

An Examination of the Motivations and Aspirations of International and Domestic Students

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Abstract

The rate of high school students coming to America from around the world seeking a higher level of education is increasing. This study was conducted to determine the reasons these countries are sending their students to America for their high school education. The participants of the study consisted of 140 students from a private, Catholic school of approximately 2,400 students, 61 domestic students from America, and 79 international students, mostly from China. These students were compared based on their attitude towards American schooling, their aspirations for college, their aspirations for their future careers, their academic performance, and the influence that their parents had on their decision to come to their private American high school. The students completed a survey using the Likert-scale. The study found that American students are significantly more satisfied with their American education. Their aspirations, performance, and influence that their parents had on their decision to come to the school were similar.

Keywords: international students, motivation, parental influence, aspirations

Introduction

For the past twenty years the number of international students who come to America to study has been steadily increasing. Some students come as part of foreign exchange programs or as part of an international study program certain schools provide. Other students come from across the world to try and get what they hope is a better education than what they can obtain in their home country. One study performed tested domestic versus international graduate students' levels of motivation towards finishing or continuing their programs. Performed at Duquesne University, the study found that there were not clear differences between international and domestic students in their motivation toward completing their education, but it did suggest that it is important to explore and understand the differences in their

level of motivation due to its marginally significant results (Karayigit, 2017).

Academic Performance and Satisfaction

Students' performance in school as well as their satisfaction with provided resources can be a motivation to improve their performance. One study performed found that international students with higher levels of satisfaction performed better. In a separate study performed at Nova Southeastern University, it was discovered that there were recurring problems with attitudes towards education among international students from different parts of the world. One notable issue was the lack of satisfaction of international students in American high schools, which has been linked to a decreased level of academic performance in international students (Exposito, 2015). An attempt to fix these problems faced by many international students could not only

improve their experience while studying, but in accordance with other research, improve their overall performance and motivation to do well in their studies. If the problems these students faced could be addressed, then their attitude towards school and their studies would also greatly improve, only making their motivation to do well increase (Smith, 2016).

Motivations for Studying Abroad

International students' reasons for choosing where to study can vary greatly. According to one study, published in the *International Journal of Educational Management*, it was discovered that international students' choices can be based on anything from recommendations from family and friends, to an ability to participate in sports, to simply an ability to gain financial aid (Alfattal, 2017). The choices international students make reflects what they are truly hoping to accomplish by leaving their home country. Whether they want to be successful later on in their education or in their fields of work is reflected by their attitude towards where they choose to study. If they choose to study somewhere because they truly feel it will put them in the best position to be successful in their future work, then it will be reflected in their attitude towards the school and their motivation to get the most out of where they choose to be (Arthur, 2017).

Comparison Between International and Domestic Students

Previous research in this area shows that motivations and attitudes can vary between domestic and international students with international students often being slightly more unhappy with certain aspects of their educational choices (Asare-Nuamah, 2017). In a study based on the experiences of Chinese students in America, the researcher notes that social challenges that the subjects faced seem insurmountable. Participants have noticed a common feeling of inferiority when interacting with American domestic peers and felt

that they were not taken seriously in group assignments and discussions. According to the study, while the international students wanted to collaborate with their American peers, they felt that the cultural barriers made it difficult to do so (Will, 2016).

Hypotheses

The purpose of this study was to determine to what degree the international students' and domestic students' attitudes towards their education vary. The study also examined whether or not there is a difference between domestic and international students' aspirations in the future in relation to studying in college and career hopes, and their overall performance currently. The following hypotheses were tested: (1) International students in American schools will have decreased levels of satisfaction with their education compared to domestic students (2) International students will have higher college and career aspirations than domestic students (3) Domestic students will perform better in school than international students due to greater motivation and satisfaction (4) International students will report more parental influence on their decision to come to an American private school.

Method

Site and Sample

This sample was 100 international students, mostly from Asia, and 100 domestic students. The students attend a private Catholic school on Long Island with approximately 2,400 students. The participants were from 11th and 12th grade. The reasoning for this was that younger students likely would not have the same focus on their aspirations for college and their careers as upperclassmen would. In order to acquire this data from the international students, the University Track Preparation program (UTP High Schools), a program that handles the education of international students in the United States, was used. The UTP office had a population of approximately 500 international students. UTP offers classes for

international students where they are isolated from domestic students. This is where the study was conducted. With the permission from various teachers in the school, the researcher distributed surveys to domestic students, mainly in science classes. One issue was that some of the international student participants had limited English skills.

