International Students’ Decision to Attend a Small, Rural Community College in Iowa

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International students’ decision to attend a small, rural community college in Iowa

by

Sarah Ellen Adams

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:
Larry Ebbers, Co-Major Professor
Linda Serra Hagedorn, Co-Major Professor
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Mack Shelley
Howard Vanauken

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2016

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated why international students chose to enroll at small, rural community colleges in the state of Iowa. Specifically, how key factors (e.g., institutional characteristics, program characteristics, marketing and recruitment characteristics, and significant others’ input) contributed to an international student’s decision to enroll at a small, rural community college in the state. These factors were drawn from a combined model of college choice developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). This study serves as an addition to current literature, but it also serves as a tool that enables small, rural community colleges in Iowa to actively and more successfully recruit and enroll international students, furthering the internationalization of higher education across the state. Additionally, this study gives a voice to international students at small, rural institutions, and allows their stories and experiences to be shared.

This qualitative study adopted a phenomenological approach. In phenomenological research “the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study” (Creswell, 2014). In this study the phenomenon was enrollment at small, rural community colleges in Iowa, and the participants in the study were international students. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were utilized in this study. A set of interview procedures were established for this study based on the results of a small survey (International Students Community College Choice Survey) administered to international students at small, rural community colleges in Iowa in March, 2016.

In addition to the rich, descriptive stories shared by the participants in this study, several themes emerged as a result of interviewing international students about their decision to enroll at a small, rural community college in Iowa. These themes include the desire to
transfer to a four-year institution apprehension about adapting to the U.S. higher education system, use of an agent, and economic factors.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Overview

Annually international student contribute over $26.8 billion to the United States Economy (NAFSA, 2014). Even more important than their financial contribution, international students provide a unique perspective in U.S. classrooms, enhance diversity and opportunities for cultural exchange on campuses, and help prepare U.S. students to be more global citizens in today’s world market (Thompson & Cuseo, 2009). As do their four-year peers, community colleges recognize the value international students bring to an institution, and understand the impact these students can have on the economy, as much as student population diversification and globalization of campus (Harrison, 2002; Marginson, 2011).

Unlike four-year institutions, less research exists on international students at community colleges. Most of the research that does exist focuses on topics related to cultural adjustment or support services for international students (Abdolalizadeh, 2014). Few address factors influencing an international student’s decision to attend a community college, and even less look specifically at small, rural institutions in the Midwest. Community colleges in Iowa need a better understanding of college choice factors that influence international student’s to select small, rural community colleges in the state in order to more efficiently and effectively recruit, enroll, and retain this student population.

Internationalization of Community Colleges

International students enrolling at community colleges is not new. The number of international students enrolled at community colleges increased throughout the 1960’s and 1970’s as the number of community colleges increased (Bohman, 2009). This led to the development of organizations focused on international students at community colleges. One of
the most recognized of these organizations is Community Colleges for International Development (CCID). CCID was established in 1976, to provide opportunities for building global relationships that strengthen educational programs and promote economic development (CCID, 2015).

Community colleges in the United States no longer support just their local, or even national communities. Due to organizations like CCID, many have expanded their missions to include the global community through internationalization of curriculum, study abroad, and recruitment of international students. International students add diversity on campus and in the classroom, expand an institution’s global community, and provide additional revenue (Bohman, 2009). An estimated $2.6 billion is added to the U.S. economy each year as a result of international community college student spending (AACC, USA AGG Fact Sheet, 2014).

International Students at Community Colleges

Higher education institutions in the United States experienced decreased international student enrollments following September 11, 2001 (Bohman, 2009). Today however, community college international student enrollment has surpassed even pre-9/11 numbers. During the 2013-2014 academic year, the top 5 places of origin of international students at associate institutions were: China, South Korea, Vietnam, Japan, and Mexico. Students from these five countries made up 50 percent of the international student enrollment at U.S. community colleges (IIE, Special Reports: Community College Data Resource, 2015). The top five institutions hosting international students during the 2013-2014 academic year were: Houston Community College System (Houston, TX); Santa Monica College (Santa Monica, CA); De Anza College (Cupertino, CA); Lone Star College (The Woodlands, TX); and Seattle Central Community College (Seattle, WA). The only institution from the Midwest division breaking into the top 40
was Johnson County Community College in Overland Park, KS (IIE, Special Reports: Community College Data Resource, 2015). Overall, the largest international student enrollment is in urban or suburban districts of California, Florida, Maryland, New York, Texas, or Washington State. However, as highlighted in the 2009 work of Bohman, even rural institutions in the Midwest are seeing an increase in international student enrollment (Bohman, 2009).

International Student Recruitment

Efforts to attract and recruit international students are happening at both community colleges and four-year institutions. The U.S. federal government has increased funding for marketing U.S. education as a destination through the Department of Education’s USA Advising Centers, funding for travel and visa interviews, and through involvement of the U.S. Department of Commerce (Bohman, 2009). Organizations and associations also aid in recruitment efforts. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) began international student recruitment trips in 2002, in order to increase the international profile of community colleges (Bohman, 2009). Today AACC continues to promote U.S. community colleges abroad, offers consultancy services, training programs, partnership initiatives, advocacy and outreach, and information on grant opportunities, funding, and exchange prospects for community colleges and prospective international students (AACC, International Programs and Services, 2015).

Individual institutions are also increasing efforts to recruit international students. A 2015, study of international recruitment practices estimated that 33 percent of United States community colleges are actively recruiting international students through international recruiting trips or through the use of international recruiters (AARCAO, 2015). In 2015, Iowa community colleges were surveyed about their international student recruitment efforts. It was found that 60 percent of small, rural community colleges in the state are actively recruiting international students
Community colleges recruit international students for a number of reasons including financial benefit from tuition revenue, diversification of the student population, promotion of internationalization on campus, and for global awareness (Bevis, 2002; Harrison, 2002; Pandit, 2007; Thompson & Cuseo, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

While 60 percent of small, rural community colleges in the state of Iowa are actively recruiting international students, little research exists on college choice factors that influence an international student’s decision to attend a community college (Adams, 2015). Even less has focused specifically on a student’s decision to attend a small, rural community college, an institution type that is likely to be less diverse than an urban or even suburban peer institution. A better understanding of why international students choose to enroll at small, rural community colleges in Iowa, and the college choice factors considered influential by international students is needed to serve as a tool for practitioners in the state, local and state policy makers, and to further advance internationalization efforts.

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study was to understand why international students chose to enroll at small, rural community colleges in the state of Iowa. Specifically, how key factors (e.g., institutional characteristics, program characteristics, marketing and recruitment characteristics, and significant others’ input) contributed to an international student’s decision to enroll at a small, rural community college in the state. These factors were drawn from a combined model of college choice developed by Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Past research indicates that these areas are important factors to consider when examining college choice. This study serves as an addition to current literature, but it also serves as a tool that enables small,
rural community colleges in Iowa to actively and more successfully recruit and enroll international students, furthering the internationalization of higher education across the state. Additionally, this study gives a voice to international students at small, rural institutions, and allows their stories and experiences to be shared.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following research question: Why did international students in this study decide to enroll at a small, rural community college in Iowa?

Methodological Approach

This study sought to understand why international students chose to enroll at small, rural community colleges in the state of Iowa. A qualitative study was best suited to answer this question because the goal was to understand the process by which events or actions took place, a contribution of qualitative research methods highlighted by Maxwell (2013). Additionally, use of qualitative methods allowed for “participants’ perspective” to be heard (Maxwell, 2013). Few studies have focused on international students at community colleges, and even fewer on those choosing to attend small, rural institutions. Allowing these students to share their stories contributes to a gap in the literature on the topic of international student college choice at the community college level.

The qualitative strategy adopted for this study was phenomenological research. Phenomenology has been referred to as an educational qualitative research design (Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Creswell, 2014). In phenomenological research “the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study” (Creswell, 2014). In this study the phenomenon was enrollment at small, rural community colleges in Iowa, and the participants in the study were international students. More specifically this study
adopted a descriptive or hermeneutical phenomenology, which is the study of personal experience and requires an interpretation of the meanings of phenomena experienced by participants in the study (Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

Creswell (2014) says that phenomenology is best used when the research problem requires a deep understanding of “human experiences”. Additionally, the participants must be able to articulate their experiences (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). To understand why international students choose to enroll at small, rural institutions, the researcher selected phenomenology as the best method for the study. Even though students would be reflecting back on their decision making process, the researcher feels the participants were able to express their experience in the college choice process accurately. In phenomenological research participants are often chosen using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a method in which the researcher relies on their own judgment in the selection of participants for the study (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). This method is effective when there are a limited number of individuals whom can participate in the study (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). Given the small number of international students enrolled at small, rural community colleges in Iowa, purposive sampling was used in this study.

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were utilized in this study. Interviewing is a very common form of data collection in qualitative research, and an appropriate fit for this phenomenological study. Seidman (2013) highlights “the purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to test hypotheses, and not to ‘evaluate’ as the term is normally used. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience”. Seidman also said “At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth” (Seidman, 2013).
This statement is of great importance to the researcher and lead to the research question guiding this study. Interviewing best address the “why” question posed in this study by giving a voice to a population of students we have heard little from in existing literature. “Interviewing is a powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues” (Seidman, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted a comprehensive combined model of college choice theory based on the work of Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) combined model explains college choice as a process that occurs within three phases. The predisposition phase is the initial stage in which students make the decision whether or not to continue their formal education beyond the secondary level. Students will either move into the college search phase or decide on an alternative route.

The next stage is the search phase. During this stage students collect information about institutions and their institutional characteristics. At the end of this phase, students will develop a set of colleges and universities to which they will apply. The choice phase is the third and final phase of the model. Students move through the choice phase by evaluating their available options and ultimately deciding on their preferred college or university. The result of this phase is the final enrollment decision.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) provide a comprehensive framework that conceptualizes the process of college choice by incorporating the effects of institutional characteristics, program characteristics, marketing and recruitment characteristics, significant others’ characteristics, individual student characteristic, and the connection between the variables. Combined
comprehensive college choice models have been utilized for research on community colleges as well as four-year institutions. Stokes and Somers (2009), adopted a model based on Hossler and Gallagher’s model to study differences in college choice between two and four-year institutions. The three-phase model also included a predisposition, choice, and search category, however the choice phase is prior to the search phase. Stokes and Somers also identified background/demographic characteristics, institutional characteristics, and institutional climate as important factors to consider when exploring student college choice (Stokes & Somers, 2009).

**Significance of the Study**

The absence of information related to international student college choice, especially at community colleges, leaves enrollment administrators with little guidance on how to design and tailor recruitment activities that will best assist international students in choosing their institution. This especially applies to smaller, rural, institutions, such as those in the state of Iowa, that often do not possess sufficient resources, both financial and personnel, to cover the broad spectrum of the international education market. This includes the ability to support an international recruitment position, use of agents, ability to send recruiters abroad, and funding for international student recruitment materials. This study contributes to the literature by focusing directly on the college choice experiences of current international community college students at small, rural institutions in the state. This study contributes to the limited research in the area of international community college student choice, and it has practical application for higher education professionals at community colleges in Iowa.

**Definition of Terms**

*Globalization.* Globalization is defined as the increased connection throughout the world due to social, economic, and political changes (Altbach, 2007; Abdolalizadeh, 2014).
Internationalization. Internationalization is a response to globalization. Internationalization refers to the specific activities, initiatives, or policies that promote global trends (Abdolalizadeh, 2014).

International Student. An international student is defined as an individual who leaves their native country to pursue full-time higher education in another country. For purposes of this study, international student will refer to a student studying in the United States with non-immigrant status, not holding permanent residency (Ottinger, 2009).

College Choice. College choice is defined as a complex, multistage process in which an individual develops the desire to continue formal education beyond high school, followed by a decision to attend a specific college or university (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Bohman, 2009).

International Student Recruitment. Student recruitment is defined as activities and strategies that are designed to attract international students to a specific institution. International student recruitment activities can take many forms such as use of agents and targeted marketing campaigns.

Associates Public Rural Small Institution. An associates granting public rural, small institution is defined as a two-year community college granting an associate’s degree located within a rural community and having a fall 2014 full-time student enrollment between 500 and 1,999 students (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2015).

Summary and Outline of Dissertation

The main purpose of this study was to identify factors that contributed to international students’ decision to enroll at a small, rural community college in the state of Iowa. Following this first chapter, this study provides a review of literature, methodology, results, and discussion
and implications. Chapter two provides a literature review on contributions of international students, international students in Iowa, international education at rural institutions, the community college, international students at community colleges, international student recruitment, college choice models, college choice characteristics, and the methodological approach for this study. Chapter three outlines the methodological design of this study, and includes a description of the theoretical framework, research design, institutional review board approval, trustworthiness, delimitations, and ethical considerations. Chapter four presents the findings of this study, including participant profiles and emerging themes. Finally, Chapter five provides a discussion of the findings, implications for practice and policy, limitations, and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Chapter two provides a literature review highlighting the main topics of this study. The literature is summarized in the following nine areas: 1) contributions of international students, 2) international students in Iowa, 3) international education at rural institutions, 4) the community college, 5) international students at community colleges 6) international student recruitment, 7) college choice models, 8) college choice characteristics, and 9) methodological approach. While several studies have explored the college choice process of community college students (Goff et al. 2004; Stokes & Somers, 2009), less have looked at the college choice process of international students. Additionally, almost no studies exist on college choice of international students who attend a small, rural community college.

Contributions of International Students

Economic Contributions

One contribution of international student enrollment is the economic impact on local, state, and the national economies. International students provide revenue through their tuition and living expenses that positively impacts the U.S. economy. Open Doors (2014) reported that international students represented 4.2 percent of the total higher education student population in the United States during the 2013-14 academic year. These international students and their dependents contributed $26.8 billion to the U.S. economy and supported 340,000 jobs during that time (NAFSA, 2014). This is an 8.5 percent increase in job support and creation, and a nearly 12 percent increase in dollars contributed to the economy from the 2012-13 academic year.
For every seven international students enrolled in the United States, three U.S. jobs are created or supported by spending occurring in the areas of higher education, accommodation, dining, retail, transportation, telecommunications, and health insurance (NAFSA, 2014). Open Doors (2014) found that the primary source of funding for international students comes from sources outside of the United States, including personal and family sources (64.7%) and support from their foreign government or university (7.5%). Table 2.1 highlights the economic contribution of international students in the United States.

Table 2.1 International Student Contributions to the National Economy, 2013-14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of international students</td>
<td>886,052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution from tuition and fees to U.S. economy</td>
<td>$19,754,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution from living expenses</td>
<td>$16,265,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependents' living expenses</td>
<td>$442,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less United States support of 26.8%</td>
<td>-$9,669,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net contribution to U.S. economy by international students and their families</td>
<td>$26,792,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs directly created/supported</td>
<td>123,465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jobs indirectly created/supported</td>
<td>216,542</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net jobs created/supported in the economy by international students and their families</td>
<td>340,007</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Association of International Educators (NAFSA) 2014.
Cultural Contributions

In addition to economic contributions, a second area of contribution, arguably the more important, is the increased awareness of diversity and intercultural issues provided to U.S. institutions. Institutions of higher education are now more than ever realizing that diversity in their student and faculty populations plays a significant role in providing quality education (Abdolalizadeh, 2014; Thompson & Cuseo, 2009). Previous research shows that the presence of international students on campus broadens the global and cultural perspective of U.S. students by exposing them to different and diverse ideas and ways of thinking (Bevis, 2002; Harrison, 2002). Exposure to diversity also helps students develop a worldview from multiple vantage points, and allows them to think about an issue from various perspectives. Through interaction with international students, U.S. students expand their knowledge of the world. Additionally, international students’ diverse practices and backgrounds help prepare students to be more competent global citizens in today’s society (Abdolalizadeh, 2014; Thompson & Cuseo, 2009).

