefully about the cost of education, living, and post-graduation job opportunities to complement their funding capabilities with their educational goals.

Tuition costs are a major expense for international students. The colleges students want to attend may prove too costly for some international students, particularly those from countries where the currency exchanged is weaker or students with less financial resources were even discouraged about higher tuition in the USA. Many students consider the affordability of tuition, which is very relevant to how their families will sustain the financial burden and how scholarships or financial aid would contribute to their overall affordability (Ngo & Cho 2022). Tuition varies depending on the research but is a heavy consideration for international students and factors into their decision to attend a specified college (Jafar & Legusov, 2021; C. F. Lee 2014; Phang 2013).

The cost of living is a significant consideration for international students in addition to tuition of the school. The cost of studying abroad generally encompasses accommodation, food, transportation, medical care, and other daily living essentials. Even within the United States, there are considerable variations in living expenses, at regional and city levels. Generally, living expenses in urban cities and major cities are more expensive compared to smaller towns or rural areas (Martin et al., 2021). Therefore, international students consider the cost of living, when making decisions for counting and planning that their budgets can meet essential living needs and to keep a reasonable quality of life for their studying in the United States.

Another aspect of decision-making is the availability of financial aid or scholarships. International students want access to financial aid to relieve the anticipated costs associated with studying abroad. Scholarships provided by universities or other entities, such as government agencies or private charities/foundations (Bound et al., 2020), can potentially change many students' affordability of studying in the United States. Universities that offer financial help or scholarships may be more attractive and accessible to international students.

In summary, factors such as tuition fees, cost of living, availability of financial aid, and potential return on investment on the decisions foreign students make greatly influence foreign students' decisions regarding which US institutions they select to attend. Students consider the availability of scholarships or financial aid, the potential cost of living and education, and the potential value of their degree in future employment opportunities. Factors affecting college choice for international students include not only academic and personal factors but also financial considerations.

Recommendations and Special Connections

Recommendations from connections, family members, alumni, educational advisors, and other third parties heavily affect students' thoughts and decisions about US colleges and universities. These recommendations lend a considerable amount of practical advice and act as push factors that impact students' decisions and thoughts about US colleges and universities. Even having friends or family members who attended or are attending the same US college will influence international students' decisions immensely. These close experiences provide feelings of familiarity, solidarity, and support that can mitigate the challenges associated with adapting to an unfamiliar environment.

International students' decision-making processes rely heavily on recommendations from knowledgeable connections. Informal connections often provide information about academic areas of study, campus culture, and student experience at a particular college if they have attended. Alumni can often talk about the pros and cons of the college that international students are considering (Cubillo et al., 2006). International students typically rely on trusted acquaintances who have previously thrived in the US college environment as trusted sources of guidance or recommendations. Because they can speak from the experience of overcoming the challenges and

opportunities associated with specific colleges in the US educational system, trusted acquaintances can serve as reliable sources of information.

A significant part of the referral process comprises the input of education consultants or organizations involved in recruiting and counseling international students. They provide guidance and support to students as they evaluate their choice of colleges. They provide individualized recommendations based on the students' academic interest, career goals, and preferences; this helps to guide students to the appropriate universities and academic programs (Acar, 2022a). Education consultants possess substantial knowledge about institutions and provide support about issues such as available financial aid options, admissions criteria, and overall fit or appropriateness of students with the specific institution.

The presence of friends or family members with close connections to a particular US college can also substantially influence the choices of international students. These connections create a sense of familiarity and support and can establish an innate sense of community within the institutional environment. While navigating the US college experience can appear daunting, students with special connections to their college can feel greater comfort and security about applying and attending the institution with their connections (Acar, 2022b).

Research indicates that the recommendations and the relationship, for example, are essential for the college choices of foreign students. This is where the study of J. J. Lee and Rice (2018) became important because it revealed that recommendations from friends, relatives, and alumni were key factors in the college choices of international students. The students valued the perspectives of people they were familiar with and had confidence in the most. Not just this, the authors also stressed the significance of relationships in international student decisions by discussing the benefits and comfort resulting from being surrounded by friends and family members at a particular college.

In summary, international students' college preferences are greatly dictated by the recommendations from friends, family, college alumni, and educational counselors. This advice provides a new perspective that helps students overcome the difficult task of selecting a college. Personal associations bring a feeling of ease, fraternity, and encouragement that promotes students' academic success and makes it easier to get used to their new surroundings.

