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Eyad Alfattal,

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# International students' college choice is different!

Eyad Alfattal

*International Extension Programs, California State University San Bernardino,  
San Bernardino, California, USA*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to evaluate the needs and aspirations of international students studying at a comprehensive university campus in the USA in comparison to domestic students represented by factors that drive students' college choice.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The study opted for a survey design through questionnaire and employed descriptive and inferential statistics to assess differences between international and domestic students.

**Findings** – Findings suggest that international students are different from domestic students on seven choice factors: on-campus housing, recommendation from family, academic reputation, reputation of faculty, participation in intercollegiate sports, printed material or video and need-based financial aid.

**Research limitations/implications** – The study was conducted at a four-year comprehensive public university campus in California. Findings and conclusions may be relevant only to such context.

**Practical implications** – International and domestic students have different preferences and their college choices are affected to different degrees by the varying choice factors. Education administrators and policy makers can have targeted strategic marketing plans that are responsive to the different types populations' needs.

**Originality/value** – This is the first study that compares international students' to domestic students' needs and aspirations when choosing a university campus.

**Keywords** Marketing, Internationalization, Choice factors, College choice, Enrollment management, International higher education

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

International students are viewed by higher education providers mainly as a source of revenue (Altbach *et al.*, 2009; Naidoo, 2010). According to the USA Department of Commerce (2016), international students contributed over \$32 billion to the American economy in 2014. The importance of these students not only involves the amounts of money they bring, but also relates to the enriching cultural and social value they contribute to the host country (Altbach and Knight, 2007; Altbach and Lulat, 1985). Knight (2004) claims that colleges involved in recruiting international students achieve numerous benefits including international profile and reputation building; faculty, student, and staff development; and research and knowledge production. By growing the international student population, a host country's foreign policy primarily seeks to build its human capital and develop strategic alliances with other nations. McGill and Helms (2013) note that the needs and aspirations of these students are not incorporated into forming higher education national and campus level policies. Kotler and Fox (1995) maintain that the more an educational campus satisfies students' needs, the more it builds its reputation, and the more it becomes the campus of choice for prospective applicants.

The study of what attracts students to choose a higher education campus as their study destination falls within the marketing research strand of scientific inquiry (Kotler, 2012). Much of marketing higher education literature has employed the marketing mix theoretical model originally proposed by McCarthy (1960). Research sought to report on motivators that influence students' selection of a particular campus to pursue education (Ivy, 2010). The assumption is that if we know what factors drive students to make their college choices, we can invest in those factors so as to improve access to higher education; make a campus more desirable; and consequently attract higher volume and higher quality



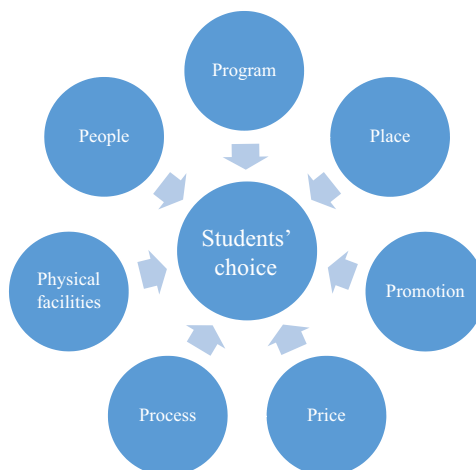
applications (East, 2013). A campus which is able to select from more qualified students with diverse backgrounds is more likely to achieve its educational objectives since qualified, diverse students are the most important asset for quality programs and successful campuses (Davies and Ellison, 1997a, b).

Bohman (2014) observes the scarcity of research into international students' choice of higher education programs in the USA. This paper attempts to fill in some of the gap in the literature; the study reported here examines factors affecting international students' choice in comparison to domestic students in an American context. Following this introduction, this paper proceeds as follows. First, the theoretical framework used in this study is summarized and some relevant literature on American and international students' higher education campus choice is reviewed. Then, the research methods employed are advanced, and the findings are presented and discussed. Finally, limitations to this study are stated and directions for future research are suggested.

### Theoretical framework and literature review

The "Marketing Mix" is a theoretical model used for the analysis of motivators that invite students to enroll in an education program (Ivy, 2008). This model investigates students' needs, requirements and desires (Alfattal, 2016; Coleman, 1994). The marketing mix represents the base of strategic marketing plans since it constitutes "a number of controllable variables that an institution may use to produce the response it wants from its various publics" (Ivy and Naude, 2005, p. 402). In other words, the marketing mix is a strategy model, with a set of controllable elements available for an institution to shape its offerings to students as well as shape students' reactions to those offers (Ivy and Alfattal, 2010; Maringe and Gibbs, 2009). A marketing mix for education that is advanced by Kotler and Fox (1995) and used widely in the literature is the 7Ps: program, place, promotion, price, process, physical facilities and people. These are illustrated in Figure 1 and defined below.