International Students in Iowa

Each year higher education institutions in the United States enroll thousands of international students. The United States hosts 16 percent of all international students, the most of any country, yet a drop from the 23 percent share it held in 2000 (OECD, 2014). However, international students made up only 3.7 percent of all higher education enrollment in the United States in that same year (IIE, 2014). After remaining somewhat flat for the past 20 years, the percentage of international students enrolled in higher education in the United
States has increased slightly in the last few years, rising to 4.2 percent in the 2013-14 academic year (IIE, 2014). Iowa is no exception to this trend.

Institutions of higher education in Iowa have recently been recognized for their communication and service to international students. A 2015 report, Through Student Eyes, ranked Iowa as fifth in the nation when it comes to communicating and serving prospective international students online (StudyPortals, 2015). This may be one reason Iowa is continuing to see international students select it’s intuitions of higher education as destinations of choice. In the fall of 2015, Iowa had over 11,300 international students enrolled at higher education institutions. This ranks 22nd in the United States for international student enrollment (IIE, 2014). The Institute of International Education estimates that these international students contribute more than $317 million to the state economy annually (IIE, 2014). Table 2.2 highlights the enrollment and economic trends of international students in the state.

Table 2.2 International Student Enrollment & Economic Contributions in Iowa, 2009-14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Year</th>
<th>Number of INTL Students</th>
<th>Growth from Previous Year</th>
<th>Economic Contribution</th>
<th>Rank in U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>9,647</td>
<td>7.00%</td>
<td>$245,400,00</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-11</td>
<td>10,404</td>
<td>7.80%</td>
<td>$280,300,000</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-12</td>
<td>11,164</td>
<td>7.30%</td>
<td>$306,300,000</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-13</td>
<td>11,540</td>
<td>3.40%</td>
<td>$325,500,000</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-14</td>
<td>11,318</td>
<td>-1.90%</td>
<td>$317,000,000</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: IIE, Open Doors 2014 Report
Until the 2013-14 academic year, international student enrollment and economic contribution had been growing in Iowa. Nearly eight percent growth occurred during the 2010-11 academic year. The largest enrollment and economic contribution of the past five years occurred in 2012-13. Iowa held steady as the 20th state in the United States in terms of international student enrollment before dropping to 21st in 2012-13 and 22nd in 2013-14.

International Education at Rural Institutions

Today, community colleges educate nearly one-half of all U.S. undergraduates (Harder, 2010). To ensure students are competitive in a global marketplace and economy, internationalization of community colleges is necessary. Harder’s 2010 study of a 2006 study of existing survey data from the American Council on Education (ACE) found that a low level of internationalization is occurring at most community colleges. When looking at community colleges by their Carnegie classification, it was found that rural community colleges are experiencing significantly less internationalization than their urban and suburban peers (Harder, 2010). Internationalization metrics used in the study included a) institutional support; b) academic requirements, programs, and extracurricular activities; c) faculty policies and opportunities; and d) international students. It was determined that institutional support was the most important indicator of internationalization (Harder, 2010).

Harder also found that positive relationships existed between the four dimensions studied for rural community colleges with the areas of institutional support and international students showing a stronger relationship (2010). Harder went on to recommend that rural community colleges increase institutional support in order to increase internalization. She called on rural
community college presidents, boards of directors, and high-level administrators to increase their institutional support for internationalization to “boost their institution’s internationalization efforts and activities” (Harder, 2010).

The Community College

Cohen & Brawer (2008) define the community college as “any institution regionally accredited to award the associate in arts or the associate in science as its highest degree.” This includes the two-year colleges examined in this study, but also public and private technical institutions. Community colleges are diverse institutions that often enroll traditionally underrepresented populations, which now includes international students. Historically, two-year institutions were developed due to demand for their programs and services in local communities and also to prepare students after high school for four-year institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Today community colleges provide access to higher education for students who may not be able to attend otherwise.

Community colleges also serve as a gateway to postsecondary education for many minority, low income, and first-generation postsecondary education students (AACC, 2015). Many community colleges provide an affordable option for students who otherwise may not be able to pursue higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Ottinger, 2009). Additionally, community colleges often provide a convenient location for students to gain a higher education, close to their home. The fall 2013 student enrollment in community colleges in the United States was 12.4 million students (AACC, 2014). Previous studies and many practitioners have identified cost and location as major factors of influence for students and their decision to attend a community college (Somers, et al., 2006; Ottinger, 2009).
International Students at Community Colleges

Research indicates that community colleges may provide a better, or more desirable, learning environment for international students (Ottinger, 2009). Smaller class sizes offer international students access to more individualized instruction and attention. Additionally, community colleges are traditionally more focused on teaching, rather than research, which allows faculty more time to spend with students compared to a larger, research intensive four-year institution (Ottinger, 2009). Previous research indicates that international students may choose to enroll at a community college for a variety of reasons. While some may be seeking the smaller more personal environment offered by a community college, others might be seeking specific programs not available in their home country or in four-year institutions in the United States. Examples would include more technical areas such as fire science or nursing assisting. Completion of a program in areas such as these, allow international students to become trained in an area of need in their home country in a relatively short time frame.

Additionally, international students might select a community college to better prepare themselves for transfer to a four-year institution. Intensive English Language Programs provide international students the opportunity to further their English skills, a skill necessary for admission to four-year institutions (Morrice, 2011). In many program students will gain proficiency in areas such as academic writing, listening and note taking, American cultural skills, reading and vocabulary development, grammar, and conversation fluency (Kirkwood, 2015). Research supports the idea that international students can gain the language skills necessary to be successful even beyond the community college (Hagedorn & Lee, 2005). During the 2013-14 academic year, U.S. community colleges enrolled 87,963 international students, a 1.4 percent
increase over the previous year. Table 2.3 provides an overview of the top associate’s institutions hosting international students for the 2013-14 academic year.

Table 2.3 International Students at Top Ten Associates’ Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Total INTL Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Houston Community College System</td>
<td>Houston</td>
<td>TX</td>
<td>5,208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Santa Monica College</td>
<td>Santa Monica</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>3,482</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>De Anza College</td>
<td>Cupertino</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>2,860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lone Star College</td>
<td>The Woodlands</td>
<td>TX</td>
<td>1,968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Seattle Central Community College</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
<td>WA</td>
<td>1,952</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Diablo Valley College</td>
<td>Pleasant Hill</td>
<td>CA</td>
<td>1,918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Northern Virginia Community College</td>
<td>Annandale</td>
<td>VA</td>
<td>1,869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Green River Community College</td>
<td>Auburn</td>
<td>WA</td>
<td>1,619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Miami-Dade College</td>
<td>Miami</td>
<td>FL</td>
<td>1,606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Montgomery College</td>
<td>Rockville</td>
<td>MD</td>
<td>1,518</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: IIE, Open Doors (2014)*

Table 2.4 provides an overview of international student enrolled for credit at community colleges in Iowa during the 2013-14 academic year.
Table 2.4 International Students at Iowa Community Colleges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Carnegie Classification</th>
<th>Total INTL Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Rural, Small</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Iowa Area</td>
<td>Rural, Small</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa Lakes</td>
<td>Rural, Small</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northwest</td>
<td>Rural, Small</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa Central</td>
<td>Rural, Medium</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa Valley</td>
<td>Rural, Small</td>
<td>295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawkeye</td>
<td>Rural, Medium</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eastern Iowa</td>
<td>Suburban, Medium</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kirkwood</td>
<td>Rural, Large</td>
<td>705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Des Moines Area</td>
<td>Rural, Large</td>
<td>353</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Iowa Tech</td>
<td>Rural, Medium</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa Western</td>
<td>Suburban, Medium</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwestern</td>
<td>Rural, Small</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indian Hills</td>
<td>Rural, Medium</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeastern</td>
<td>Rural, Small</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>1,871</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Condition of Iowa Community Colleges 2014*
International Student Recruitment

The desire to recruit international students, and efforts to do this, happen at all levels of higher education, including community colleges. Both the government and private organizations aid in these recruitment efforts. American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) began international student recruitment trips in 2002, in an effort to elevate the international profile of community colleges in global education and exchange (Bohman, 2009). Today AACC continues to promote U.S. community colleges abroad, offer consultancy services, training programs, partnership initiatives, advocacy and outreach, and information on grant opportunities, funding, and exchange prospects for community colleges and prospective international students (AACC, International Programs and Services, 2015).

Individual institutions are also increasing efforts to recruit international students. Community colleges recruit international students for several reasons including financial benefit from tuition revenue, diversification of the student population, promotion of internationalization on campus, and for global awareness (Bevis, 2002; Harrison, 2002; Pandit, 2007; Thompson & Cuseo, 2009). Efforts to recruit international students to small, rural community colleges in Iowa are also being seen. A 2015 study on international student recruitment at Iowa community colleges found that rural, small and rural, medium community colleges in Iowa are more likely to actively participate in international student recruitment than their rural, large and suburban, medium peers (Adams, 2015).

Slightly over one-half (58%, n=7) of respondents indicated that their institution actively recruits international students. Table 2.5 highlights the results by institutional location and size. Rural, small and rural, medium institutions are more actively engaged in international recruitment than their larger or more suburban counterparts.
Table 2.5: International Student Recruiting by Institution Location

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution Type</th>
<th>Number Recruiting INTL Students</th>
<th>% of Institution Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural, Small</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural, Medium</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural, Large</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban, Medium</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Two-thirds of community colleges indicated that they had taken steps in the past year to increase or maintain their international student enrollment. The most utilized steps included development of new international programs or collaborations abroad, and engagement with an alumni network (Adams, 2015).

College Choice Models

The study of college choice allows higher education institutions to understand the decision making process of students (Ottinger, 2009). College choice not only impacts students, but also their significant others, policymakers, and institutions of higher education (Litten, 1980; Smith & Cavusgil, 1984). Additionally, understanding the decision making process of students in regards to their college choice is beneficial to policy makers in developing strategies to attract and enroll future students (Hossler, et al. 1989). Historically, three categories of college choice models have been utilized for research in this area: 1) economic models, 2) status attainment models, and 3) combined models. All three have been used to explore American student college choice, a brief overview of the three is provided below. This study utilized a comprehensive combined model of college choice, specifically that of Hossler and Gallagher (1987).
Economic Models

In economic models of college choice it is assumed that students consider the cost of a college versus the perceived benefits of that college (Hossler, Braxton & Coppersmith, 1989; Ottinger, 2009). Hossler, et al. (1989) highlights that when students consider different college choices, they will take into consideration both the perceived advantages and the perceived disadvantages of each institution in order to determine which choice has the most benefit for the lowest cost (Ottinger, 2009). As highlighted earlier, community college students place value on affordable education, many use economic models in their decision-making process due to the lower cost of attendance of community colleges (Ottinger, 2009). Economic models are limited however, because they do not address college decision-making as a process, nor do they address how an institution can influence that process (Hossler et al., 1989).

Status Attainment Models

Status attainment models are based on social theory and measure how various social and psychological constructs relate to students’ college choice behavior (Litten, 1982; Hossler et al., 1989; McDonough, 1994; Plank & Jordan, 2001). Status attainment models focus on socialization processes, family conditions, peer interaction, academic achievement, and aspiration as it relates to student college choice (Ottinger, 2009). These models are limited though in that they do not include economic considerations of college choice.

Combined Models

Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) combined model presents college choice as a developmental process that occurs within three phases. The first step is the predisposition phase
in which students make the decision whether or not to continue their education beyond high school. The result of this phase is that students will either move into the college search phase or decide on an alternative option such as military service or entering the workforce.

The search phase is next. During this stage students collect information about specific institutions and their institutional characteristics. At the end of this phase, students will have developed a set of institutions to which they will apply. The choice phase is the final phase of the model. During this phase students evaluate their available options and ultimately decide on their preferred institution. The result of the choice phase is the final enrollment decision.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) provide a comprehensive framework that conceptualizes the process of college choice by incorporating the effects of institutional characteristics, program characteristics, marketing and recruitment characteristics, significant others’ characteristics, individual student characteristic, and the connection between the variables. Combined comprehensive college choice models have been utilized for research related to two-year colleges as well as four-year institutions. Stokes and Somers (2009), adopted a model based on Hossler and Gallagher’s model to study differences in college choice between two and four-year institutions. Their three-phase model also included a predisposition, choice, and search category, however the choice phase was prior to the search phase. Stokes and Somers also identified background and demographic characteristics, institutional characteristics, and institutional climate as important factors to consider when exploring student college choice (Stokes & Somers, 2009).
College Choice Characteristics

Much literature exists on the college choice process of students. However, most studies have focused on domestic American students and four-year institutions. This study seeks to fill a void in existing literature on the college choice process of international students selecting community colleges specifically within small, rural cities in the state of Iowa. As a starting point, common influences identified in earlier research will be explored in this study. This includes the areas of influence categorized the following four ways: 1) institutional characteristics, 2) program characteristics, 3) marketing and recruitment characteristics, and 4) significant others’ input. This study will utilize these same four characteristics categories and apply them to international students’ college choice of a small, rural community college in Iowa.

Institutional Characteristics

Institutional characteristics refer to permanent features of an institution, and are the most frequently mentioned variables in determining college choice among domestic and international students (Abdolalizadeh, 2014). Institutional characteristics are unique to each college or university and include things such as institutional reputation, facilities on campus, the reputation of faculty, perceived rigor of the institution, research opportunities, cost of attendance, financial aid and scholarship opportunities available, and physical location of the campus. Studies looking specifically at college choice of international students have found that the institution’s national ranking and global reputation are the most significant factors in college choice (Kim, 2001; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Soutar & Turner, 2002; Pyvis & Chapman, 2007).

The cost of attending a higher education institution has been found to be extremely important for both domestic and international students. Research has identified cost of education
is one of the top five most important factors that influences a student’s choice, both in domestic and international students (Kim, 2001). When considering higher education costs, it is important to also consider financial aid. Availability of financial aid, usually in the form of grants, scholarships, or assistantships, is important for self-funded international students who pay out-of-state, and sometimes international student tuition rates (Kim, 2001; Zeszotarski, 2003). In most cases, this option is not available to international community college students. In general, international undergraduate students and associates degree seeking international students do not receive financial aid and are typically non-sponsored. For most, the primary source of funding for tuition fees and living expenses continues to be family funds (NAFSA, 2014).

While the physical and geographic location of an institution is a significant factor for domestic students, research suggests it is less so for international students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Instead of location, international students give more weight to things like safety, current international student populations on campus, and support services for international students (Kim, 2001; Abdolalizadeh, 2014).

Program Characteristics

Program characteristics are variables specific to each department or unit within a college or university (Abdolalizadeh, 2014). Program characteristics include factors such as a program’s reputation, faculty within a program, flexibility of a program (such as online course offerings and night classes), and relevance of the program in the current workplace. Both domestic and international students place the institutions’ departmental and program reputation among their highest priorities when deciding on what institution to attend (Kim, 2001; Soutar & Turner,
As international students consider programs, important factors include the quality of the program and flexibility of the program (Kim, 2001).

The reputation and accessibility of faculty members can be important factors in a students’ college choice process as well. However, faculty reputation may not play as big of a role in the decision making process of international community college students as it would for international students seeking graduate programs. Additionally, the quality of contact a prospective student has with a faculty member can also influence their decision. This is particularly true during the admissions process (Poock, 1997) and should be considered as a recruitment strategy by community colleges.

Marketing and Recruitment Characteristics

One could argue that without marketing and recruitment efforts international students, especially those pursing community colleges would not even know about institutional or program characteristics. Small, rural community colleges in Iowa will probably never have the same name recognition internationally as an Ivy League institution. Therefore, it is important to consider the impact and influence of marketing and recruitment efforts on international student college choice. This includes materials such brochures, catalogs, guidebooks, personal contact with faculty, use of educational agents, websites, electronic communication, and social media.

Throughout the admissions process ease of the process, processing time, and the friendliness of the admissions personnel have been linked to student satisfaction with the enrollment process of an institution (Fisher, Todd, & Wyman, 2000; Taylor, 2001). For international students, this also includes the processing time of visa-related documents, a process
that can be long and complicated for international students. Due to the added challenge of obtaining a visa, Waters (1992) found that international students tend to accept the first offer of admission that they receive.