Admission Procedure Complexity

One of the main aspects that play a crucial role in shaping the preferences of international students is how hard it is to get into US colleges. Standardized tests like the SAT and ACT and English language tests like the TOEFL and IELTS are required, along with essays, letters of reference, and transcripts, which are some of the many criteria for the college application process in the United States. The non-disclosure of US educational norms, as well as peculiarities in its requirements, may lengthen the students' application process. Some international students do not get a grip on the education system of the USA, but instead, they fail to comply with the necessary documents. Some students might decide not to apply to some of the universities due to the bunkering of the process they would have to go through, while the rest, via other organizations or even educational consultants, may get help to get through it.

One of the fundamental aspects of the admission procedure is standardized testing. Students from other countries must send their test scores from exams such as SAT to universities in the United States. These exams help in determining the student's academic ability and their preparedness for college work. Due to the differences in the education system of the countries, language barriers, and inadequate knowledge of the test format, international students face extra

difficulties quite often (Gautam et al., 2016). It is complicated to study material from these exams and then register for tests that demand extra preparation from students, thereby making the application process a hurdle of its own.

English language proficiency emerges as part and parcel of the university entrance criterion for international students. Tests, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), are usually requested by colleges. Their agenda is to establish if a student possesses the English language skills required to thrive in an English-speaking environment. The sacrificing of one's evenings to the whole month's lifestyle of preparing for and writing these language fluency tests is an additional admission step international students must overcome (Wu et al. 2015).

Submitting essays, letters of reference, and transcripts complicates the admissions process. Undergraduates, particularly international ones, should have enough time to write essays and personal statements if they want to get into higher education institutions. Among other documents, students also require reference letters from their teachers or from counselors who could give evidence of their peaceable and ability. Besides, students should also give records from educational institutions where they did their previous learning to prove their academic level and achievements. Sometimes, aggregating these files might become challenging since the kids are involved in courses from different educational institutions (Acar, 2022b).

For international students unfamiliar with the US educational system and its unique requirements, the intricacy of the admissions process is especially important. If students are uncertain of the application deadline, required paperwork, and the whole scheme, they may feel disorientated and anxious. Such students may feel that they will be overwhelmed by the procedures, and in the case of an error, their chances will be diminished, which will hurt their chances of getting admitted. In other words, international students make tough decisions because the US institutions' admission process is so complicated (Aldawsari, 2022).

In conclusion, mastering the varied responsibilities—including standardized tests, such as English writing aptitude, essays, letters of recommendation, and transcripts—can be very challenging. These perplexities, blended with the unfamiliarity of the American education system, can make it difficult for students to apply to specific colleges. Additionally, educational counselors are the main source of guidance in the application process, which many students find troublesome.

Methodology

Research Design: Phenomenological Exploration

This study employs a phenomenological research approach to understand how international students select US institutions. Phenomenology focuses on grasping individuals' subjective perspectives and lived experiences, making it ideal for exploring the intricate and nuanced factors that influence international students' decisions regarding educational institutions (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Wilding & Whiteford, 2005).

Research Approach: Inductive Reasoning

This study primarily employs inductive reasoning as its research technique, which is grounded in data analysis and empirical observations. Unlike deductive reasoning, which begins with a predetermined hypothesis or theory and seeks to confirm it through empirical data, inductive reasoning starts with specific observations and patterns, ultimately leading to broader

generalizations or hypotheses based on those observations (Hayes & Heit, 2018). Therefore, the study takes a more neutral and open-minded stance by setting aside any preconceived ideas or assumptions. This methodological clarity enhances the credibility and rigor of the research findings, enabling conclusions to be based solely on observed facts, free from the influence of prior beliefs or theoretical frameworks (Pellegrino & Glaser, 2021). In conclusion, this study's application of inductive reasoning demonstrates a dedication to rigorous and exploratory inquiry, which is demonstrated by the method's ability to produce fresh views and insights within the research field and its responsiveness to empirical data.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-structured interviews with foreign students presently enrolled at US colleges were used to collect data. The participants were purposefully chosen to guarantee a diversity of cultural backgrounds and geographical regions, such as China, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Germany, and Russia. Seven females and ten males comprised 17 participants who were drawn from Washington, DC, New York, New Jersey, California, and Florida. A trained typist recorded every interview on tape and wrote a full transcription. As part of the researcher's validation procedure, verbatim transcripts of all interviews were also sent to the interview subjects for their approval and review. This methodology guaranteed precision and genuineness in recording participants' emotions, perspectives, encounters, and convictions (Patton, 2014).

