

The Current Political Climate and Its Effects On International Students in American Higher
Education
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Abstract

This paper examines the political climate in order to determine if there is a correlation between the rhetoric and policies put into place by the American government and retention and admission of international students. Information about the government such as President Donald Trump's policies are examined and included as evidence. This evidence is then checked against statistics of the retention and admission of international students to determine if there is an effect of the rhetoric utilized and policies put into place. This paper will first provide historical context of international students and compare it to the modern day landscape and then provide background of the current political climate in 2018. Lastly, this paper includes the effect international students have on American higher education. It is largely suggested that the United States will remain a leader in global education and that there will not be any large decreases in international student enrollment anytime soon; however, it is still important for a universities and policy makers to make students of all races, creed, ethnicity, religion, and sexuality feel welcome despite what the American government may portray.

INTRODUCTION

The appointment of Donald Trump as the current President of the United States has created controversy. Although Trump's plans for higher education are unclear, his rhetoric of the Muslim travel ban and "building a wall" is enough to dissuade some potential international applicants to American higher education institutions (Altbach & de Wit, 2017). Although the dip in foreign applicants is not drastic, it is important to think about the possible repercussions fewer international students can have on an institution. For example, about one million international students support the US economy with 37 billion dollars ("U.S. Political Climate Casts a Cloud over International Enrollment"). Not only do international students support the US economy, but they serve an important role in producing a culture of diversity, acceptance, and understanding within a university. Therefore, with fewer international students, this culture can lessen which can negatively affect students trying to gain a broader perspective of the world. When considering the current political climate, it is important university officials make their acceptance of international students clear and policy makers must forge change to halt policies that negatively impact international students. Although the United States will remain to be a leader in global higher education and there are not drastic declining rates of international students, if the admission of international students continues to decrease, it can negatively impact the US economy and the culture and diversity within an American institution.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The influx of international students is not a contemporary addition to American higher education. Universities, whether in the United States of America or elsewhere have always been

international organizations, or at least have had some international organization aspect. Student migration for universities has been evident since the 12th Century. For example, people all over Europe would travel to Bologna and Paris to attend the medieval universities (García & De Lourdes Villarreal, 2014). This trend continued in the 19th Century when many international students migrated to attend German universities due to Germany's commitment to scholarship and research (García & De Lourdes Villarreal, 2014). In order to emulate with the German model, the United States created a curriculum change in the 19th century from teaching only classical languages and humanities to integrating more sciences and engineering programs due to funding available from World War II (García & De Lourdes Villarreal, 2014). This curriculum change, along with other changes such as populations served and purpose allowed the United States to enter the market to become a global leader in education. International students have always been migrating to international universities for an education but the reason as to why many international students leave their home for a higher education cannot necessarily be boiled down to one reason due to family factors, socioeconomic status, etc. However, some broad reasons as to why students leave their home for this higher education abroad is for the degree advantage. Many international students hail from countries such as China, India, South Korea, where a western college degree serves to be an advantage in the competition for jobs and promotions (Goralski & Tootoonchi, 2015). This western college degree is appealing because many of the global leaders of these countries were western educated. For example, Ma Ying-jeou, former president of China received a degree from New York University Law School and an S.J.D. from Harvard Law School (Lungu, 2017). Another reason as to why the United States became a destination choice for many international students is due to the hegemonic

power of the US (García & De Lourdes Villarreal, 2014). Many of the world's commerce and business is conducted in English and so this makes the American university where instruction is in English quite appealing. However, it is important to recognize that universities in places such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand also have instruction in English and are gaining ranks in becoming appealing spots in higher education for international students. Therefore, the flow of international students have always been present in history and the appeal of American higher institutions grew due to increased emphasis on research and the United States growing as superpower.