While some students and parents may still prefer a physical, printed copy of college materials it is unlikely that community colleges will have the resources to mail college specific brochures as part of their recruitment efforts to international students. It would be more beneficial to focus on electronic marketing campaigns and their online presence. The 2014 Social Admissions Report, a survey of college-bound high school students, showed that institutions’ websites are the most heavily accessed online resources, with 86 percent of respondents listing these as very or extremely useful. The same report showed that 34 percent of students rated an institution’s social media sites as very helpful to extremely helpful through the application and decision process (Zinch, 2014). With changes in technology, face-to-face interaction is no longer necessary for spreading “word of mouth” as electronic communication has gained popularity in recent years through social networking sites (Lee, 2010).

Educational agents can play an important role in the decision making process of an international students. Agents serve as a source of information about higher education, the application process, and steps necessary to enroll at an institution. A high percentage of students reported having made the decision to attend a particular university based on agents’ recommendations (Maringe & Carter, 2007). Agents provide a variety of services to international students including language, counseling on choice and career opportunities, paperwork processing, and in some cases assistance after the student arrives in the U.S. (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014). Agents face challenges though as they promote community colleges to international students and families, many of who are not familiar with community colleges.
A 2014 study looking at promotion of community colleges by agents in China found that agents considered marketing community colleges to families in China to be difficult (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014). Agents cited parental influence, lack of information, and structural barriers as challenges to their exploration of community colleges with students. Agents in the study expressed how crucial it is to establish trust with their clients, but that they lost ground in this area by suggesting a community college to their Chinese clients. Some agents felt this was due to the fact that community colleges are less familiar in China, and seen as less prestigious than four-year institutions (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014).

Significant Others’ Characteristics

It is well documented that students look to significant others for influence in their decision making process. Influential significant others include parents, family and friends both in the student’s home country but also the country where they intend to study, institution alumni and individuals filling a counselor type role for a student. Multiple studies have cited influence from a student’s parents at extremely important in the college choice process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Hossler et al., 1999; Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000). This has been also been found true for international students (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Pimpa, 2004; Bodycott, 2009). Parents provide not only a source of advice and counsel for students, but in many cases also serve as a source of financial support (Hossler & Maples, 1993). International students view friends and family as sources that are trustworthy, objective, and reliable (Zeszortarski, 2003; Doku, 2007; Ottinger, 2009; Bohman, 2010).
Methodological Approach

This study sought to understand why international students chose to enroll at small, rural community colleges in the state of Iowa. A qualitative study was best suited to answer this question because the goal was to understand the process by which events or actions took place, a contribution of qualitative research methods highlighted by Maxwell (2013). Additionally use of qualitative methods allowed for “participants’ perspective” to be heard (Maxwell, 2013). Few studies have focused on international students at community colleges, and even fewer on those choosing to attend small, rural institutions. Allowing these students to share their stories contributes to a gap in the literature on the topic of international student college choice at the community college level.

The qualitative strategy adopted for this study was phenomenological research. Phenomenology has been referred to as an educational qualitative research design (Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Creswell, 2014). In phenomenological research “the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study” (Creswell, 2014). In this study the phenomenon was enrollment at small, rural community colleges in Iowa, and the participants in the study were international students. More specifically this study adopted a descriptive or hermeneutical phenomenology, which is the study of personal experience and requires an interpretation of the meanings of phenomena experienced by participants in the study (Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

Creswell (2014) says that phenomenology is best used when the research problem requires a deep understanding of “human experiences”. Additionally, the participants must be able to articulate their experiences (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). To understand why international students choose to enroll at small, rural institutions, the researcher selected phenomenology as
the best method for the study. Even though students would be reflecting back on their decision making process, the researcher felt the participants were able to express their experience in the college choice process accurately. In phenomenological research participants are often chosen using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a method in which the researcher relies on their own judgment in the selection of participants for the study (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). This method is effective when there are a limited number of individuals whom can participate in the study (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). Given the small number of international students enrolled at small, rural community colleges in Iowa, purposive sampling was used in this study. This study identified international students by asking participants for their current citizenship status. This has been widely used in previous research including the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS).

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were utilized in this study. Interviewing is a very common form of data collection in qualitative research, and an appropriate fit for this phenomenological study. Seidman (2013) highlights that “the purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to test hypotheses, and not to ‘evaluate’ as the term is normally used. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience”. Seidman also said “At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth” (Seidman, 2013). This statement is of great importance to the researcher and lead to the research question guiding this study. Interviewing best address the “why” question posed in this study by giving a voice to a population of students we have heard little from in existing literature. “Interviewing is a
powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues” (Seidman, 2013).

Summary

Chapter Two included literature review that shaped and provided context for this study. Specifically, the researcher summarized previous literature from nine areas: 1) contributions of international students, 2) international students in Iowa, 3) international education at rural institutions, 4) the community college, 5) international students at community colleges 6) international student recruitment, 7) college choice models, 8) college choice characteristics, and 9) methodological approach. In the next chapter, methodology is discussed. Chapter three focuses on the research question, methodological approach, theoretical framework, research design, trustworthiness, delimitations, and ethical considerations of the study.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore why international students decide to enroll at small, rural community colleges in the State of Iowa, and to gain deeper understanding of the college choice process of these international students. This study contributes to a gap in literature about international students at community college, specifically small, rural community colleges, in the Midwest. This qualitative study collected data through interviewing, which was guided by the results of a small survey that asked international students at small, rural community colleges in Iowa to rate influential factors in their decision to enroll at their current institution. This chapter provides a review of the research question, methodology, and research design that were utilized to address the study’s purpose. Additionally this chapter outlines the trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and limitations of the study.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following research question: Why did international students in this study decide to enroll at a small, rural community college in Iowa?

Methodological Approach

This study sought to understand why international students chose to enroll at small, rural community colleges in the state of Iowa. A qualitative study was best suited to answer this question because the goal was to understand the process by which events or actions take place, a contribution of qualitative research methods highlighted by Maxwell (2013). Additionally use of qualitative methods allowed for “participants’ perspective” to be heard (Maxwell, 2013). Few studies have focused on international students at community colleges, and even fewer on those
choosing to attend small, rural institutions. Allowing these students to share their stories contributes to a gap in the literature on the topic of international student college choice at the community college level.

The qualitative strategy adopted for this study was phenomenological research. Phenomenology has been referred to as an educational qualitative research design (Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Creswell, 2014). In phenomenological research “the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study” (Creswell, 2014). In this study the phenomenon is enrollment at small, rural community colleges in Iowa, and the participants in the study are international students. More specifically this study is adopted a descriptive or hermeneutical phenomenology, which is the study of personal experience and requires an interpretation of the meanings of phenomena experienced by participants in the study (Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

Creswell (2014) says that phenomenology is best used when the research problem requires a deep understanding of “human experiences”. Additionally, the participants must be able to articulate their experiences (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). To understand why international students choose to enroll at small, rural institutions, the researcher selected phenomenology as the best method for the study. Even though students would be reflecting back on their decision making process, the researcher felt the participants are able to express their experience in the college choice process accurately. In phenomenological research participants are often chosen using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a method in which the researcher relies on their own judgment in the selection of participants for the study (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). This method is effective when there are a limited number of individuals whom can participate in the study (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). Given the small number of
international students enrolled at small, rural community colleges in Iowa, purposive sampling was used in this study. Additional information about participant recruitment and selection is discussed later in this chapter.

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were utilized in this study. Interviewing is a very common form of data collection in qualitative research, and an appropriate fit for this phenomenological study. Seidman (2013) highlights that “the purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to test hypotheses, and not to ‘evaluate’ as the term is normally used. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience”. Seidman also said “At the heart of interviewing research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth” (Seidman, 2013). This statement is of great importance to the researcher and lead to the research question guiding this study. Interviewing best address the “why” question posed in this study by giving a voice to a population of students we have heard little from in existing literature. “Interviewing is a powerful way to gain insight into educational and other important social issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives reflect those issues” (Seidman, 2013). Further discussion of the interview process utilized in this study is provided later in the chapter.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopted a comprehensive combined model of college choice theory based on the work of Hossler and Gallagher (1987). Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) combined model explains college choice as a process that occurs within three phases. The predisposition phase is
the initial stage in which students make the decision whether or not to continue their formal education beyond the secondary level. Students will either move into the college search phase or decide on an alternative route.

The next stage is the search phase. During this stage students collect information about institutions and their institutional characteristics. At the end of this phase, students will develop a set of colleges and universities to which they will apply. The choice phase is the third and final phase of the model. Students move through the choice phase by evaluating their available options and ultimately deciding on their preferred college or university. The result of this phase is the final enrollment decision.

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) provide a comprehensive framework that conceptualizes the process of college choice by incorporating the effects of institutional characteristics, program characteristics, marketing and recruitment characteristics, significant others’ characteristics, individual student characteristic, and the connection between the variables. Combined comprehensive college choice models have been utilized for research on community colleges as well as four-year institutions. Stokes and Somers (2009), adopted a model based on Hossler and Gallagher’s model to study differences in college choice between two and four-year institutions. The three-phase model also included a predisposition, choice, and search category, however the choice phase is prior to the search phase. Stokes and Somers also identified background/demographic characteristics, institutional characteristics, and institutional climate as important factors to consider when exploring student college choice (Stokes & Somers, 2009).
Research Design

Initial Survey

Prior to conducting one-on-one interviews for the study a survey was created and distributed to international students in the state of Iowa currently enrolled at small, rural community colleges. The survey results provided a starting point for development of the interview procedure that was later used in this study. While it was a small study and not generalizable, it did provide value to the researcher.

The survey instrument utilized was an adaptation of the Influential Factors in International Students’ College Choice Survey (Abdolalizadeh, 2014) and the Factors Influencing the College Choice of International Graduate Students Questionnaire (Ruby, 2007). The International Students’ Community College Choice Survey (ISCCC) built on the surveys utilized by Ruby for international graduate students, and Abdolalizadeh for international undergraduate students at four-year institutions, to best capture influential college choice factors for international students at two-year institutions. The ISCCC was an online survey built and administered through Qualtrics. The survey instrument contained 21 questions and 74 items. Appendix A contains the survey instrument.

The survey captured background demographic information about the participants and also their rankings of influential factors in the areas of 1) institutional characteristics, 2) program characteristics, 3) marketing and recruitment characteristics, and 4) significant others influence. A pilot study of the ISCCC took place in February 2016. International program coordinators determined to be gatekeepers at each community college (Adams, 2015), were asked to evaluate the survey and provide feedback. Gatekeepers included international recruiters, international admissions personnel, and international student affairs staff at community college in Iowa.
Additionally, gatekeepers at medium and large, rural community colleges and suburban community colleges in the state were asked to share the pilot survey with international students at their institution. Overall seven individuals, four gatekeepers and three international students, responded to the pilot study. While the gatekeepers did not suggest modifications to the survey all expressed interest in the topic and research outcomes. The biggest takeaway from the three international students’ whom responded to the pilot was that students did utilize the sections for providing additional comments at the end of each category of questions.

The pilot study also shed light on the difficulty of reaching international students via gatekeepers at each institution. The population of international students with access to the pilot study was 1,431 students, yet only three responded to the pilot study. Based on this type of response, it was determined that follow up communication including phone calls would be utilized during the study with small, rural community colleges. This assured that the gatekeepers did in fact send the survey invitation and reminders to international students at their institution.

The ISCCC survey was distributed in the spring of 2016. First, in March 2016, the researcher invited previously determined gatekeepers at each of the seven small, rural community colleges in Iowa to share the ISCCC survey with international students at their respective institutions. A sample email with link to the ISCCC survey was provided to each gatekeeper. Appendices B-D include the informed consent document and recruitment emails. Six of the seven gatekeepers sent potential participates an email inviting them to participate in the ISCCC survey. This method was decided on because it is more likely that students, especially international students will respond to a request or email from someone they know versus a stranger.
In the invitation email, potential participants were informed that their responses would be kept confidential. If a student decided to participate, they were able to access the ISCCC survey through a link that was included in the original invitation email. After the invitation email was distributed to gatekeepers the survey was kept active for four weeks. Gatekeepers were asked to send reminder messages to their students after the second and third weeks that the survey was open. They were provided sample text and the researcher confirmed with each of the six participating institutions that reminder messages had been sent. All complete and incomplete survey attempts were recorded in the Qualtrics system.

After the ISCCC survey link was deactivated through Qualtrics the data cleaning process began. Survey data was downloaded from the Qualtrics system and responses with less than an 85 percent completion, and participants whom indicated they did not attend one of the seven small, rural community colleges explored in the study were removed. After the cleaning process, 15 responses remained. This is 3.4% of the total international student population at small, rural community colleges in the state and 3.5% of the total international student population at small, rural community colleges administered the survey.

The purpose of the survey in this study was to identify factors that international students considered important in their decision to enroll at a community college in Iowa and to allow the researcher to build on this information during one-on-one interviews for a more in depth look at the path international students took in their decision to attend a small, rural community college. The ISCCC survey highlighted that cost, program flexibility, small class and campus size, ease of the admissions process, and program reputation were rated as having some of the highest influence for international students who participated in the survey. Questions related to the
influence of economic factors, admissions process, and pre-existing notions or conceptions of a community college were adopted into the interview procedure as a result of the survey.

Research Setting

This study involved seven public, small, rural community colleges in the state of Iowa. Classification of small, rural community college came from the Carnegie Classification system and was applied to the fall 2015 fulltime enrollment for the seven schools in this study. Rural institutions granting associate’s degrees and enrolling fulltime between 500 and 1,999 students met the recruitment for classification as small, rural community college in this study. In the fall of 2015, 23,888 students were enrolled for credit at these seven institutions. Of these nearly 24,000 students, 440 were international students, comprising approximately 1.8% of the for credit enrollment at Iowa’s small, rural community colleges.

Participant Selection

Purposive sampling is a common technique used in qualitative research to reach a targeted sample. It is a non-probability sampling method and occurs when criteria for the sample are selected based on the judgment of the researcher (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). Purpose sampling is also an effective method when limited numbers of individuals can serve as primary sources of data given the scope of a study (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2012). Purposive sampling was selected for this study because of the limited number of international students enrolled at the seven small, rural community colleges in Iowa. Additionally it was selected for this study because it is both cost and time-effective.

Students were asked to verify that they met the criteria listed below prior to interviewing. Individuals who were invited to participate in this study need to satisfy all of the following criteria:
1. At least 18 years of age;

2. Enrolled fulltime, for credit at a small, rural community college in Iowa;

3. Met the definition of an international student as outlined in this study, a international student will refer to a student studying in the United States with non-immigrant status, not holding permanent residency.

Earlier identified gatekeepers at the seven, small, rural community colleges in Iowa were provided an overview of the study and asked to share the opportunity to participate in one-on-one interviews with international students at their institutions. Additionally they were asked to share any leads or potential participants with the researcher. Gatekeepers were contacted via email (Appendix G) and also provided copy for an email that could be used to contact their students. These emails were sent in mid-August, 2016. The email highlighted the purpose of the study, the method of data collection, the commitment of the participant, compensation for the participant, and next steps to take should they like to learn more or participate. Five international students contacted the researcher as a result of a gatekeeper passing along the study information. Two of these individuals did not meet the criteria of the study and did not move forward in the process. Three additional international students were identified through an international student Facebook group that was shared with the researcher via a gatekeeper.

Participants

Six international students from small, rural community colleges were interviewed for this study. Of the six students, five were male and one female. These international students were from the world regions of Africa, Asia, Central America, Europe and two from South America. They represent three of the seven small, rural community colleges in the state of Iowa.

Participant names were changed to pseudonyms to maintain confidentially of the participants.
Additionally, the name of the community college was changed and each student’s home country was listed as a world region. This was an important step in maintaining confidentiality as the number of international students at small, rural community colleges is quite small and therefore more easily identifiable. A list of the pseudonyms used in this study are provided in Table 3.1. Individual participant profiles for each student can be found in the next chapter.