Instrument

The survey included a total of thirty questions. There were five questions for each category tested. All the scales were Likert-type, meaning that a statement was posed, and subjects would respond how much they agreed or disagreed with said statement. The items on the survey were a combination of statements used in previous surveys and studies on international student populations, and items that the researcher created based on existing work from other scientists. An example of a statement for the satisfaction category was "I wish I were a student at another school," and an example for the career aspirations category was "having a prestigious career is extremely important to me." The subjects responded by circling to what degree they agreed with the statement on a scale of one to four. A four would mean the subject strongly agrees with what was stated, and one means they strongly disagree. The survey had a form of consent attached to it that was signed by the guardian of each participant. More examples of survey items can be found in the Appendix.

Data Collection

Data was collected between March and the survey items were based on questions believed to give the best results for the study, but not all of them were professionally created. Surveys were distributed in regents classes, honors classes, AP classes, and special UTP classes designated for international students only to ensure that intelligence did not play a major part in the subjects' answers. Special arrangements were

made with the teachers in the UTP department as well as the non-UTP teachers to take time from their classes to distribute and collect my surveys. Subjects in each class were given approximately ten minutes to complete the survey. Data was first collected from the international subjects before handing out surveys to domestic students due to availability. Once completed, subjects submitted their surveys and they were graded based on their answers before statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

When the subjects' surveys were collected back two groups were formed, one for domestic students and one for international students. The survey items corresponded to one of five dependent variables that were being tested: attitude, college aspirations, career aspirations, the students' performance in school, and the role that the students' parents/guardians played in each decision to pursue American schooling. The scores from the five questions for each category were then added up to give them a total score for each category. For each category, a participant could have received a maximum score of twenty, meaning they had a good attitude, high aspirations for college and future careers, performed well in school, and were fully motivated to study in America. The lowest score one could have received in each category was a five, meaning they had a poor attitude, were not aiming high or hoping to be successful, or did not perform well in school currently. Each subject got a total score based on their cumulative score in each of the four categories. Means and variances for each sample were calculated and p -values representing comparisons of the samples were determined with the use of a t -test. A level of significance ($p < 0.05$) was established and samples were considered significantly different at that level.

Results

In total, five categories were analyzed and scored for each sample group, and five t-tests were conducted between each sample group. Each t-test was evaluated by using 0.05 as the minimum acceptable level of significance.

Satisfaction

In comparing the mean satisfaction scores of the domestic and international students, the difference was highly significant. On a scale from 5-20, domestic students indicated an average score of 17.62, which proved to be significantly greater than the international students' average satisfaction score of 15.81. The p -value of this comparison was $p = .000435$, a value that is much lower than the significance maximum of $p = .05$. This figure indicates that domestic students are significantly more satisfied with their experience in an American school system than International students. The mean satisfaction scores are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Satisfaction Levels of Domestic and International Students

	\bar{x}	s^2	p
Domestic	17.617	9.257	<.001
International	15.808	7.456	

College Aspirations

When comparing the score from the college aspirations category, the mean indicated that the domestic students had slightly higher aspirations for college than the international students did. The domestic students had a mean college aspiration score of 16.18, while the international students had a mean score of 15.96. The variances of these scores were among the lowest in the whole study, and they indicate that most of the students that were studied display the same feelings towards their college aspirations. The p -value of .6269 indicates that the difference between these scores is not significant, so although the domestic

students aspired for higher goals for their college careers, their aspirations were not significantly higher. The means and variances for college aspirations are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. College Aspirations of Domestic and International Students

	\bar{x}	s^2	p
Domestic	16.183	8.220	.627
International	15.962	5.466	

Career Aspirations

When comparing the career aspirations of the two groups, the difference was once again insignificant. The mean score of 16.23 for the domestic students was barely higher than the mean score of 15.92 for the international students, and the p -value of .5419 was too high for the difference to be significant, meaning that the domestic students and the international students had relatively similar career aspirations. The means and variances for career aspirations are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3. Career Aspirations of Domestic and International Students