MODERN DAY LANDSCAPE

Since the 1900s, international student enrollment has been increasing. For example in the school year of 1949-1950, there were roughly 26,000 foreign students. This number went up to 286,00 in 1979-1980 and finally peaked to 1.1 million in 2016-2017 (Zong & Batalova, 2018). It is important to understand that these numbers are cumulative and so these numbers are just the added number of new international students to the preexisting international student population. Although in the year of 2016-2017, it seems that there has been a large international student enrollment, the enrollment of new international students has actually decreased from 2015-2016 by 3% (Ross, 2017). This decrease in new international student enrollment was the first drop the Institute of International Education (IIE) has seen in 12 years (Ross, 2017). Although this drop is quite marginal, it is still important to understand as to why this drop occurred in the first place. In order to understand why a drop in foreign student enrollment occurred in American higher institutions, external factors need to be analyzed rather than internal factors within an

institutions. External factors need to be taken into consideration instead of internal factors because if it were internal factors, then only a handful of specific American universities would experience a decrease in international student enrollment rather than American institutions as a whole. Therefore, an external factor that could be considered within the year of 2016 is the shift in political climate. In 2016, a new United States president was elected: Donald Trump. Trump's immigration policy and, specifically, illegal immigration to the United States, was a signature issue of his presidential campaign (Flegenheimer & Barbaro, 2016). It was reported that 29% of US institutions were greatly concerned about attracting international students and 16% of US institutions were greatly concerned about retaining their international students ("U.S. Political Climate"). The percentage of concerned institutions is alarming as it is not as high as it should be. International students provide not only a source of revenue for an institution but forge a culture of understanding and acceptance that will be analyzed in detail below.

CURRENT POLITICAL CLIMATE

In order to properly understand how the current political climate could affect international student admission and retention, policies and rhetoric utilized by the government and more specifically President Donald Trump have to be analyzed. Trump's plans for higher education are unclear; however he does have an opinion on immigrants and illegal immigrants who come into the United States. Looking into Trump's policies and attitude towards immigrants is a glimpse into how Trump views international students as immigrants and international students are two groups of foreigners in the United States. Part of Trump's political campaign was his discussion on building a substantial wall on the US-Mexico border to bar illegal

immigrants from entering as Trump largely characterizes illegal immigrants from Mexico as criminals (Altbach & De Wit, 2016). In 2017, Trump imposed a travel ban on seven largely Muslim countries for two months which provisionally revoked up to 60,000 visas (Altbach & De Wit, 2016). In July 2016, Trump opposed the H1-B visa program that is utilized by foreigners looking for skilled work in the United States (Natarajan, 2018). Not only did Trump oppose the H1-B visa program but his government also began an extreme vetting process of visa applications for international students and issued threats to restrict optional practical training (OPT visa) which allows graduating international students to receive jobs (Dunnett, 2018). Although some of these political developments do not affect international students directly, they are enough to present the United States as an unwelcoming environment towards foreigners and therefore cause a decrease in international student enrollments. The repercussions of international student enrollments can be shown economically and culturally. Therefore, it is the role of the university to create a welcoming institution independent of the government's viewpoint and policy makers must forge change to facilitate the flow of international students.

DISCUSSION 1: REVENUE

One reason as to why the possible continued decline of international student enrollment in American higher education is important is because the financial capital international students produce for a university and US economy. International students are a vital source of financial gain for an institution because most international students are charged full-fees to attend (García & De Lourdes Villarreal, 2014). These full-fees include but are not limited to paying in full for tuition, housing, textbooks, food, air travel, and personal expenses. Due to the status of being

international, these types of students are not qualified for federal loans and scholarships and thereby limiting an international student's access to aid (Lewin, 2012). Many times the aid international students are able to receive are based upon their academic performance and can be highly competitive. The full-fees international students pay go towards the needs of a university such as the expansion of academic programs or more scientific research funding. Nonetheless, the money paid for by the international student allows for a university function. A functioning university allows for it to boost its surrounding economy due to a university's production of human capital and utilization of neighboring resources (Valero, 2016). Therefore it makes sense as to why the million of international students in the United States contribute about \$37 billion to the US economy and support 450,000 jobs (Dunnett, 2018). Continuing on, in the states of California and New York which are homes to most international students have contributions of 3.214 and 2.583 million, respectively, by their international students (Hegarty, 2014). Therefore these large sums of money show the importance of international students within an institution because they are able to produce monetary effects that not only impact revenue of universities but also its surrounding economy. International students are non-immigrants that are allowed to a permanent residence in the United States as defined by the Department of Homeland Security until the completion of their purpose and are expected to return home, unless they are granted an OPT or H1-B Visa to continue working in US (Hegarty, 2014). However, with the impending rhetoric utilized by Trump to limit education and work visas, the important monetary contributions international students have on the university and economy can decrease if fewer international students decide to apply and study in the United States. Less revenue for the university and economy can possibly lead to a less functioning society that can cause reduced job

outlook and possible instances of poverty. Therefore, international students are important for a university and its economy in terms of revenue.