Table 3.1 Interview Pseudonyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Home Country</th>
<th>World Region</th>
<th>Community College Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alan</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>South America</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacob</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Central America</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>South America</td>
<td>C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Collection

Data collection in this study involved conducting one-on-one interviews with international students at small, rural community colleges in Iowa. The purpose of these interviews was to understand why international students choose to enroll at small, rural community colleges in the state, and to allow international students the opportunity to tell their stories of decision-making and experience. A semi-structured interview format was utilized in this study. The interview procedure and questions can be found in detail in Appendix I.

An interview guide and set of standard interview questions were established to lead each interview. These questions were drawn from the data analysis of the ISCCC survey and were piloted with three international students not included in the targeted population of small, rural community college in Iowa. One was an international student from a large four-year institution in Iowa and the other two were from a large, rural community college in Iowa. Two male
students and one female student, all from the world region of Asia, were utilized in the pilot study. The order of interview questions was adjusted and minor wording changes were made based on the pilot study.

After confirming the interview procedures, international students were recruited to participate in one-on-one interviews as outlined in the participant selection section above. Gatekeepers, such as international recruiters, international admissions personnel, and international student services staff, from the seven small, rural community colleges in Iowa were utilized to identify international students at their institution that would possibly be willing to participate in an interview. These gatekeepers had previously been identified during a 2015 capstone project of the researcher exploring international recruitment practices at Iowa community colleges. Gatekeepers were contacted via an email (Appendix G) and asked to reach out to their international students or provide names for the researcher to contact directly. Three of the six interviews were established as a result of the contact with community college gatekeepers. The additional three were identified via international student groups on social media site, Facebook. Students were intentionally selected to represent a diverse range of home country origins and small, rural community colleges.

Once international students were identified they were contacted about participating in the study (Appendix G). An explanation of the study, was provided as well as a copy of the informed consent and invitation to participate in a 30 to 45 minute interview. As part of the informed consent, participants were provided information about the purpose of the study, the researcher conducting the study, what was expected of them as participants, risks of the study, compensation for participation in the study, time commitment, confidentiality of the reporting of
one-on-one interviewing, and contact information for both the researcher and the IRB Office that had approved the study.

Once a student agreed to participate and agreed to the information provided in the informed consent that had been sent to them electronically, an interview was scheduled via Zoom. Interviews were scheduled in advance and a reminder email with instructions for connecting to Zoom were sent to participants one day in advance of their interview. With the participant’s knowledge, the interviews were conducted and recorded utilizing the audio function of Zoom only. In compliance with the IRB approval received for this study interviews were not video recording. Interviews were conducted between August 29, 2016 and October 12, 2016.

After each interview the zoom recording was submitted to Rev.com for transcription. Upon receipt of the transcription the researcher would review the transcription and submit a copy to the participant for review and member checking. This allowed the participant, in most cases a non-native English speaker, to clarify or add additional information to their original recollection. After viewing the transcription four of the six participants provided additional information in a follow-up interview also conducted via zoom audio. The same transcription process was followed, submission to Rev.com, review by the researcher, and member checking by the participant.

Data Analysis and Coding

During the data collection process the researcher kept notes throughout the interview about impressions and thoughts related to the participant and the experience they shared with the researcher. Additionally, after receiving the transcription from rev.com the researcher would re-
read the interview adding notes to the sidebar, pulling out key words and repeated ideas. The transcriptions were also provided back to the participant to allow for clarification and further comment.

After any follow-up with the participant the researcher utilized the transcription, sidebar notes, and notes from the one-on-one interviews, re-reading each multiple times in order for the researcher to recollect on the interviews and begin to initially identify ideas that best represented the interviewer’s responses. This is a technique commonly used in content analysis. After re-reading and identifying main ideas from each interview, the main ideas were given codes that helped to organize words and phrases from each interview and to identify themes across all interviews.

Institutional Review Board Approval

This study involved human participants, and was approved prior to any research being conducted by the Iowa State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), (Appendix E). An application for research involving human subjects was submitted to the Iowa State University IRB in early November 2015. A question regarding the follow-up communication plan for the study from IRB was addressed via email in late November 2015 and approval for an exempt study involving surveying international students at small, rural community colleges in the state of Iowa was approved in December 2015. Following approval from Iowa State University IRB, each small, rural community college in the State was contacted about additional or separate IRB applications at their institution and provided a copy of the Iowa State approval. Nothing additional was required by the community colleges beyond Iowa State’s approval.
In August 2016, a modification was submitted to add interviewing to the study. IRB requested that interviews not be video recording, audio only, and approved the modification request in late August 2016 (Appendix F).

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that trustworthiness of a research study is important in evaluating its worth. Trustworthiness involves establishing creditability, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Credibility is the confidence of the “truth” of the findings, while conformability is the extent to which the findings are shaped by the participants in the study versus researcher bias (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Transferability is showing that the findings have application in other contexts, and dependability means showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This study adopted a series of techniques to achieve credibility, transferability, and conformability. Those techniques are highlighted below.

Member-Checking

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that member-checking is the most crucial technique for establishing credibility. Member-checking was utilized in this study by providing a copy of the interview transcript back to the participants allowing them to make clarifications, add to original statements, or provide feedback to the researcher. Given that English was not a first language for most of the students in the study, the researcher felt it was especially important for participants not to feel pressured into misspeaking, or fear that they may misrepresent themselves, their families, or their current institutions. They were informed prior to the start of their interview that they would receive a copy of the transcript and have the opportunity to made adjustments.
Follow-up interviews for clarification were conducted with four of the six participants as a result. In all four cases the participants had additional information to share after reading the initial transcript.

Thick Description

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe thick description as a way of achieving external validity. They state that by describing a phenomenon in detail the reader can evaluate the extent to which the conclusions drawn by the researcher are transferable to other times, settings, situations and people (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Thick, rich description was used both in the participant profiles and themes presented in chapter four of this study. As much detail as possible was provided, without allowing for identification of the participants, in order to allow the reader to experience the phenomenon explored, college choice, from the point of view of the international students in the study. As highlighted by Creswell (2014) the purpose of qualitative research is to create understanding of how the selected participants have made meaning of the subject being studied. Thick description allows for this to happen.

Audit Trail

The technique used for establishing confirmability in this study was use of an audit trail. An audit trail is defined as a transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a project to the reporting of the findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Interview transcripts and notes from the researcher were stored in CyBox, an encrypted cloud based storage system, and utilized in the presentation of results and findings in the study. Additionally, a clear description of the research design, data collection, and data analysis were provided earlier in this chapter. In addition, the thought process of the researcher is shown in the information provided about
participant selection and rationale for the selection of a qualitative method of study. Finally, the findings of this study were drawn back to existing literature to further highlight the connection to earlier established concepts and interpretations.

Reflexivity

Often it is thought that bias in research should be avoided. However, it’s more important that preconceptions should be avoided and bias discussed by the researcher. The perspective of the researcher shapes the research. I approached this study with the bias that international students positively impact our local, state, and national communities. I believe that institutions of higher education should actively and intentionally recruit international students and it’s something I have the pleasure of participating in on a daily basis in my current position as a college recruiter.

Additionally it is important to note that I approach this study with the perspective of a college recruiter, U.S. citizen, one-language speaker (English), and someone who did not receive their education abroad. This is about as opposite as I can possibly get from the subjects I am studying. However, I am passionate about the academic success of international students, passionate about other cultures, and genuinely interested in the path international students take in joining us here in the Midwest. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to meet the six participants in this study, to learn about their past, but more importantly to learn about their plans for the future. I wish them nothing but success as they continue their journeys from small, rural community colleges in Iowa to wherever they are headed next.

Delimitations

Delimitations are characteristics that limit the scope and define boundaries for a study, and are determined by the researcher (Simon, 2011). This study explored the process of deciding
to enroll at a small, rural community college in the state of Iowa for international students. While research on international students at community colleges is limited in itself, this study focused more narrowly on international students at small, rural community colleges in Iowa. This purpose came from a capstone project related to international student recruitment in Iowa that was conducted by the researcher in the summer of 2015.

One result of this capstone project highlighted that the majority of small, rural institutions in the state were recruiting international students, indicating their interest in growing this population of students at their institutions. This was not true for some of the larger and more urban community colleges in the state. This study seeks to provide a resource to small, rural community colleges in the state and to aid in future recruitment efforts of international students by these institutions. This study included only international students enrolled at one of Iowa’s seven small, rural community colleges. Additionally students needed to be at least 18 years old, enrolled for credit, and have full-time student status in order to be included in the study.

Ethical Considerations

This study involved human participants, and was approved prior to any research being conducted by the Iowa State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), (Appendices E and F). Additionally, separate proposal applications and IRB applications, where required, were provided to each community college prior to conducting any research.

This study utilized international program administrators at each community college as gatekeepers for international students at their respective institutions. These gatekeepers sent an email including an online survey link to potential participants, and later helped identify international students willing to participate in one-on-one interviews. The researcher did not have access to the participant names or email addresses for the survey portion of this study, but
did have first and last names and email addresses for the interview participants. To further remove personal identifiers from the data the researcher only collected broad demographic information, such as region of home country versus name of home country, to further minimize the potential of being able to identify a particular respondent. Participants were provided an electronic consent form prior to starting the survey and were informed that there were no consequences should they decide to drop out of the survey at any point. Interview participants were provided an electronic consent form prior to participating in one-on-one interviews. They were also advised that stopping the interview or deciding not to participate at any point was allowed. To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures were taken: A coding system was used, pseudonyms were used and identifiers were not kept with the data. Identifiable information collected was deleted one week after the participant has reviewed the interview transcript. Data was kept confidential throughout the analysis process. Additionally, data was stored in a password protected and encrypted cloud-based system called CyBox.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore why international students decide to enroll at small, rural community colleges in the State of Iowa, and to gain deeper understanding of the college choice process of these international students. This chapter provided a review of the research question, methodological approach, theoretical framework, and research design that were utilized to address the study’s purpose. Additionally this chapter outlined the trustworthiness, delimitations and ethical considerations of the study. In the next chapter, a report of the findings is provided.
CHAPTER 4. RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter presents the detailed results of this study through the use of tables, and narratives. The chapter begins with an overview of the International Students Community College Choice survey (ISCCC) results. The results of this small survey helped shape the interview protocol utilized in the study. Following the ISCCC survey overview, a profile of each participant whom provided narrative for this study is introduced. Finally, this chapter concludes with the themes that emerged as to why international students in this study chose to enroll at a small, rural community college in Iowa.

International Students Community College Choice Survey

This study is shaped by the results of a small survey distributed to international students enrolled in small, rural community colleges in Iowa about their decision to attend their current institution. The International Students Community College Choice survey (ISCCC) asked participants about several variables in four categories: 1) institutional characteristics, 2) program characteristics, 3) marketing and recruitment characteristics, 4) significant others’ characteristics. Each of these broader categories had its own set of variables, of which multiple questions were asked, to gauge the importance of each variable in an international student’s decision making process to attend a small, rural community college in Iowa. Results of this study are highlighted in the tables below.

Within the category of institutional characteristics, five variables including reputation and standards, student services, cost and scholarship, institution location, and student population and enrollment were explored. A total of twenty-one items measured the significance of each of these variables.
Table 4.1 Institutional Characteristics Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cost and Scholarship</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6.47</td>
<td>0.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reputation and Standards</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Services</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.73</td>
<td>1.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institution Location</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Population</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cost and scholarship were the most influential (mean=6.47), and student population was the least influential (mean=5.40). While not surprising that cost and scholarship rank high for any students in the decision making process, a note was made that this would be an important part of the conversation during one-on-one interviewing. A question regarding economic factors of influence such as family finances, cost of attendance, scholarship options, was added to the interview protocol as a result of this survey.

Within the category of program characteristics, five variables including perceived friendliness, program size, program flexibility, program reputation, and availability of an intensive English language program were explored. A total of ten items measured the significance of each of these variables.

Table 4.2 Program Characteristics Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program Flexibility</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6.27</td>
<td>0.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived Friendliness</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6.07</td>
<td>0.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Reputation</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Size</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.63</td>
<td>0.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive English Language Program</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.07</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Program flexibility was the most influential (mean=6.27), and availability of an intensive English language program was the least influential (mean=5.07). Originally it was thought by the researcher that the availability of an intensive English language program would be the most influential variable in this category for international students. While the ISCCC survey did not support that idea, English language studies did emerge as an important factor for half of the participants in the one-on-one interviews.

Within the category of marketing and recruitment characteristics six variables including ease of admissions process, printed marketing materials, electronic marketing materials, positive interactions, communication away from campus, and vising campus were explored. A total of sixteen items measured the significance of each of these variables.

Table 4.3 Marketing and Recruitment Characteristics Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ease of Admissions Process</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6.53</td>
<td>0.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Interactions</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6.27</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed Marketing Materials</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus Visit</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5.71</td>
<td>1.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Marketing Materials</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.60</td>
<td>1.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Away from Campus</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ease of the admissions process was the most influential (mean=6.53), and communication away from campus was the least influential (mean=4.60). Based on this information a question about the ease of the process was added to the interview protocol, as well as a question about use of the internet, an area that rated lower than expected in the ISCCC survey.

Within the category of significant others’ characteristics were variables including family and friends, alumni or current students, academic advisors, and home country influence. A total
of eleven items measured the significance of each of these variables. As expected, family and friends (mean=5.33) were the most influential, while home country input (mean=4.93) was the least influential. A specific question about the role a student’s parents/family played in their decision was added to the interview protocol. Additionally a question asking students to recall any other individuals they found helpful throughout their decision making process, if any, was added.

Table 4.4 Significant Others’ Characteristics Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family and Friends</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni or Current Students</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>1.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advisor Figures</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Country Input</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.93</td>
<td>1.58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participant Profiles

In order to provide context for the themes discussed later in this chapter, the researcher sought to provide background information through participant profiles for each of the participants in this study. Below is a glimpse of the six international students attending small, rural community colleges in the state of Iowa who participated in this study. The intent of these profiles is to provide the readers with insight and a connection to each of the participants. A summary of participant demographic information was presented in chapter three. Participant names have been changed to protect their identity and country of origin is represented by a world region to further de-identify the data. While interviews were not conducted in person, the researchers feels a connection was established with the participants and their stories allowed to be shared due to the level of confidence and trust established both before and during the interview process.
Alan

Alan is in his second year at Community College C. Prior to enrolling in community college in Iowa, Alan worked in a high school in his home country in Europe. It was here that his passion for teaching began, which lead him to further his education in the U.S. after hearing a presentation from an international agency and encouragement from his mom.

I’d always been thinking, oh, I might want to do teaching, but I don’t really know how to go through it…I was working at my old high school, when I was working there, it was a company called [name of agency] that actually came and lectured one day, and they gave out a note to say hey, we’re [name of agency], here’s what we do. My mom just said, hey, you need to do this.

Being an only child, the push from his parents was what Alan needed to start his higher education journey. When asked about the role his parent’s played in his decision making process, Alan said “Everything. If not for mom really pushing me to get here, I probably wouldn’t be here today.” When describing the role his parents played in his decision making process, Brian credits them, his mom especially, as one of his biggest reasons for coming continuing his education.

I mean, I thought of the idea when [agent] came there, and gave me the brochure, I’m like, sure, that would be fun, but that’s not really something I’m thinking about. Then my mom kept pushing and pushing, and like, okay fine, I’ll do it. See if [agent] can find something. I just went with it.

Alan was involved with an athletic program in his home country, and he continued this passion as a student athlete in the same athletic program at his current institution. As a student athlete he had additional communication with the coaching staff at his current institution during
his decision making process. Alan said, “I always say that I came here, partly education, partly (athletic program), so I mean, they’re both interrelated. I love doing (athletic program), I really love doing it, but at the same time, I need to study too. I’m not here just for (athletic program), I’m here for both.”