	\bar{x}	s^2	p
Domestic	16.233	7.640	.542
International	15.923	7.163	

Academic Performance

Another comparison in which the domestic and international students showed similar scores was in the academic performance category. There does not seem to be any trend indicating that domestic students or international students perform better than the other, as the domestic students' performance score average of 14.38 was not much different than the average of the international students, which was 14.58. The p -value of .6665 proves that international students do not perform significantly better than domestic students. The

means and variances of academic performance are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4. Academic Performance of Domestic and International Students

	\bar{x}	s^2	p
Domestic	14.383	6.410	.667
International	14.577	7.338	

Parental Influence

Finally, the mean score for parental influence in coming to a private American high school was very similar for both sample groups. The average score of 14.77 for the domestic students compared to the average score of 14.58 for the international students was extremely close, and the p -value of .7550 indicated that the difference is not significant at the $p < .05$ level. This shows that the parents of domestic and international students essentially had the same impact on their child's decision to attend a Catholic private high school.

Table 5. Parental Influence on Domestic and International Students

	\bar{x}	s^2	p
Domestic	14.767	11.436	.755
International	14.577	11.338	

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to reveal more about why citizens of other countries continue to send their students to American high schools. This topic is especially relevant today since the rate at which America is receiving international students is at an all-time high. The study's goal of comparing international students' satisfaction with American schooling, aspirations towards college and future careers, academic performance, religious values, and the influence that their parents had on their decisions to come to a private American high school to those of

domestic American students was designed to pinpoint the aspects of American schooling that appealed to the international population the most. Aside from identifying the attraction of American school systems, comparing their performance and satisfaction could potentially shed light on the strengths and deficiencies of American school systems when educating their international students. The major findings of this study address many of the identified issues.

The Difference in Satisfaction Levels of Domestic and International Students

Each comparison in this study revealed valuable information, regardless of the significance of the data. The domestic students in this study proved to be significantly more satisfied with their American schooling than the international students. This is an important comparison in assessing the success of their rapidly growing international programs at American high schools. The survey results of the study revealed that international students feel that they are lonely in the classroom, feel out of place in school, and that they wish they were a student at a different school. If these statements apply to other international students throughout the country, then it is imperative that American high schools work to better address the needs of their international students in a more effective way. The study affirms the notion that there is reason to believe that international students have serious issues with cultural and social barriers, especially when interacting with their American peers and teachers.

The Difference in College and Career Aspirations of Domestic and International Students

Both categories regarding the future aspirations for the students yielded similar means with trivial differences. This complicated the analysis of data since one would think that college and career aspirations would be a major reason for students of other countries to uproot their lives and come to America for high school. In fact, the

mean score for international students was lower than that of domestic students for both categories regarding future aspirations. This supports the literature cited earlier, as previous studies have indicated that there is no clear difference between the aspirations and motivations of international and domestic students.

The Difference in Academic Performance of Domestic and International Students

The results of the study also indicated that the domestic and international students performed at very similar levels in their academic coursework. This is telling, because it likely specifies that American school systems successfully eliminate the barriers that make learning in a foreign environment difficult for international students. This is also consistent with previous research on the topic. However, the variance for the performance of the international students was relatively high, so it is likely that there was a population of international students who performed exceptionally well, and a population who could not overcome the cultural barriers. A question that is raised from this comparison is whether or not American school systems are effectively educating international students, particularly from China. China consistently performs extremely well on global standardized testing, and Americans tend to perform below average. If international students who come to America are performing on par with American students, it begs the question as to whether or not they could be performing at a higher level in Chinese high schools where the educational methods may be better.

The Difference in Parental Influence on Domestic and International Students

Finally, it would definitely be telling if students from either population indicated that their parents played a major role in their coming to a private Catholic American high school. The results were again insignificant. Both populations

generally indicated that their parents played some role in their decision to come to this American school, but that they were glad that they did make this decision. This likely has to do with the prestige of the private school. In China, high school enrolment is relatively low, so a reason for their wanting to come to America could be telling of deficiencies in their own country.

Further Study

Future studies of similar populations may examine more reasons for international students coming to America for study. Other categories may include the quality of life in their home country, their quality and access to education in their home country, and the financial status of their family. It may also be beneficial to compare more specific variables in the study, such as gender within the domestic and international groups. The students could also be broken up based on their academic rigor.

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