Sampling Strategy

Participants were intentionally selected to represent a broad spectrum of cultural backgrounds and geographic locations. Efforts were made to include a variety of demographics, including age, gender, academic major, and years of study. Although the sample size is small, the richness and depth of the data are enhanced by the diverse national and regional backgrounds of the participants. Their geographical locations provide valuable insights into how international students navigate decision-making in various educational contexts (Patton, 2014; Robinson, 2014).

Data Analysis Procedures

The qualitative information gathered from the interviews was examined using thematic analysis. Finding trends, recurring themes, and differences in the decision-making processes of the participants were all part of this. Regular conversations within the research team developed intercoder dependability, guaranteeing consistency and rigor in the analysis process. To further strengthen the findings' credibility and dependability, member verification carried out to confirm participant interpretations of the data (Maxwell, 2008; Thorne, 2000).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were essential for upholding the study's validity and integrity throughout the research process. This required strict compliance with informed consent guidelines, ensuring that each participant was fully briefed on the study's objectives and design before agreeing to participate. Additionally, robust protocols were established to safeguard participants' identities and anonymity while also honoring their right to privacy and protecting sensitive information. By prioritizing ethical standards, the study not only respected the rights and well-being of participants

but also highlighted the significance of ethical conduct in research, thereby fostering trust and confidence in the methodology (Arifin, 2018; Orb et.al., 2001).

Validity and Reliability

To enhance the validity and reliability of the findings, we employed both researcher triangulation and intercoder reliability/agreement, two related but distinct methods. Researcher triangulation involved the participation of multiple researchers in the analysis process. This approach allowed for diverse perspectives when interpreting the data, reducing the potential for individual biases and increasing the overall robustness of the findings. Each research team member independently reviewed the data and shared their interpretations, followed by collaborative discussions to cross-verify and consolidate the results. This “cross-verification among team members” refers to this iterative process of reaching consensus on the thematic patterns emerging from the data.

In addition to researcher triangulation, we ensured intercoder reliability by having multiple researchers code the same set of qualitative data. This process involved comparing the coding results to ensure consistency in identifying themes and patterns across the dataset. Achieving high agreement among coders confirmed that the findings were not subject to individual subjectivity but reflected a shared understanding of the data.

Finally, we employed member checking to further validate the accuracy of our interpretations. Participants were asked to review and confirm whether the themes and interpretations accurately reflected their perspectives, adding an extra layer of credibility to the research (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Quintão et al., 2020).

Limitations

It is important to recognize that the study has several limitations. The purposive sampling method may lead to sample bias, and the findings may not be applicable outside the specific context of the study. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported data could introduce social desirability bias. The small sample size of 17 participants may also affect how generalizable the results are. Additionally, using verbatim transcripts for validation could increase bias, as participants might change their responses after seeing the transcripts (Patton, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study’s methodology used a qualitative, phenomenological approach to investigate how overseas students decide which US institutions to attend. The study attempted to obtain a deeper knowledge of the factors influencing international students’ decisions through semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, and careful ethical considerations. Notwithstanding, the approach was thoughtfully created to meet the goals of the study and offer insightful information about the challenges associated with recruiting and assisting international students in postsecondary education.

Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Influence of Institutional Reputation and Rankings

International students' decision-making was significantly influenced by US college rankings and reputation. These students recognized rankings as indicators of academic quality and institutional status, and they studied them carefully from reliable sources like the Times Higher Education Rankings and US News World Report. Numerous students clearly preferred universities with high rankings because they believed that these institutions offered better educational opportunities and job prospects.

One student gave the following example: "I devoted numerous hours to studying colleges and their rankings. I was aware that going to a highly regarded university would boost my reputation in the job market in addition to giving me an excellent education." Two other students echoed this sentiment, saying, "The rankings were a crucial factor in my decision-making process" and "I desired to go to a university that was well-known throughout the world for its intellectual achievements." These quotes highlight how important institutional reputation and rankings are in influencing the opinions and choices of foreign students choosing US universities.

Another student highlighted that he checked out different resources that rank universities around the world and compared those sources. He said, "I even checked out the ranking criteria. In other words, I learned how those institutions rank the schools with different perspectives." These rankings gave students a sense of security and credibility by confirming that their decisions aligned with generally acknowledged benchmarks for quality in higher education. Another student said, "It is good to know that specific majors also have rankings, so I was able to compare my intended major at different schools." Another student explained the importance of college rankings by saying, "I knew that America has the best universities, and the reason is of such reputation is obvious. The schools are offering high quality of education. Companies know universities' reputation and the rankings. They hire people from top ranked schools." Rankings act as a foundation, giving prospective students confidence and credibility in their university selection. Students can make decisions that will positively impact their academic and professional careers by aligning them with generally acknowledged norms for quality in higher education. This gives them confidence in their decision-making process.