DISCUSSION 2: CULTURE

Although the aspect of money that international students provide to an institution is important in order for an institution to function, the cultural diversity that is brought is just as equally important in order to foster a sense of acceptance. Universities are places to further one's education academically and culturally and therefore includes gaining a global education (Alvis, 2016). This global education does not necessarily include forcing one to study abroad, but it means having the day to day interactions with students with global perspectives, such as international students. By conversing with international students, one is able to gain another perspective on a certain issues that they might not have otherwise received. Gaining a global perspective is becoming so pertinent that the International Baccalaureate (IB) program for high schools that offers international education has grown by 39.3% from 2012 to 2017 ("Facts and figures"). Although the IB program is for high school students only, this portrays the pertinence of gaining a global education that it begins from an early age. Continuing on, these conversations allow students within an institution to gain an understanding of another culture and develop an understanding and respect towards other cultures. The deputy director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers has stated that although the financial implications of international students are "great," the "pedagogical and philosophical reasons are incredibly important" ("U.S. Political Climate"). For many, universities are the first place people begin to see diversity or different types of cultures due to the presence of

international students and faculty. It is pertinent students begin to foster these senses of acceptance and understanding of other cultures before receiving a job and entering the workforce where cultural tolerance is, at most times, expected. Therefore, if fewer international students decide to enroll in American institutions, like the 3% drop that occurred in 2016, it will not significantly affect the cultural diversity within an institution. However, if the drops in international enrollment continue decrease, then there will be fewer international students entering American universities and therefore not allowing new students to experience the cultural diversity international students provide in order to foster their global perspective. It is important to understand that if international enrollments continue to drop, then the political climate is perhaps not changing and in order for the political climate to change, policy makers must create new policies that show that international students are welcome into the United States.

DISCUSSION 3: ROLE OF POLICY MAKERS

Because the current political climate affects international student enrollment, it is pertinent for policy makers to remain at the forefront at this issue just as much as universities in order to best serve international students. Throughout Trump's presidency so far, he has made statements such as advocating for the extreme vetting of visa applications for international students thereby making the process to apply to American universities much more difficult, threatening to abandon optional practical training which allows graduating international students to receive job placements directly after graduation, and tightening rules of H1-B visa applications (Dunnett, 2018). The arduous legal process of trying to obtain a visa in the United States has made frustrated international applicants look elsewhere for educational options

(Hegarty, 2014). For example, in competition with US, international students in Canada are able to work for up to three years post graduation and if graduating with a graduate degree, they can even apply for permanent residency without having to first secure a job (Goralski & Tootoonchi, 2015). By looking to places elsewhere for an abroad education, United States can eventually lose its ranks in being a global education leader; however, this is not anticipated anytime soon.

Nonetheless, if policies are not produced that make the visa application process easier or make foreigners feel welcome, international student enrollment may continuously decrease till the negative effects are shown such as lowered revenues and tolerance on campus. Therefore, it is the duty of policy makers in Congress to push for legislation that does not discriminate solely on the basis of religion or stereotypes such as the travel ban and “building” of a wall. Instead, policy makers should ensure they create legislation that continues the purpose of the United States being the land of the free and a cultural melting pot. This would mean include producing legislation that welcomes foreigners by making obtaining a visa for educational purposes easier. Understandably, there are reasons as to why obtaining a visa is difficult as not every single person can be let into the country if they desired to do so, such as how visa issuances was temporarily impacted for at least five years following the 9/11 attacks (Johnson, 2018). However, a step in the right direction would be at least for legislators to show they are willing to stand up against injustices towards the values of the United States such as welcoming everyone despite race, religion, and creed. If legislators make their stance against policies put into place by the government clear, international students will see that there are people in the US government that are on their side and therefore will want to continue applying to the US institutions for higher

education and hence continue to provide the benefits international students have on US institutions.