Throughout the interview, Alan was soft spoken and gave a great deal of thought before answering each of his questions. His answers were relatively short and follow up questions were used to help him open up further about his experience. At one point Alan described himself as “kind of a shy guy” and spoke about growing up in the outskirts of a larger city in his home country. While Alan said he considered the cost of attendance and living in his decision making process; as a student athlete he had scholarship opportunities available. Additionally he added that he had support financially from his family. “I had my grandpa from my mother’s side leave a lot of money left, he gave us when he died, so we used a lot of that money to get me through college.”

Alan plans to complete his associate’s degree at his current community college and then transfer to a four-year institution in the state to complete his teaching degree. Although Alan is currently undecided on the subject, and if he will return to his home country or seek employment opportunities abroad, he knows which age group he hopes to instruct one day, “I know its middle school. What subject I want to teach is not certain yet.”

Brian

Brian was 16 when he graduated from high school in his home country, located in South America. It was two years later that he would enroll at Community College C, a small,
rural community college in Iowa. He is currently in his second year at the institution. Brian used his time between high school and higher education to prepare and make arrangements to study abroad.

Back home we have place after high school basically because to get into colleges back home you have to do an exam. This exam is really hard basically. You have to study a lot, a lot, a lot. That’s one of the things that made me also want to go out of [name of country] because I don’t like the educational system they have because even if you have good grades in your entire high school, you study a lot, some people are just bad doing these exams. I don’t understand so much the exams. I was like that’s not for me. In 2014 we had these after schools where you study everything that you learned in high school in one year. It’s a review of all topics basically. That’s what I did in 2014. Then by the end of the year, I did the test the TOEFL, SAT I think. Yeah, I did the SAT, too. By the end of 2014 I was just doing my tests, getting the paperwork, everything that I need to go to the United States.

Brian found support for his decision to study abroad from his mother. “Probably I would say that my mother was the one that actually agreed with me to come here. My mom and dad, they are divorced. I live with my mom, so basically I didn’t ask my dad about should I go to the United States.” Brian said he relied on his mom for guidance, but that money was a concern she expressed.

I asked more my mom because she’s the one person responsible for me here. She was the one that really helped me with my choice, especially when I decided to choose a community college. When I told her about the community college, it’s a good way to save money, especially back home we were having problems with the economy and all
this stuff, she agreed right away when I said it about the community colleges in the United States.

Brian’s father was not initially supportive of his decision. “My dad, he didn’t agree with me at first. Then when I said I have everything set, and I explained to him too all these possibilities, then he was cool after that.” In addition to being a fulltime student Brian works to support himself financially, another factor that tipped the scale for his mother.

At first when I said I want to go to the United States, it was like “Are you going to have money for that? all this kind of stuff. Then I told her all the possibilities for scholarships, and I could work, I’m working now, so all this stuff that I can do here to help me, and also that community college is a good way to save money. She agreed with me.

Brian was not the first of his siblings to seek higher education abroad however. He has one sibling, an older sister who studied in Germany. Brian himself considered studying in Europe but valued input he received from friends studying in the U.S. He shared “I have a friend, a really close friend actually, childhood friend studying in the U.S., he plays soccer here.” While not a student athlete Brian described himself as “a big fan of sports” and said he wanted to study in a place “where sports are really serious.”

Throughout his interview Brian came across as confident and sure of his decision and next steps in his path. He spoke almost analytically and based his answers and decision-making on research. As an example, he found his current community college by researching four-year institutions with strong programs in engineering, a field he hopes to complete a bachelor’s degree in after finishing at the community college. He narrowed his community college choices based on his research of four-year engineering programs and discussing further with an adviser at a four-year institution in the state of Iowa. “I sent an email to [four-year institution] advisor,
engineering advisor over there, and he said between Community College Z and Community College C, it’s by you which one you choose.”

After completing his degree at Community College C Brian intends to transfer to a four-year institution in the state to complete his bachelor’s degree in civil engineering. He is also considering graduate school. One thing that really struck the researcher about the conversation with Brian was his attention to the workforce and opportunities after graduation. In answering multiple questions he would cite current demand for workers or opportunities for employment after graduation. “I want to finish Community College C, transfer to [four-year institution], get my degree, maybe do a master. I don’t know, depending on the work possibilities after that.”

When later asked about staying in the U.S. after graduation Brian said, “It depends on how things go back home. If the system doesn’t get better, which I’m going to be really honest right now, I think that it will not get better because I know how things work back home, things get a lot of time to work back home…I’m not just considering the U.S. to work. I would try maybe something in Europe probably.”

Jacob was incredibly passionate to tell his story of deciding to attend a small, rural community college in Iowa. In fact, it is something he blogs about to help other students making the decision to study abroad from his home country in Asia. “I also write a blog about studying abroad in the U.S. and I talk about which agents are better for high school students who want to come to the United States.” While he blogs about the use of agents, Jacob ultimately made the decision to navigate studying abroad without one. Throughout the conversation Jacob appeared very conscious of the cost of studying abroad and weighed economic factors heavily in his decision making process.
When I was in the last grade, so grade 12, one agent came and I talked to them. That’s how I found out about the study abroad itself. Then, I searched by myself a little bit more. I went to some conferences about studying abroad, some of them were held by agents. First I was seriously considering using an agent, and then I went to eight, maybe more, different agents. I talked to them, but each agent charges differently…As I researched those agents, the cheaper ones were still 800 dollars, but I decided not to use them, because if I have 800 dollars I can buy a computer, which I did. Despite the expense of studying abroad it was important for Jacob to come to the U.S. to further his dreams of working for the United Nations someday.

My dream in the future is to work for different countries, and the United Nations. For the United Nations, English and other languages are required…It’s required to be able to speak two languages other than [home country language]. I decided to study English and Spanish, and to come to the United States, an English speaking country, is the best idea to learn English. There’s also a lot of Spanish speaking people in the U.S., so that’s the big reason why I decided to come here.

Jacob is currently in his second year at Community College C. Speaking with Jacob you would not know that just two years ago he could barely communicate in English. He comes across as well spoken and confident in his language skills, but he admits this was not always the case. “Last year, I had some difficulty to adjust living in U.S., because now I kind of speak English, but when I came here, my English was, I would say, horrible…I couldn’t really speak English.” Jacob’s language skills were also a concern of his parents, two individuals hesitant for Jacob to pursue his education at a community college in the U.S.
They didn’t like the idea of me coming here, to the U.S. because my parents are very [home nationality], and they didn’t have any interest in different countries or studying abroad in another country. They didn’t have any idea of that. The first time I talked to my parents and asked if they could pay tuition for me, for the university in the U.S., they disagreed completely…my parents also concerned about my English skills. I think my English score on the TOEFL, I didn’t take TOEFL but I would say my score was lower than 60 if I took it. So that was a big concern for my parents, and also cost.

The lasting impression Jacob left on the researcher was his commitment to his education and how seriously he took both the decision-making process and the education he received. He came across as very driven, conducting most of his research himself, informing himself of the U.S. education system, learning about his options, and then working to convince his parents to support his decision.

I really don’t like education in [home country], especially college education, because…some people here in the U.S. say [home country] education is sophisticated, in some parts, yes, it is sophisticated, especially in the university now-a-days, students just go to classes and they use smart phones, they don’t listen to classes, but they can still pass it and graduate. I don’t like that idea. If I pay tuition and then go to university, I believe we should study.

Jacob is confident he will live his dream of working for the United Nations someday but for now he is focused on completing his associate’s degree at Community College C. He intends to transfer to a four-year institution but has not yet started to pursue this path. He is undecided on a major or location for his four-year institution but does plan to continue in the U.S.
James

James is a second year student from Community College B. His home country is in Central America. He is the oldest of three children and the first in his family to attend college in the United States. One thing is clear after a conversation with James, family is the most important part of his life. James’s answer to almost every question throughout the interview tied back to his family in one way or another. Even after the formal information questions ended, James shared how he had recently sent gifts back to his younger sister and about how his relationship has changed with his two younger siblings since coming to the U.S. Proving to his family that he made the right decision in moving to the U.S. to continue his education is a motivation for James.

I was only 16 when I graduated, so I didn’t want to attend a big high school, sorry, a big college. I was only 16; not used to academic rules in the United States, so I thought, my dad thought that it would be a good idea as well, to come to a community college first for a year, get used to all that. He thought I wasn’t mature enough. I wanted to prove him wrong, at a community college, it was easier to prove him wrong.

James was also motivated to come to the U.S. for his higher education because he felt it was the best decision for his path towards a degree in business. He intends to transfer to a four year institution to complete his degree and then return to his home country and hopes to run his own business.

Back home it’s a 3rd world country. Education back home it’s not bad because it’s not public, it’s private, you pay for it, so schools are not bad. I don’t like the system…high school, you go and you’re just sorted into a section and those are your classmates for the whole year. You don’t choose your classes so everybody takes the same courses,
everybody graduates from high school from the same thing. Math, calculus we’re really good at it, so when I come to the U.S., I don’t have any issues. I might be a little bit more advanced on math and general education, but then in accounting, there are some students in here that they took accounting in high school. Back home, you don’t take that, you just take like the general education…high school, it’s good, but then university, business our country is not good in business. I’m studying business…universities in the U.S. they’re way better and business is way better.

Of all the participants interviewed James spoke the most candidly about the challenges he experienced in his process of applying and enrolling in higher education institutions in the U.S. He also shared that he did not truly understand the U.S. higher education system or community colleges during his decision making process. “I didn’t know anything about it [U.S. higher education system], because there’s only like one high school in [home country] that teaches you about it, and then all the other high schools they don’t teach you anything. I watched a bunch of TV shows so that really helped me a lot.” He added that even after enrolling in the community college he didn’t fully understand what he was getting into.

They always talk about it like, you want to go to U.S. for your university, but they never talk about, explain to you this is a bachelors dress, this is an MBA, you are an undergraduate. When I was filling out my first application, I didn’t know what to do so I used Google and then I got confused about it and then I enrolled into a community college. I found out that I enrolled into a different program and not the one that I was enrolled in a program that I was not going to be able to transfer my credits because I didn’t know about it but when I got there I spoke to international affairs office and they were able to help me switch my program again.
As previously mentioned, the biggest influence for James was family, but the researcher sensed a maturing in James during his time in the U.S. The person he described at the beginning of his decision making process is much more naïve and aloof than the individual interviewed just two years later. James sounds confident in his decision and passionate about finishing his education and returning to his home country.

I was only 16 when I graduated so I didn’t feel any pressure of coming to the U.S. If it wouldn’t have been more them [parents] I would still be back home, probably studying but I wouldn’t care. I graduated at 16, I wasn’t passionate about my studies because I was 16 and then I thought, I could sleep in for 3 years. I wouldn’t miss a bunch of my life, I would still be on track. They were the ones that said, “Hey, you should study.” I knew I wanted to study but they were like “Hey, have you applied?” and that’s their role, I guess.

Julie

Julie is a second year student from a country in South America studying at Community College C. Over the audio only portion of Zoom she seems very happy to share her story.

“[gatekeeper] told me about this two days ago, and I was really happy that people are interested in us.” She is interested in studying theatre, a program not available at her current community college, but one she hopes to find at a four-year institution in the future.

I choose to attend the community college in Iowa because of the low tuition that they have here. I think also because of the transfer opportunities…I want to apply to a four-year university back when I was in [home country], but there was a lot of obstacles for me to do that. If I go for a community college, I didn’t have the obstacles so I can transfer, and I go to a university where I want to go before.
Julie spoke often of the physical attractiveness of the community college campus she selected and that safety was a concern in her decision-making process. When asked what she first liked about her community college Julie referenced visuals from a video she had seen on the college website. “I think that the first thing when I looked through the webpage was the doors. I really liked the way they were built and the spaces that they have because we can study there.” She later added, “Iowa is a safe place. There’s nothing that really happens here. I like that.” Additionally, “the dorms location is really cool because I only have to walk five minutes walks to my classes.”

Julie intends to transfer to a four-year institution in the future but is glad she started at a community college. “I like that it was a medium community college not a large one, because this is the first time I’m studying English and there were lower size classes and students. I think I would get lost at a bigger university. I liked that, too, that when I study at bigger university, I’m more prepared for that.”

Justin

Justin is a second year student from Community College A, he is pursuing a degree in business and plans to transfer to a four-year institution. While he did not directly complain about his experience as an international student, after talking with him you got the sense that he has struggled to get to where he is today. Justin spoke most openly about facing stereotypes and misconceptions as an international student.

I can also say that they have a lot of misconceptions about international students…If we want to take work study or those kinds of things it’s harder to find a job just to sustain your living expenses. If I say for example, one hour credit was like $190 for resident, but we have to pay $294. That’s twice the price, but still you find yourself in situations...
where people think that you’re using the tax money, but to be honest you’re not using anything, it’s your money. You have to pay it out of pocket. Money is always an issue. Also it’s like there’s a lot of misconceptions that even carry in the classroom by some teachers, I might say, I don’t want to talk bad about it, but its’…a lot of times you find that even the teachers at community colleges, they don’t really know about the F1 student visa. They don’t really know what kind of student they have in their classroom, so a lot of times you have those misconceptions that you don’t really feel comfortable with. You just have to deal with it.

Justin admits he did not understand the U.S. higher education system prior to enrolling at his community college and in general international students do not understand the system. “To choose the community college is not something that people know a lot about outside of the U.S. This was kind of hard to decide that you know where you want to go out, which community college you’re going to choose.” He also expressed interest in having an agency available to assist students in his home country throughout the decision making process.

I wish we had a system where you could get somebody who just speak both languages and help you understand the system and facilitate everything. But there is no such thing. You have to find someone who can just do the process for you, and when you have to send an email and get a response for the next steps…I wish we could have somebody who just takes care of that. Like somebody from the community college, but we didn’t really have this option.

Although he did not have the assistance of an agent, Justin did have the support of his family, including his parents and a cousin enrolled at a U.S. community college.
I think I didn’t even know about community colleges before that. I found it just through my cousin. He was telling me about a community college and I was skeptical. I was like “So it’s not a university?” He’s saying “No, it’s a two year college.” “What am I going to do there?” And everything, but the thing is I have a friend here and he went through a community college.

When asked about when he first started thinking about higher education Justin said, “I think it’s probably, like, middle school. This thing is, with us, it’s not even something you can just decide on. It’s not that you turn 18 and you get to choose what you want to be, something that’s better to have it planned really early.” Even though his parents were unsure about Justin’s decision to start at a community college he said “it was always the goal” for him to leave his home country and pursue his education.

After transferring to a four-year institution and finishing a bachelor’s degree in business Justin plans to complete his master’s degree at an institution in the Midwest. His passion is in business and economics and he hopes to become a corporate trainer someday. While he has not decided where he would ideally work after completing his degrees, he knows it will not be without challenges.

I’ll say that, it’s not just me, a lot of international students I know, when you start going to school here, you become an opportunity that you have, and most of the people try to find a job here. But again, you have a lot of difficulties. The system is really hard. Some of them can get it, some other have to just go back. I feel like I may just stay just for the experience, but I’m thinking about something more international.
Themes

This study asked why do international students choose to attend a small, rural community college in the State of Iowa? One-on-one interviewing with six international community college students was utilized to answer this question. The interview procedures and questions were guided by the results from the International Students Community College Choice survey. Five themes (cost, size, transfer options, use of an agent and apprehension) emerged from the qualitative data collected and are presented below.

Cost

Cost was overwhelmingly the most predominate theme that emerged from one-on-one interviewing. Both cost of tuition and cost of living were cited by all participants at multiple times during their interview. Julie said, “I chose to attend the community college in Iowa because of the low tuition that they have here. Low tuition, that’s the most important factor, that’s the main reason.”

Jacob shared that he originally planned to attend a private liberal arts school after hearing from an agent, but was swayed by the lower cost of a community college.

One agent had already pushed us to go to a liberal arts college, because the agent went to a liberal arts college maybe 15 years ago, and she liked it. I was impressed by that agent, and first I wanted to go to a liberal arts college, but because of cost, and liberal arts college is small, and private university is very expensive, that’s how I ended up going to community college. First, I was going to go to a liberal arts school.