Theme 2: Importance of Location, Cultural Fit, and Climate

The location and cultural fit of colleges have become crucial factors for overseas students, even above institutional reputation. Students' comfort levels and weather preferences also played a significant influence, as did the college's climate. To avoid harsh winters or extreme weather, several students stated a wish to study in areas with good temperatures, such Florida or California. One student explained, "I chose a college in California because I love the warm weather and outdoor lifestyle. I was drawn in by the climate as I couldn't picture enduring the lengthy, harsh winters." Another one stressed, "I specifically looked for colleges in regions with mild climates because I come from a tropical country, and I wanted to avoid the heat." These quotes demonstrate how climate, location, and cultural fit greatly influence overseas students' preferences for US institutions. The decision-making process of overseas students was also significantly influenced by the college's location and cultural fit. To connect with a community that shared their interests and backgrounds, many students looked for institutions in areas with thriving cultural scenes and diverse demographics. One student said, "I wanted to study in a city where I could feel connected

to my cultural roots where there is a diverse population.” Similarly, others added, “It meant a lot to me to be surrounded by so many different cultures;” “I wanted exposure to different perspectives and experiences, so I chose a college in a city known for its cultural diversity.”

One important consideration in my choice was the location’s cultural compatibility. Another student said, “I always wanted to study in big and cosmopolite cities like New York City. I know that university education is not only about classes and assignments, but an experience, and I knew that this was possible with a good environment.” Another student added, “location of the school was my priority. The cities also have reputations and rankings. The location where you continue your education also teaches you a lot.” These quotes demonstrate how, while deciding where to study, international students take the college’s cultural environment into account.

Theme 3: Financial Considerations and Affordability

International students carefully consider costs like living expenses and tuition as they start the process of choosing US universities. These students carefully analyze affordability during their decision-making process since they are aware of the substantial financial outlay needed for higher education in the US. Many students intentionally look for schools in places known for having cheaper costs because they understand how much money may affect their ability to further their education. Due to their relative affordability of living and tuition as compared to their northern counterparts, southern states are particularly well-liked by international students. One student said, “I realized that schools in Texas and Florida have significantly lower tuitions. So, I focused on those regions.” The same student added, “For me, affordability was quite important. The most important fact to finalize my college list (to apply).” This demonstrates how financial factors, such as regional cost differences, are crucial in determining which US universities are chosen by international students. Many students take the initiative to apply for scholarships and financial help in order to lower the expense of their higher education. One student explained, “I pursued financial aid and scholarships to help offset the costs of studying in the US.” Another student added, “My decision-making was greatly impacted by financial factors.” This highlights the significance of financial factors in international students’ decision-making and demonstrates their proactivity in overcoming financial difficulties.

Many students looked for institutions in areas recognized for having cheaper expenses because they were concerned about how affordable higher education was in the US. Whether they were selected or not, all interviewed students knew of the lower living expenses and tuition rates in the southern states. A student said, “I knew that institutions in Texas and Florida often have lower living expenses and tuition. For me, affordability was crucial as I did not have any scholarships from my home country.” Another student explained, “To help with the costs of studying in the US, I applied for financial aid and scholarships.” Another student added, “my decision-making process was heavily influenced by financial factors.” Such quotes portray that financial concerns are one of the primary factors that shape the college’s application procedures, especially finalizing the college names to apply. All interviewed students highlighted such financial matters and added that they searched for scholarship opportunities for specific colleges they wanted to attend.

Theme 4: Influence of Personal Connections and Cultural Context

International students always consider personal connections when they mature their college lists to which they would like to apply. In this context, personal ties, including recommendations

from friends, family, and alumni, have a significant impact on international students' college choices. For many cultures, having strong social links has been a beneficial input for individuals. International students naturally seek help from their network to navigate their college applications and final college lists to apply. Besides professional help, several interviewed students highlighted that they used their networks to make better decisions for their potential college education in the US. One student said, "My cousin who studied in the US gave me recommendations for a couple of institutions based on her experiences. Her advice was quite helpful to me in reducing my possibilities." Another student also underlined the security and comfort of having close family in the US: "Because I have relations in the US, I felt more comfortable studying there. Having a support system helped ease some of my worries about adjusting to college life." These quotes show the importance of having a very close relationship with one's own cultural background. It should be the driving force of the support given to the students from abroad throughout the whole process of US university selection.