DISCUSSION 4: ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES

As policy makers forge change in terms of legislation, it is important for universities to create a welcoming environment that is independent of the government's viewpoint in order to attract international students that provide the benefits of revenue and culture. According to a survey 81% of the international respondents stated that the current political developments in the US have made them uneasy and unsure whether or not that they are welcome on their campus anymore ("U.S. Political Climate"). It is important to understand perceptions people have of the government, whether based on fact or not, can be stronger than facts and therefore universities must play a pivotal role in welcoming all students and especially international students. In order to be the best welcoming place a university can be, institutions should look to other institutions that have established ways to recruit international students in effective ways. For example, University of Southern California, Purdue University, and the University of Illinois each have more than 8,000 international students. These high enrollments of international students are due to strong commitments these universities have in recruiting and retaining their international students (Hegarty, 2014). Purdue University spends thousands of dollars in order to cater to the needs of international students such as having a dedicated office of international student services (Hegarty, 2014). Purdue also issues scholarships to these international students in order to show them that Purdue is not just here for their money but as an institution that truly cares for them. Another example of a university following in suit, is Temple University. Temple University does

not have as many international students as Purdue but similar to Purdue, Temple has a dedicated established office for international students called the Office of International Affairs (“Temple University”). Within this office, Temple launched the #YouAreWelcomeHere week that holds activities to show that Temple is here to support and welcome international students in every way possible. Not only does Temple offer this week of welcoming but has several other ways to benefit its international students such as by spearheading scholarship programs and forming TempALS which pairs an international student with a Temple alumni to support the transition of the international student (“Temple University”). Although Purdue University has the higher amount of international students, all institutions should work to make their international students feel welcome like how Temple University despite their lower numbers of international students. Universities working out of its way to show an international student that they are welcome on campus can resonate deeply within a student and therefore allow them to remain within that university or apply for admission. Having more international students are important to a university in terms of revenue and fostering a culture of diversity and understanding and therefore by universities being open and welcome to these students, these benefits can continue to reap.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In times of political intensity, it is understandable that a government seeks to protect its own citizens; however, when this protection goes over the limits of the true values of its country, it is important policy makers ensure the country's values are held up. For example, in terms of rhetoric and policies put into place by the government under Donald Trump, it is important

policy makers produce legislation that does not discriminate anyone but continues to protect its own citizens whilst maintaining the principles of freedom the United States of America stands on such as welcoming foreigners, including international students. By showing international students that at least part of the government is advocating for them, they will feel welcome enough to apply and join an American institution. However, welcoming an international student does not stop with policy makers as universities must continue create the welcoming environment of inclusivity. Universities are able to do accomplish this by following suit of successful institutions with international student enrollment such as Purdue University and Temple University. Advocating and welcoming international students is important as international students are not only forms of revenue in order for a university to function, but they also serve as the important role in fostering of culture of tolerance within an institution by providing different perspectives for students to learn around them thereby showing the importance international students have on American higher institutions.

CONCLUSION

All in all, international students serve a great purpose in American higher education as they provide revenue to foster academic programs and growth within a university which in turn benefits them and the surrounding economy. Not only in terms of money, but international students serve as the key in producing a culture of understanding and acceptance for students of all backgrounds to learn from that are necessary to move on in the workforce. The diversity that Temple offered is one of the reasons it drew me in. The rhetoric and policies made by the current American government is enough to create a perception of unwelcomeness that can dispel international students from applying to American higher institutions. Although the decreases in enrollment of international students are not expected to decrease drastically, if perception given by the American government is not changed, international students will look elsewhere for a higher education and enrollments may then lead to drastic decreases. In order to change this perception for universities to continue having the benefits of international students, policy makers must halt policies that undermine the values of America and universities must create environments of inclusivity that can attract international students. In doing so, international student populations will continue to rise and reap its benefits in American higher education.

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