Cost was such an important factor for Jacob that despite liking the agents he had met he decided against using one in order to further save money.
First, I was seriously considering using an agent, and then I went to eight, maybe more, different agents. I talked to them, but each agent charges differently. Some agents charge only for the application, but some agents charge for everything. They pay tuition and living expenses for us, instead. So the most expensive one charges $50,000, which is including tuition and living expenses. As I researched those agents, the cheaper ones were still $800, but I decided not to use them, because if I have $800 I can buy a computer, which I did.

Jacob used his investment in a computer to conduct his own research on higher education institutions in the U.S. Additionally he had to convince his parents the cost was worth it. “Even community college costs twice as much as [home country] universities, because it’s including living expenses. If I go to university in [home city] where I’m from, I an go to university of my actual home where I live, then I save living expenses dramatically.” Jacob took this cost of living into consideration throughout his decision making process.

First I had no idea where I’m going. I was just looking for university, I was looking for community college, anywhere in the U.S. One important thing for me was tuition and fees, so I exclude California, New York, big cities, because the tuition and fees costs a lot more, and also living expenses, they are expensive.

Brian said, “I did a lot of research, on internet, and basically choose a community college over a university, because it’s cheaper. I chose in Iowa, especially because I did some research about U.S. states too, and I found out Iowa is a place with not so much high cost of living.”

I wanted to choose a place which is not so…If I were to choose a place where it actually matches my personality, all this kind of stuff, I would actually not be in Iowa. I would choose Florida because it looks like [home country], actually. Also my research showed
me Midwestern is cheaper, the college and the living cost. I was like, I’m going to choose a college in the Midwest of United States.

Brian found support from his parents to attend community college in the U.S after promoting the economic factors of his decision.

I asked more my mom because she’s the one person responsible for me here. She was the one that really helped me with my choice, especially when I decided to choose a community college. When I told her about the community college, it’s a good way to save money, especially back home we were having problems with the economy and all this stuff, she agreed right away when I said it about the community colleges in the United States. At first when I said I want to go to the United States, it was like “Are you going to have money for that? all this kind of stuff. Then I told her all the possibilities for scholarships, and I could work, I’m working now, so all this stuff that I can do here to help me, and also that community college is a good way to save money. She agreed with me.

Justin added that cost was an influential factor in his decision-making, but that this is not necessarily the case for all international students.

We have to look at the different groups of international students. You’ll find students for whom money is not an issue. Parents are really rich, so it doesn’t really matter. You’ll have some people who have decent money and they want just a good education. Some others, the third group, they just have a scholarship to that school. It’s about just finding a good school to start off with a decent tuition…Iowa, it’s cheaper compared to other states. I was just looking for a good community college post high school and then I
found that going to Iowa is way cheaper than other places, tuition-wise and living expenses.

Justin added that he considered other countries besides the U.S. due to the high cost of tuition. “I come from a very French-speaking country, so I want to come with the U.S., and with the high tuition and everything, I was thinking more Canada.” Although unrelated to his decision to attend a small, rural community college Justin shared about his experience looking for part-time work as an international student and about international specific tuition, further highlighting the importance of cost for international students.

If we want to take work study or those kinds of things it’s harder to find a job just to sustain your living expenses. If I say for example, one hour credit was like $190 for resident, but we have to pay $294. That’s twice the price, but still you find yourself in situations where people think that you’re using the tax money, but to be honest you’re not using anything, it’s your money. You have to pay it out of pocket. Money is always an issue.

James and Alan spoke the least about cost. James considered the impact his tuition and living costs would have on his family. “I didn’t want my dad to spend a lot of money, so the community college was cheap.” Alan was the only participant not to bring up cost without being asked. Alan said he did consider the cost of coming the U.S. for higher education but that his family was able to cover his expenses due to money left to his family after his grandpa passed.

Size

Similar to cost, size was credited as being a decision making factor for all six of the participants. Size of classes, campus, and the community were cited. James shared, “I honestly didn’t look that much at universities. I was only 16 when I graduated so I didn’t want to attend a
big college, so I thought, my dad thought that it would be a good idea as well, to come to a community college first for a year.” When considered the community college “a small place to start”. Justin added that though small, community colleges still offer the resources students need.

Though it is smaller than universities they have a lot of resources that can allow you to just start with less pressure, instead of just going directly to a big university. You have small classes and teachers that you can really talk to instead of just waiting three to four days to have an appointment.

In addition to referencing size of classes, campus and the community, Brian, Julie, and Jacob also mentioned that safety played a role for them as well and equated this to size. Brian said access to teachers and safety played a role in his decision-making.

The education you can receive, it’s more focused, because at university there’s hundred fifty person classes. Here is small classes that I can talk to the teachers most easily. It’s pretty safe, people is pretty nice here. I was planning just to go to the smaller state, and with not a popular state, like California or Florida…I think the most important factors, besides the cost to me, was the campus…The housing and the city too, because it’s a small city.

Jacob also placed an importance on safety. “Safety was one of the important parts for me. If [name of town] doesn’t have a good reputation for safety, I wouldn’t come, but I didn’t hear any crime stuff, or I didn’t hear bad things in [name of town], so that’s one reason I decided to come here.” A self-described, “shy guy” Alan said he felt more at home in a rural location than urban. “I’m kind of a shy guy, so I don’t really like the big campuses and all of the big stuff.
I guess a small college in a rural area actually suits me better than one in the urban areas, I guess.”

Julie also shared her opinion of Iowa being a “safe place” where she would not get lost in the crowd of a larger institution.

I like that it was a medium community college not a large one, because this is the first time I’m studying English and there were lower size classes and students. I think I would get lost at a bigger university. I liked that, too, that when I study at bigger university, I’m more prepared for that.

Transfer Opportunities

All six participants referenced transfer options or desire to transfer to a four-year institution as rationale for their decision to attend a small, rural community college in Iowa. James specifically mentioned transfer agreements at his community college as being important to him. “Apparently, they had a bunch of agreements with other universities so after I would finish my two years, it would be easier to transfer my credits and my classes.” He also added that the community college was a place to start taking “general educations”, which is a trend of domestic students as well. Brian actually considered attending a four-year institution directly, but later decided on a community college after discussing with an academic adviser at a four-year institution and researching partnerships between that institution and community colleges in the area.

At first, actually I was thinking of going to a four-year school. I was on [four-year institution] website, because that’s where I want to go after Community College C. I was searching about the other community college they have, on the…they have a list of community college, they have like partnership… I sent an email to [four-year institution]
advisor, engineering advisor over there, and he said between Community College Z and Community College C, it’s by you which one you choose.

Julie also mentioned transfer opportunities as a main reason for selecting her community college.

I choose to attend the community college in Iowa because of the low tuition that they have here. I think also because of the transfer opportunities…I want to apply to a four-year university back when I was in [home country], but there was a lot of obstacles for me to do that. If I go for a community college, I didn’t have the obstacles so I can transfer, and I go to a university where I want to go before.

Justin admits he did not fully understand the community college system prior to enrolling but that he would encourage other international students to consider this option for getting started prior to attending a four-year institution.

I was skeptical, but after my two years I really feel like it was really the best option. You saw a lot and you kind of have a lot of time to adapt and learn more about everything that is going on with culture and how it’s going to be later.

Alan did not cite transfer opportunities as a specific reason for selecting a community college but said, “My plan is to try and transfer to [four year institution], and continue my teaching education. I’ve heard they had a good reputation in teaching.”

Use of an Agent

Of the six participants in this study, three used agents during their college choice process, two additional discussed agents in their conversations with the researcher, and one stated that he did not use an agent at all. Regardless of whether or not they were hired by the participants in this study, agents played a role in almost every participant’s decision.
Julie, James, and Alan all worked with an agent during their college choice process. All three said this was how they found out about community colleges. Julie explored several options presented to her by the agent and ultimately made her decision based on her own research.

I worked with an agent in [home country] at Education USA. They give me an agent. She guide me through the whole process to applying to Visa, information and a website that they have all the top community colleges here.

James and Alan replied more heavily on options recommend for them by their agents. Alan first met his agent through the high school where he was working. At the time he really was not even considering higher education.

I’d always been thinking, oh, I might want to do teaching, but I don’t really know how to go through it… I was working at my old high school, when I was working there, it was a company called [name of agency] that actually came and lectured one day, and they gave out a note to say hey, we’re [name of agency], here’s what we do. My mom just said, hey, you need to do this… I mean, I thought of the idea when [agent] came there, and gave me the brochure, I’m like, sure, that would be fun, but that’s not really something I’m thinking about. Then my mom kept pushing and pushing, and like, okay fine, I’ll do it. See if [agent] can find something. I just went with it.

Alan’s agent presented two different community colleges for him to consider and Alan said he decided on Community College C based on the photos on their website and the fact that he heard from the (athletic program) coach at Community College C before the other community college presented by his agent. James had a similar, almost apathetic approach to selecting his school and relied heavily on the counsel of his agent.
I always thought university first, never thought of a community college, because I don’t know I just never thought to a community college. Then I started working with this agent and I told her that I didn’t want to go to a big university, but then she offered me this option. Go to a community college they are smaller and then you can transfer to a bigger university. Because it’s true, I didn’t want to be my whole life in a small university.

James first connected with his agent through his high school and later developed a more personal relationship through his family.

My high school worked with this organization, U.S. government organization, it’s called Education USA. They have an agent in [home city], it’s the only agent in [home country]. She works with a bunch of high schools. She brings people from other universities, from big universities and she takes them over the high schools that she wants. She went a lot to my high school. I don’t know how everything worked through. My parents are pastors and she’s a Christian so they eventually got to know each other. They formed a special bond because they have common people, a bunch of common friends. At a party or something, we saw her. She’s the neighbor of my cousin now. Her brother is now a teacher in my school so everything worked through and I was able to meet her.

Jacob ultimately decided not to hire an agent due to cost, but he did heavily consider using an agent and actually met with a number of agents throughout his process. “First I was seriously considering using an agent, and then I went to eight, maybe more, different agents.” He credits his understanding of the U.S. higher education system and his learning about community colleges to agents.
Definitely going to agents was helpful to me, because that’s how I learned the basic system and process to come. That’s how I learned about the four different kinds of universities here in the U.S., how many years it takes, how transferring works. I got most of the information from agents, so I think that part helped me a lot. They basically told us that there are three different colleges. One is community colleges, two different kind, public school and state school, public school and private school. Then, also they divided two into two different kinds, two-year university community college, and four-year university, state university. There was two choices for private school, either a liberal arts college, or four-year big, university, private university. That’s how I learned about community college.

Justin did not use an agent in his college choice process but wished that he did have access to this resource.

I wish we had a system where you could get somebody who just speak both languages and help you understand the system and facilitate everything. But there is no such thing. You have to find someone who can just do the process for you, and when you have to send an email and get a response for the next steps…I wish we could have somebody who just takes care of that. Like somebody from the community college, but we didn’t really have this option…I’ll say that it’s more like easy for universities that you have a lot of options, and depending on what you want to do, you can make some research and know where you want to go. But because it’s more like a gen-ed process, I didn’t really know about a lot of options, so you have to first pick someone through community college to help you out.
Apprehension

An influential factor not addressed during the quantitative portion of this study that did emerge as a theme during one-on-one was apprehension, or nervousness about the decision to study in the United States. In one way or another all of the participants expressed concern, apprehension, nervousness, or lack of confidence in their own abilities as part of their decision to attend a small, rural community college in Iowa. Justin mentioned being able to get started with “less pressure” than when he anticipated he would experience from starting at a four-year institution. He added, “I was skeptical, but after my first year, I really feel like it was really the best option.” You save a lot and you kind of have a lot of time to adapt and learn more about everything that is going on with culture.”

I didn’t really know about the system. I learned about it through friends that used to go to college here. But most of the people that come from different countries, they don’t know about community colleges. People just go straight to universities instead of going to the community college. When I was talking to my friends, “How is it going to be? I don’t even have a major?” They call it liberal arts or liberal science. It’s something that I didn’t know a lot. I had to just come here. Even for the interview process, I told them that I just don’t even know, and they say that you’re going to get an associate’s degree. I’d never heard about it.

Justin added that his parents also had questions and apprehension about the community college.

I know I wanted to come to the U.S., but none of us really knew about the community college. We were a little worried, is it a good option as compared to going straight to the university? They knew what I wanted to do, like for a major, but to choose the
community college is not something that people know a lot about outside of the U.S. This was kind of hard to decide that you know here you want to go, which community college you’re going to choose, as compared to it’s easier to just do that at university, because you know that you have a big community there.

As earlier mentioned, James was 16 when he graduated high school, making him the youngest of the participants at just 18 now.

I was only 16; not use to academic rules in the United States, so I thought, my dad thought that it would be a good idea as well, to come to a community college first for a year, get used to all that. He thought I wasn’t mature enough. I wanted to prove him wrong and I thought a community college, it was easier to prove him wrong.

James also shared that he didn’t know what to expect about the small, rural community college, because he had never heard of it before starting his college search. Ultimately he decided to enroll to get his feet under him, “I just went here to get used to the environment. If you’re afraid or if you’re not sure what you want, you can start here, and get a little bit of all the careers and start taking general educations.”

Brian spoke about his fears of not finding a place to fit in, “I think that I was most uncertain, with just kind of like the away from home part. I was just maybe insecure, about if I was going to feel whole, and feel at home.” Julie mentioned a fear of “getting lost” at a bigger university. She also added, “All the teachers, and professors, and people that work here, are really willing to help you if you have any doubts or problems.” Julie and Jacob also expressed the importance of finding a place to better their English language skills. Julie said that the community college would be her first time studying English. Jacob added the importance of being able to practice his English language skills to his decision making process. “I wanted to go
somewhere, a region which (home country) are few because it helps to study English. I was looking for university around Mid-West region.” He also shared about his experience studying English during his first year, “Last year, I had some difficulty to adjust to living in U.S., because now I kind of speak English, but when I came here, my English was, I would say, horrible. I barely communicated with friends.” Similarly to Justin, Jacob’s parents expressed apprehension with his decision to attend a community college.

They didn’t like the idea of me coming here, to the U.S. because my parents are very [home nationality], and they didn’t have any interest in different countries or studying abroad in another country. They didn’t have any idea of that. The first time I talked to my parents and asked if they could pay tuition for me, for the university in the U.S., they disagreed completely…my parents also concerned about my English skills. I think my English score on the TOEFL, I didn’t take TOEFL but I would say my score was lower than 60 if I took it. So that was a big concern for my parents, and also cost.

Jacob also shared that long lapses in responses from the community college also had his parents questioning the legitimacy of the institution.

I expected the international student advisor for [nationality] prospects to reply quickly, like maybe in two days at least if I email them. They sometimes don’t reply to me until after one week. My parents and I were concerned about if that college actually exists, because they replied with us very late. The international student advisor told me that he is not in college, but he is on vacation, so he cannot proceed my application, which sounded very weird for me, because he could ask somebody else to proceed, or make sure about what’s going on. Until I got the certificate, I don’t know how to say it, the mail from college that tells me that I’m accepted to college, I didn’t know that the college
actually existed, because I’ve never been to the U.S., I’ve never been to Iowa and visited the college before.

Alan also experienced apprehension and fear of the unknown throughout his decision making process, mostly related to leaving his family in Europe.

The big step of moving out, that was the big, nervous thing. I’m leaving home, I’m leaving everything. It was a bit of nervousness going into that, but when I was here, the first here weeks, I was just as happy as happy could be, I guess…Everything was so new. I didn’t really know how anything about college and college life and what it meant. I didn’t even know how your school system worked at the time. It was a nervous, frustrating thing, of not really knowing what’s going to happen, not really knowing if I’m like, go through it. It was all so new, so I wasn’t really sure what was going to happen. It was kind of scary at the time.