Alumni networks serve as significant resources for overseas students, sharing firsthand experiences and guidance on different aspects of college life, from academic programs to extracurricular activities. One student said, "before coming to my university, I was able to talk to an alumnus who was living in my home country. He gave me many important insights about the school and its internal culture." Practically, the college choice of international students is highly influenced by the personal relationships they have because they receive essential guidance, support, and a sense of belonging a community when they start their education in the United States.

Conclusion

The substantial intellectual and financial contributions they make are why international students are appreciated in host countries and by universities (Acar, 2016). International student enrollment involves a long decision-making process with several factors to consider as the determinant factors. This study has probed the multipartite nature of climate preferences, close connections, financial concerns, institutional reputation, location, and cultural fit combined to form the preferences and choices of international students. Students value the institutions with high rankings. US News World Report and Times Higher Education Rankings are examples of such rankings. They believe that the higher the rank of the college, the better academic performance and job opportunities will be. The above data have revealed the importance of a university's reputation and rankings. These results are the first ones to highlight the importance of institutional reputation and rankings (Marginson et al., 2010).

Much more so now, physical distance is one of the colleges' most important considerations while deciding where to study, together with climatical issues and cultural affinity. In order to enjoy the college experience more and feel that they belong, students frequently sought out institutions located in areas with the best weather and the most culturally diverse settings (James, 2018). The students' financial circumstances have been the most crucial deciding factor in the selection process for most of them, with the affordability issues of international students being the biggest concern. Among other factors, the decisions of international students are greatly influenced by the economic side of the equation, as the prices of universities are, in most cases, the vital forces that give them the power to make decisions. Usually, the southern states were preferred to the northern ones due to their somewhat cheaper living expenses and tuition than the northern ones; there are clear signals that financial assistance plays an important role in the success of international students in tertiary education. At the same time, one must mention the powerful impact of a scholarship, any kind of grant given as a scholarship, and a part-time job for the students, therefore,

identifying the significance of the economic components in the education of the students. Moreover, the inputs from fellow students, relatives, and grown-ups, along with reciprocal contacts between one and the other, greatly affected the colleges and universities students selected. It shows clearly how social networks and cultural milieu are the deciding criteria when choosing a college. The most important consideration when making decisions is the institution's reputation. Prestigious universities with solid academic reputations are frequently prioritized by international students, who see them as steppingstones to better professional chances and academic achievement. Comparably, the institution's location also has a big influence; many students attend schools in places renowned for their affordability, diversity of culture, and economic opportunities.

International students are also stressed about financial issues as they weigh their choices regarding financial aid, tuition, and living expenses. Many students determine the schools they will attend based on the US being the more affordable. Furthermore, students' thinking is largely influenced not only by the institute's policies and academic merit/faculty contribution but also by things pertaining to personal, social, and other related aspects, such as cultural fit. International students prefer universities, which are the spaces of alumni connections and a culture of togetherness. This can be done by developing culturally specific activities among the students and the community at large, learning and sharing common cultural experiences. The ongoing success of students and their happiness, when they attend a school, can be significantly improved by a supportive environment. Allowing the potential of recruitment strategies and support services can make immense progress among universities concerning international students' requirements and preferences. In contrast, they only need to support these impacts. Universities can attract and retain a diverse student body and improve the educational experiences of all students by creating a diverse and inclusive school environment with the implementation of the cultural exchange program and cross-cultural discussions.

Besides, the utilization of such findings by decision-makers and other stakeholders in the field of education can create some new arrangements and standards that will increase international students' care for higher education facilities and their affordability and accessibility. Policymakers and other institutions can aid international students in crossing cultural boundaries and participating in global mobility in higher education when they stop making admission requirements strict by offering financial assistance options, which will increase the number of students with high potential. Additionally, such an educational setting will lead to a more inclusive and connected learning community. Policymakers and universities should team up in the fight against financial hurdles, promotion of cultural exchange, and celebration of diversity as regards providing international students with the maximum opportunity for academic achievement and the maximum chances to become an enhancement of the society we all live in.

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Notes on Contributor

Erkan Acar, PhD, is the founder of USA International Education Consulting LLC, a U.S.-based company dedicated to helping students achieve their educational goals in the United States. Dr. Acar earned his PhD in Human Development and Instructional Leadership from Marywood University in Scranton, PA, and holds a master's degree in educational development and Strategies from Wilkes University in Wilkes Barre, PA. He has extensive experience teaching education courses at both the graduate and undergraduate levels at Marywood University and continues to teach at higher education institutions across the U.S. Additionally, Dr. Acar has published

numerous academic and non-academic papers. He also teaches on Udemy, where he has reached over 7,600 students from 145 countries.

ORCID

Erkan Acar, <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8670-708X>