Summary

This chapter summarized the results of the study. Results of the ISCCC survey were presented as the background for one-on-one interview procedures that were utilized to collect the stories of six international students at small, rural community colleges in Iowa. A profile of each participant was provided, giving background and setting the stage for information gathered through interviewing. Finally the themes of cost, size, transfer options, use of an agent, and apprehension were drawn from the narratives provided by participants. The implications of these identified themes will be discussed in chapter five.
CHAPTER 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This study investigated how key factors (e.g., institutional characteristics, program characteristics, marketing and recruitment characteristics, and significant others’ input) contributed to an international student’s decision to enroll at a small, rural community college in the state of Iowa, and additionally why international student choose to enroll at small, rural community colleges in the state of Iowa. This study serves as an addition to current literature, but it also serves as a tool that enables small, rural community colleges in Iowa to actively and more successfully recruit and enroll international students, furthering the internationalization of higher education across the state.

Summary of Findings

Cost

The cost of attending a higher education institution has been found to be extremely important for both domestic and international students in previous research, and that was echoed in this study as well. Almost every participant in the study, all except Alan, stated that cost and cost of living were important, if not the most important, factors in their decision to attend a small, rural community college. This finding is supported by findings from earlier research that identified cost of education as one of the top five most important factors that influences a student’s choice, both in domestic and international students (Kim, 2001).

When considering higher education costs, it is important to also consider financial aid. Availability of financial aid, usually in the form of grants, scholarships, or assistantships, is important for self-funded international students who pay out-of-state, and sometimes international student tuition rates (Kim, 2001; Zeszotarski, 2003). International student rates
were specifically referenced by Justin, the participant most outspoken about the challenges to
financing an education in the U.S. In most cases, this option is not available to international
community college students. For most international students, the primary source of funding for
tuition fees and living expenses continues to be family funds (NAFSA, 2014). Many of the
students shared their experience discussing financing their education with their family members
and that the lower cost of a community college, compared to a four year, was a selling point as
they worked to convince their parents of their support.

Size

While the physical and geographic location of an institution is a significant factor for
domestic students, research suggests it is less so for international students (Mazzarol & Soutar,
2002). Instead of location, international students give more weight to things like safety, current
international student populations on campus, and support services for international students
(Kim, 2001; Abdolalizadeh, 2014). This study found that international students at small, rural,
Iowa community college did actually consider the geographic location in many instances.
Several students cited low-cost of living in the Midwest as a main reason for considering Iowa.
While they may not have specifically sought the small, rural towns where they ended up, they
did consciously make the decision to pursue a community college in the Midwest, indicating that
like their domestic peers, location is a significant factor in their decision making. This study also
supports the idea that international students consider safety, a factor mentioned by two students
in the study. None of the students though mentioned the current international student
populations on campus or the support services for international students, beyond general
comments like, “everyone is very helpful”. This may be due to the small number of international
students on small, rural campus, and to the small staff recourses in general.
Transfer Opportunities

Although it is documented in existing literature that international student utilize community colleges as a gateway to four-year institutions, it was surprising to the researcher that every student discussed not only their desire to transfer to a four-year, but in many cases the steps they have already taken in that process. All students interviewed in this study were second year community college students, which may account for some of the transfer planning that has already occurred, but it was not something expected by the researcher.

Brian actually said that he selected his current community college after first deciding on a four-year institution for the program he was considering, civil engineering, and then working backwards to find a community college already partnering with the institution. He shared about researching four-year engineering programs in the U.S. and about contacting an academic adviser at the institution of his choosing, and discussing community college options with this adviser. Brian was the most planned of all the students, but many were on the path to associates of arts completion, understood that their community college coursework would count towards general education requirements, and were starting to think about master’s programs in the case of two students.

Use of an Agent

Educational agents can play an important role in the decision making process of an international student. Agents serve as a source of information about higher education, the application process, and steps necessary to enroll at an institution. A high percentage of students reported having made the decision to attend a particular university based on agents’ recommendations (Maringe & Carter, 2007). Fifty percent of the participants in this study used an agent throughout their process. Two of these students relied heavily on the recommendation
of their agent, in some cases admitting they truly did not even understand the community college system but trusted their agent’s advice.

While agents provide a variety of services to international students including language, counseling on choice and career opportunities, paperwork processing, and in some cases assistance after the student arrives in the U.S. (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014), they face challenges as they promote community colleges to international students and families, many of whom are not familiar with community colleges. Jacob, a student who considering using an agent but eventually decided to conduct his own research instead of hiring one, said that he learned about the U.S. higher education system through an agent hosted conference and interviews he had with agents, but that his parents did not understand or trust the community college because they were not familiar with the system.

Justin, also a student who did not use an agent, experienced a similar reaction from his parents. Both Justin and his parents did not understand what it meant to attend a community college and if it was even a credible institution. A 2014 study looking at promotion of community colleges by agents in China found similar results. Agents considered marketing community colleges to families in China difficult (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014). Agents cited parental influence, lack of information, and structural barriers as challenges to their exploration of community colleges with students. Agents in the study expressed how crucial it is to establish trust with their clients, but that they lost ground in this area by suggesting a community college to their Chinese clients. Some agents felt this was due to the fact that community colleges are less familiar in China, and seen as less prestigious than four-year institutions (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2014).
Apprehension

As mentioned in the results section, a theme that emerged as a result of the qualitative data collected that was not expected was that of apprehension. In some way each of the international students interviewed expressed fear of the unknown, nervousness to leave their home country, uncertainty about the U.S. higher education system, or lack of confidence in their ability to be successful. These fears were part of their decision making factor to attend a small, rural community college in Iowa. The community college provided them a friendly, smaller, more accessible option to enter higher education, just as it does for many domestic students each year.

Implications for Practice and Policy

In addition to contributing to research in the area of international community college student choice, this study has several implications for practice and policy in the field of higher education. This study is most valuable for the offices of admission, enrollment, and international student services at small, rural community colleges in Iowa. As community college enrollment in the state continues to decrease, recruitment and enrollment of international students in Iowa community colleges can be a way to reverse the trend. In addition to increasing student numbers and tuition dollars, as previously discussed in this study, international students most importantly increase diversity on campus and global awareness of domestic students through the unique perspectives they bring to campus and the classroom.

This study provides valuable information for admission and enrollment personnel at small, rural community colleges in the state about factors current international students consider to be most influential in their decision to attend this type of institution. Low cost or lower cost very much aligns with the community college perception. Going a step further, community
colleges should consider scholarship programs specifically for international students, or eliminate barriers, such as Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), from existing scholarship opportunities. A cost comparison tool would also be helpful for international students whose goal it is to ultimately transfer to a four-year institution. Allowing students to visually see the cost savings of attending a community college for two years prior to transfer, versus a four-year institution for all four years, would speak directly to international students and their families.

Almost every participant in the study mentioned transfer opportunities. One way community colleges, particularly small, rural community colleges in Iowa, can attract more international students would be by focusing on the transfer options for international students. All but one of the international students interviewed in this study mentioned transfer options or plans. Community colleges already have a wealth of transfer information for domestic students and should utilize this information in their recruitment of international students. Additionally they should highlight any joint degree programs, transfer agreements, articulation agreements, or other special connections with a four-year institution.

While almost all of the students interviewed in this study had the desire to transfer to a four year institution, community colleges could additionally target specific international student populations through the creation of flexible agricultural based programs. Many small, rural community colleges in Iowa exist in communities largely dominated, or with a history, in agriculture. By developing flexible programming that allows an international student to receive specific agricultural education most applicable to their home country, a pipeline of future international students could be established. Similar to the idea of the U.S. State Department’s Community College Initiative Program, student would train in an area of need to their home
country for a short period of time and then return back to their community. Kirkwood Community College participated in the Community College Initiative Program and could provide insight into creation of similar programs at smaller community colleges in the state.

Ease of the admissions process and positive interactions were highly rated in the marketing and recruitment characteristics category of the International Students Community College Choice survey and were also expressed during one-on-one interviews. Community colleges should consider simplifying and streamlining their admissions process for international students. One recommendation would be to evaluate the current application and determine what information is essential for the admissions process and remove anything that is no longer being used in the admissions decision process.

Additionally, community colleges should consider allowing international students to submit unofficial documents as part of the admissions process, requiring official documents to be submitted only if a student chooses to enroll. Having one point person for international students should also be considered by community colleges. As earlier mentioned, international students may be apprehensive, and may have fears about attending a U.S. school. Building a relationship with an individual at the community college early in the decision making process would be beneficial.

Finally, it is recommended that community colleges develop a marketing campaign aimed at reaching parents and family members of international students. As found in this study, and many previous studies, family and friends are the most significant influencers for international students. Campaigns speaking directly to parents of international students about small, rural community colleges in the Iowa would be beneficial. Explaining the U.S. higher education system, how the community college fits in that system, cost savings of community
colleges, and success stories of other international students who started at community colleges would be beneficial. Small, rural institutions also have the benefit of promoting safety and more personalized attention due to smaller class sizes. Additionally, these marketing campaigns should specifically address the most influential factors for international students such as cost and scholarship opportunities, ease of the admissions process, and testimonials from current international students or alumni. Additionally, utilizing current international students as ambassadors for the community college in the student’s home country and via social media or other marketing campaigns would be recommended.

Limitations

This study had a number of limitations. All participants in this study were enrolled international students who had already been attending community colleges in Iowa when they completed the ISCCC survey or participated in one-on-one interviewing. This means students were reflecting back on their perceptions of their college choice process. However, because community colleges are offering two-year degrees, most students were reflecting back only one to two years.

Language is another limitation of this study. Many of the participants in this study were non-native English speakers. The potential for survey or interview questions to be interpreted differently existed. It is also documented in earlier research that even with an understanding of English, international students may have difficulty explaining their decision making process due to language and cultural differences (Lin, 2000).

The size of the international student population enrolled at small, rural community colleges in Iowa also limited the study. Less than 2,000 international students were enrolled for credit at Iowa community colleges in the fall of 2015 (Iowa Department of Education, 2014) and
only 440 international students were enrolled at small, rural community colleges. This means that the sample of students in the survey and interviews may not be reflective of other international student populations in the state or the Midwest, and therefore while the findings may be helpful for other community colleges in the region they are not generalizable to all international student populations at community colleges across the country. Additionally because of the small size of the international student population at small, rural community colleges in Iowa, international students were considering as a whole. Future studies could considering looking specifically at one gender or one geographic location for more detailed insight.

Although the researcher worked with the appropriate gatekeeper at each community college to assure students that their participation in the survey and interviews was voluntary, the possibility exists that the participants perceived the survey and interviewing as an obligation. All participants were informed prior to participating that they could opt out of participation at any time. Electronic consent was obtained prior to the start of each survey or interview. Finally, one of the largest limitations of this study was the small response rate of the initial survey. With responses from only 3.4% of the total international student population at small, rural community colleges (15 total students), the analyses that can be performed and conclusions that can be drawn were very limited in nature.

Recommendations for Future Research

Little research exists on international students at community colleges, and even less on international students at small, rural community colleges. While this study contributes to that body of knowledge there are still many opportunities for future research. One recommendation for future research includes expanding the population size outside of the state of Iowa. A larger
population of international students at small, rural community colleges in the United States would allow for a larger number of responses to analyze in the quantitate section of this study. A larger sample size to analyze would also mean that a more complex and meaningful analysis could be performed. The size of this study is quite small and is therefore limited in scope. Additionally, because of the limited numbers, international students were looked at as a whole instead of by subcategories such as gender, region of origin, status as a student athlete. Future studies with larger numbers would be able to look at differences among these groups.

Additionally as a result of the findings in this study, it is recommended that future studies explore marketing and recruitment characteristics of importance to international student college choice more in-depth. This study found that printed materials were rated as more influential than electronic materials, and this was unexpected. A better understanding of how to communicate with international students, specifically those most likely to select small, rural institutions, would be valuable to community college recruitment initiatives.

Conclusion

This study sought to understand why international students choose to enroll at small, rural community colleges in the state of Iowa, and to identify how international students at small, rural community colleges in the state rate factors that influenced their decision to enroll at the institution. While the study was limited by the small population of international students currently at these institutions in the state, it serves as a resource for small, rural community colleges to better understand their current international students and to recruit additional international students in the future. Similar to the findings of studies on college choice factors of domestic community college students and international students at four-year institutions it was
found that cost, campus and classroom size, and transferability were most important to international students’ selection of a small, rural community college.

Community colleges were established to serve the needs of the local community, but today extend their mission to educating students from across the globe. This study sheds light on the most important factors considered by international students who ultimately enroll at small, rural community colleges in Iowa, and can hopefully serve as a catalyst to further research and recruitment of international students to community colleges across the country.
REFERENCES


Pope, M., & Fermin, B. (2003). The perceptions of college students regarding the factors most influential in their decision to attend postsecondary education. *College and University, 78*(4), 19-25.


Q1 International Student Community College Choice Spring 2016 Survey

Thank you for your time in responding to the following questions.

- This survey will take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete.
- Please complete the entire survey.
- Please click on the blue arrow button at the bottom of each page to advance to the next page.
- Your participation is critical to the project and I thank you for completing this survey.

Informed Consent:

Thank you for participating in this survey. Your feedback is important. Please answer the following questions as honestly as possible. These questions concern factors that influenced your decision to attend a community college. The purpose of this survey is to help the researcher understand college choice factors that influenced international students to study at community colleges in the United States.

I do not anticipate that taking this survey will contain any risk or inconvenience to you. Furthermore, your participation is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

All information collected will be used only for my research and will be kept confidential. There will be no connection to you specifically in the results or in future publication of the results. All answers will become part of a larger data set, and responses are not identifiable to
you as a student responder. If you have any questions please contact: Sarah Adams at seadams@iastate.edu

Additionally, if you have any concerns about your treatment as a participant in this study, please contact:
Office for Responsible Research
Iowa State University
orrweb@iastate.edu
(515) 294-1516

By clicking YES you are verifying that you have read the explanation of the study, and that you agree to participate. You also understand that your participation in this study is strictly voluntary.

☐ Yes (1)
☐ No (2)

If No Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey
Q2 What is the name of the institution you attend now?

- Iowa Lakes Community College (6)
- Iowa Valley Community College (7)
- North Iowa Area Community College (10)
- Northeast Iowa Community College (11)
- Northwest Iowa Community College (12)
- Southeastern Community College (13)
- Southwestern Community College (14)
- Other (16) ____________________

Q3 What is the name of the program you are in now?

Q4 Are you enrolled full time at your current institution?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q5 Are you currently enrolled in coursework for credit at your institution?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
Q6 Are you a student athlete?
- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q7 What is your gender?
- Male (1)
- Female (2)

Q8 What is your country of citizenship?

Q9 What is your age (in years)?

Q10 Have you ever applied to a four-year institution in the United States?
- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q11 Have you ever been accepted to a four-year institution in the United States?
- Yes (1)
- No (2)
Q12 Of the colleges/universities you applied to, was this college your first choice?
- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q13 Have you attended any other U.S. colleges or universities prior to your current institution?
- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Answer If Have you attended any other U.S. colleges or universities prior to your current institution? Yes Is Selected

Q13_a If yes, please list the other college/university.

Q14 Part 2: Institutional Characteristics: In deciding to attend your current institution, how important were the following institutional characteristics?
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<th>Very Important (6)</th>
<th>Somewhat Important (5)</th>
<th>Neither Important nor Unimportant (4)</th>
<th>Somewhat Unimportant (3)</th>
<th>Very Unimportant (2)</th>
<th>Not at all Important (1)</th>
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<td>Reputation of the faculty (2)</td>
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<td>Admission standards (4)</td>
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<td>Social atmosphere of campus (16)</td>
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<td>Library facilities (17)</td>
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<td>Recreation &amp; leisure facilities (18)</td>
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<td>Established population of international students (19)</td>
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<td>Availability of pathway program to a four-year institution (20)</td>
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<td>Athletic scholarship and/or opportunity to be a student athlete (21)</td>
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</table>
Q15 Please specify any other institutional characteristics that were extremely important to you when selecting your current institution.

Q16 Part 3: Program Characteristics: In deciding to attend your current institution, how important were the following program characteristics?

|               |               |               |               |               |               |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
|               | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             |
|               | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             |
|               | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             |
|               | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             |
|               | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             |
|               | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             |
|               | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             |
|               | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             |
|               | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             |
|               | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             |
|               | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             |
|               | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             | ○             |

Q17 Please specify any other program characteristics that were extremely important to you when selecting your current institution.
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<th>Extremely Important (7)</th>
<th>Very Important (6)</th>
<th>Somewhat Important (5)</th>
<th>Neither Important nor Unimportant (4)</th>
<th>Somewhat Unimportant (3)</th>
<th>Very Unimportant (2)</th>
<th>Not at all Important (1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reputation of program (1)</td>
<td>o</td>
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<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reputation of faculty in program (2)</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friendliness of department faculty (3)</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
<td>o</td>
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<td>department staff</td>
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<td>Flexible program</td>
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<td>requirements (5)</td>
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<td>Flexible course</td>
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<td>offerings (6)</td>
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<td>Availability of</td>
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<td>Intensive English</td>
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<td>Language Program</td>
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<td>Small class sizes (8)</td>
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<td>Size of department (9)</td>
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<td>Time required to complete program (10)</td>
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</table>

Q18 Part 4: Marketing & Recruitment Characteristics: In deciding to attend your current institution, how important were the following marketing & recruitment characteristics?
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Extremely Important (7)</th>
<th>Very Important (6)</th>
<th>Somewhat Important (5)</th>
<th>Neither Important nor Unimportant (4)</th>
<th>Somewhat Unimportant (3)</th>
<th>Very Unimportant (2)</th>
<th>Not at all Important (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catalogs from the institution (1)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Website of the institution (2)</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social media of the institution (3)</td>
<td>☐</td>
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<tr>
<td>Email messages from the institution (4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phone call from the institution (5)</td>
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<td>Campus visit (7)</td>
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<td>Meeting with a university representative in home country (8)</td>
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<td>Meeting with a third party/agent representative in home country (9)</td>
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</table>
Read information about institution in a guidebook about universities in the United States (10)

Information from StudyIowa.org (11)
| Institution admissions personnel were helpful and attentive (12) |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Institution international office personnel were helpful and attentive (13) |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
| Positive interaction with faculty (14) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Ease of admissions process (15) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Timely admissions process (16) |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
Q19 Please specify any other marketing & recruitment characteristics that were extremely important to you when selecting your current institution.

Q20 Part 5: Significant Others' Characteristics: In deciding to attend your current institution, how important were the following characteristics of significant others’?

<p>| Institution was the first to process and mail visa documents (17) | 〇  | 〇  | 〇  | 〇  | 〇  | 〇  | 〇  | 〇  |</p>
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<th>Somewhat Important (5)</th>
<th>Neither Important nor Unimportant (4)</th>
<th>Somewhat Unimportant (3)</th>
<th>Very Unimportant (2)</th>
<th>Not at all Important (1)</th>
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<td>Input from parents (2)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Input from family/friends in home country (3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Input from family/friends in the United States (4)</td>
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<td>Input from students in the program (5)</td>
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<td>Input from former teachers/faculty (6)</td>
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<td>Input from</td>
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<tr>
<td>advisor/counselor</td>
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<tr>
<td>embassy/consulate</td>
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<td>sponsor</td>
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Q21 Please specify any other significant others' characteristics that were extremely important to you when selecting your current institution.
APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT, SURVEY

International Student Community College Choice Spring 2016 Survey

Thank you for your time in responding to the following questions.

- This survey will take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete.
- Please complete the entire survey.
- Please click on the blue arrow button at the bottom of each page to advance to the next page.
- Your participation is critical to the project and I thank you for completing this survey.

Informed Consent:

Thank you for participating in this survey. Your feedback is important. Please answer the following questions as honestly as possible. These questions concern factors that influenced your decision to attend a small, rural community college. The purpose of this survey is to help the researcher understand college choice factors that influenced international students to study at community colleges in the United States.

I do not anticipate that taking this survey will contain any risk or inconvenience to you. Furthermore, your participation is strictly voluntary and you may withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

All information collected will be used only for my research and will be kept confidential. There will be no connection to you specifically in the results or in future publication of the results. All
answers will become part of a larger data set, and responses are not identifiable to you as a student responder. If you have any questions please contact: Sarah Adams at seadams@iastate.edu.

Additionally, if you have any concerns about your treatment as a participant in this study, please contact:
Office for Responsible Research
Iowa State University
orrweb@iastate.edu
(515) 294-1516

By clicking YES you are verifying that you have read the explanation of the study, and that you agree to participate. You also understand that your participation in this study is strictly voluntary.
APPENDIX C
PILOT STUDY INVITATION

Invitation to Participate in Pilot Study

Thank you for your participation in my capstone research. I have attached a copy of my final report for you.

Building on this project I am currently conducting research on factors that influence international students’ choice to attend a small, rural community college in Iowa. I have included a link to my survey and would appreciate any feedback you are able to provide. After this survey pilot, I will be asking for your assistance in reaching international students at your institution at the start of the spring 2016 semester.

The survey, available by clicking on the hyperlink provided below, asks students to respond to statements regarding factors that influenced their decision to attend a small, rural community college in Iowa.


The survey takes approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Participation is strictly voluntary and students can withdraw at any time.

All information collected will be used only for my research and will be kept confidential. There will be no connection to students specifically in the results or in future publication of the results.
All answers will become part of a larger data set, and responses are not identifiable to each student responder. If you have any questions please contact: Sarah Adams at seadams@iastate.edu.

Additionally, if you have any concerns about the treatment of your students as a participant in this study, please contact:

Office for Responsible Research
Iowa State University
orrweb@iastate.edu
(515) 294-1516

Again, thank you for considering this opportunity.

Sarah Adams
Doctoral Candidate
School of Education
Iowa State University
APPENDIX D

STUDY INVITATION, SURVEY

**Invitation to Participate in Study**

I, Sarah Adams, am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Iowa State University. Currently, I am conducting research on factors that influence international students’ decision to attend a small, rural community college in Iowa. I invite you to share my study with international students at your institution.

The following text could be used to contact students.

*Please consider participating in this short survey to assist Sarah Adams, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Iowa State University, with her research on factors that influence international students’ choice to attend a small, rural community college in Iowa.*

*The survey, available by clicking on the hyperlink below, asks you to respond to statements regarding factors that influenced your decision to attend a community college.*


*The survey takes approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. Participation is strictly voluntary and you can withdraw at any time.*
All information collected will be used only for her research and will be kept confidential. There will be no connection to you specifically in the results or in future publication of the results. All answers will become part of a larger data set, and responses are not identifiable to you as a student responder. If you have any questions please contact: Sarah Adams at seadams@iastate.edu

Additionally, if you have any concerns about the treatment of your students as a participant in this study, please contact:

Office for Responsible Research
Iowa State University
orrweb@iastate.edu
(515) 294-1516

Again, thank you for considering this opportunity and for passing this along to your international students,

Sarah Adams
Doctoral Candidate
School of Education
Iowa State University
APPENDIX E

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Date: 12/16/2015
To: Sarah Adams
1200 Gerhard Business Building

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Factors Influencing International Students’ Community College Choice
IRB ID: 15-880

Study Review Date: 12/14/2015

The project referenced above has been declared exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b) because it meets the following federal requirements for exemption:

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey or interview procedures with adults or observation of public behavior where
  - Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
  - Any disclosure of the human subjects’ responses outside the research could not reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to their financial standing, employability, or reputation.

The determination of exemption means that:

- You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.
- You must carry out the research as described in the IRB application. Review by IRB staff is required prior to implementing modifications that may change the exempt status of the research. In general, review is required for any modifications to the research procedures (e.g., method of data collection, nature or scope of information to be collected, changes in confidentiality measures, etc.), modifications that result in the inclusion of participants from vulnerable populations, and/or any change that may increase the risk or discomfort to participants. Changes to key personnel must also be approved. The purpose of review is to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption.
- Non-exempt research is subject to many regulatory requirements that must be addressed prior to implementation of the study. Conducting non-exempt research without IRB review and approval may constitute non-compliance with federal regulations and/or academic misconduct according to ISU policy.
- Detailed information about requirements for submission of modifications can be found on the Exempt Study Modification Form. A Personnel Change Form may be submitted when the only modification involves changes in study staff. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an Application for Approval of Research Involving Human Subjects Form will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review. Only the IRB or designees may make the determination of exemption, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.

Please be aware that approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. An IRB determination of exemption in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you have questions or concerns at 515-294-4566 or IRB@iastate.edu.
APPENDIX F

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD MODIFICATION

Date: 8/25/2016
To: Sarah Adams
1200 Gerdin Business Building

CC: Dr. Linda Serra Hagedorn
E262 Lagomarcino Hall
Dr. Larry Ebbes
N256 Lagomarcino Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Factors influencing International Students' Community College Choice

IRB ID: 15-680

Study Review Date: 8/25/2016

The project referenced above has been declared exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in 45 CFR 46.101(b) because it meets the following federal requirements for exemption:

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey or interview procedures with adults or observation of public behavior where
  - Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects cannot be identified directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
  - Any disclosure of the human subjects’ responses outside the research could not reasonably place the subject at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to their financial standing, employability, or reputation.

The determination of exemption means that:

- You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.

- You must carry out the research as described in the IRB application. Review by IRB staff is required prior to implementing modifications that may change the exempt status of the research. In general, review is required for any modifications to the research procedures (e.g., method of data collection, nature or scope of information to be collected, changes in confidentiality measures, etc.), modifications that result in the inclusion of participants from vulnerable populations, and/or any change that may increase the risk or discomfort to participants. Changes to key personnel must also be approved. The purpose of review is to determine if the project still meets the federal criteria for exemption.

Non-exempt research is subject to many regulatory requirements that must be addressed prior to implementation of the study. Conducting non-exempt research without IRB review and approval may constitute non-compliance with federal regulations and/or academic misconduct according to ISU policy.

Detailed information about requirements for submission of modifications can be found on the Exempt Study Modification Form. A Personnel Change Form may be submitted when the only modification involves changes in study staff. If it is determined that exemption is no longer warranted, then an Application for Approval of Research Involving Humans Form will need to be submitted and approved before proceeding with data collection.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review. Only the IRB or designee may make the determination of exemption, even if you conduct a study in the future that is exactly like this study.

Please be aware that approval from other entities may also be needed. For example, access to data from private records (e.g., student, medical, or employment records, etc.) that are protected by FERPA, HIPAA, or other confidentiality policies requires permission from the holders of those records. Similarly, for research conducted in institutions other than ISU (e.g., schools, other colleges or universities, medical facilities, companies, etc.), investigators must obtain permission from the institution(s) as required by their policies. An IRB determination of exemption in no way implies or guarantees that permission from these other entities will be granted.
(Name of Gatekeeper),

This past spring you helped me reach international students at your institution for my dissertation project focused on international students’ decision to attend a small, rural community college in the state. Based on information gathered from my survey, my study has been expanded to include interviews with international community college students to further enhance my findings.

I am again seeking your help in identifying international students whom may be interested in participating in an interview about their decision to attend a community college. Student identities will be kept confidential in all reporting of my data. Additionally, students interviewed will receive a $25 Amazon gift card for their participation.

I appreciate any direct contacts you can provide, or messages you can pass on via email or social media to your international student population about this opportunity.

A modified copy of my original institutional review board approval is attached, and I am available to answer any questions or concerns you may have, seadams@iastate.edu or 712-253-7989.

Sarah Adams
Doctoral Candidate
Iowa State University
Dear (student name),

I am a student in the Higher Education Doctoral Program at Iowa State University, and I am conducting research on factors that influence international students to attend small, rural community colleges in the state of Iowa.

I am very interested in interviewing you for this study to learn more about your decision to attend your current school. The interview will only take 30-45 minutes to complete, and you can be assured that your identity will be protected. This means that your name and the name of your school will not be used in the study.

Additionally, after completing the interview you will receive a $25 Amazon gift card to thank you for your assistance. I welcome any questions you have about the study and look forward to hearing from you.

Sarah Adams
Doctoral Candidate
Iowa State University
APPENDIX H

INFORMED CONSENT, INTERVIEWS

CONSENT FORM FOR: FACTORS INFLUENCING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS’ DECISION TO ATTEND A COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN IOWA

This form describes a research project. It has information to help you decide whether or not you wish to participate. Research studies include only people who choose to take part—your participation is completely voluntary. Please discuss any questions you have about the study or about this form with the project researcher before deciding to participate.

Who is conducting this study?

This study is being conducted by Sarah Adams, a doctoral student in the Higher Education program at Iowa State University.

Why am I invited to participate in this study?

You are being asked to take part in this study because you are an international student enrolled at a community college in Iowa.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the process of international students’ decision to attend a community college in Iowa to better serve international students in the future.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to participate in a 30-45 minute interview involving 10 questions about your decision to attend a community college in Iowa. The interview may be conducted either face-to-face or through teleconference system Zoom. Face-to-face interviews will be audio recorded, Zoom interviews will be audio recorded.

What are the possible risks and benefits of my participation?
There are no foreseeable risks expected of your participation in this study.

Benefits—You will receive a $25 Amazon gift card following your interview as compensation for your participation in this study.

**How will the information I provide be used?**

The information you provide will be used in my dissertation study and will contribute to existing literature on college choice and international community college students.

**What measures will be taken to ensure the confidentiality of the data or to protect my privacy?**

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable laws and regulations. Records will not be made publicly available. However, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the ISU Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies with human subjects) may inspect and/or copy study records for quality assurance and analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken: A coding system will be used, pseudonyms will be used and identifiers will not be kept with the data. Identifiable information collected will be deleted one week after the participant has reviewed the interview transcript. Data will be kept confidential throughout the analysis process and when results of the study are disseminated through the use of pseudonyms, by removing the name of the community college, and by using a world region in place of a home country. Data will be stored in a password protected and encrypted cloud-based system called CyBox. The study investigator will be the sole individual with access to CyBox.

**Will I incur any costs from participating or will I be compensated?**
You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will be compensated for participating in this study by receiving a $25 Amazon gift card following your interview.

**What are my rights as a human research participant?**

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part in the study or to stop participating at any time, for any reason, without penalty or negative consequences. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

**Whom can I call if I have questions about the study?**

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study. For further information, please contact Sarah Adams, seadams@iastate.edu, 712-253-7989 or supervising faculty member Dr. Larry Ebbers, lebbers@iastate.edu

**Consent and Authorization Provisions**

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study. If signing electronically, you will receive an electronic copy of your informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant’s Name (printed) __________________________________________________________

__________________________  ____________________
Participant’s Signature Date
APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW PROCEDURE

Date and Time of Interview:

Demographic Questions:

1. Have you had time to review the informed consent document? Do you have any questions about the interview process?
2. What is your home country?

Interview Questions:

- Tell me why you decided to attend college in the United States? When did you start this process? Who helped you throughout the decision making process?
  - Why in Iowa?
- How did you first find out about community colleges?
- Why did you choose a community college?
- How did you first learn about your current community college?
- Did you work with an agent? Did you consider working with an agent? Why or Why not?
- Throughout your decision making process what went well? What were the challenges?
- What role did you parent’s play in your decision?
- Who else, if anyone, influenced your decision to enroll?
- When you first learned about your community college, what did you like about?
- Was there anything you did not like about your community college?
- When making your decision to attend a community college what was most important to you?
- Economic factors (cost, affordability, family finances)
- Program Characteristics (program size, faculty)
- Institution Characteristics (location, reputation, size)
- Marketing/Recruitment (brochures, internet, agent)
- Influence from significant others

- Who provided helpful information for you when deciding to attend a community college?
- How much did you use the Internet? (social media, college website, other sources)
- How would you describe your community college to someone who had never heard of it?
- Is there anything additional you would like to tell me about why you selected your community college?