The "Program" component is all the programs and services that the institution makes available. The "Place" element of the marketing mix refers to "the system of program delivery" (Kotler and Fox, 1995, p. 335); that is, the making of education available and accessible in terms of time and physio-geographical distribution of the teaching and learning. The "Promotion" component of the marketing mix is all the methods that institutions use to speak to their target publics to convey the intent, the educational



**Figure 1.**  
Kotler and Fox's  
(1995) education  
marketing mix model

activities and the benefits of their programs. The “Price” component is a key factor as students pay different fee levels and are assisted through different scholarships, grants and loans at different institutions. The “Process” element of the mix is the management of the process of enrollment and the processes of teaching and learning. The “Physical facilities” is how the institution is physically shaped. The “People” component of the marketing mix is the administration, faculty and staff of the institution (Ivy, 2008).

The degree of importance of each of the components of the marketing mix is perceived differently by different student populations (Kotler and Fox, 1995). That is, the factors perceived as important and the degree of importance of those factors in the marketing mix are context dependent; context includes student variables such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic and other background variables (Ivy, 2008; Maringe and Gibbs, 2009). Therefore, in the situation where a college has a strategic objective of inclusion, equal access, and diversification, the needs and desires of the various student populations can be analyzed and responded to differently (Harvey, 1996). Such variance is reported in a study on immigrant students to the USA students by Teranishi *et al.* (2004). The authors study the interaction of college choice with ethnicity and socio-economic class in six Asian Pacific American subgroups. Teranishi *et al.* (2004) claim that socio-economic class affects the distribution of different ethnic groups across different types of institutions (public/private and college/university). Furthermore, the authors propose that place is more important for Filipinos and Southeast Asian Americans than it is for their Japanese and Korean counterparts. Filipinos and Southeast Asian Americans prefer campuses closer to their family’s place of residence. Relatedly, regardless of the socio-economic background of the student’s family, price is not a very important variable in the selection and enrollment process for Japanese, Chinese, and Korean Americans.

In addition to Teranishi *et al.* (2004), there is a plethora of studies into American domestic students’ college choice. For instance, Galotti (1995) conducts a longitudinal study in which he looks at college choice and consequent outcomes including satisfaction; Hossler *et al.* (1989) report on the college choice process; Hossler and Gallagher (1987) empirically test a three-stage model for students’ college choice decision-making process; Pérez (2010) examines the Lantia/o undocumented students’ higher education program choice and access; and Perna *et al.* (2008) report on the role of college counseling in creating college opportunities.

On the other hand, there seems to be scarcity of empirical research into factors affecting international students’ choice of higher education campuses in the USA (Bohman, 2014). One such rare study is McMahon’s (1992). McMahon explores reasons behind international students’ mobility employing the push-pull model, which was originally developed in migration studies by Lee (1966), who investigated human cross-national movement and resettlement. McMahon (1992) highlights the importance of scholarships and claims that there are correlations between home country and host country conditions: home countries have educational “weakness” compared to host countries; and international students mainly come from countries with “weak” yet internationally involved economies (p. 476).

The contexts where there have been more frequent studies into internationalization and factors affecting international students’ choice are the Australian and the Canadian. Pimpa (2005), for example, investigates ten factors influencing Thai students’ choice of Australian universities: campus reputation, program, instruction, job opportunity, facility, faculty reputation, safety, fee, agent recommendation, and alumni. Pimpa claims that the most important factor underpinning Thai students’ choice of an international education destination is university reputation followed by the quality of program. The least two important factors, on the other hand, are agent recommendation and alumni. These findings are partly in line with a study in the Canadian context by Chen (2007). Chen investigates the process of decision making and factors attracting graduate international students to select a country and a campus as their destination. Chen incorporates the process

models of Florida (2002), Hossler and Gallagher (1987), Mazzarol and Soutar (2002), and Neice and Braun (1977) and advances a modified push-pull framework for analysis. Chen's findings claim that reputation and availability of scholarships, as well as the cultural and demographic environments of the campus and surrounding city, are the most important factors shaping students' choice. Finally, Chen and Zimitat (2006) attempt to examine whether Taiwanese students favor Australian or American higher education institutions. The authors use the theory of planned behavior originally proposed by Ajzen and Fishbein (1975). Chen and Zimitat propose that their subjects' intentions to study abroad are interdependent on internal and external motivators that are mainly shaped by students' attitudes to behaviors. Subjects favor Australia as their destination country because they believe that Australia is a strong economic power and has a high quality education system. On the other hand, students who select American institutions are mainly influenced by family and friends (Chen and Zimitat, 2006).

As illustrated above, the review of the literature suggests that studies into higher education campus choice report on international students in isolation of their domestic counterparts. Comparisons, however, are helpful for higher education administrators and policy makers as campuses typically provide services for both types of populations. Leadership teams of campuses may be informed of the degree to which, if any, international students' needs are different or similar. Such knowledge can help set strategic recruitment plans that may target increasing enrollment for either or both types of students.

## Methods

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the needs and aspirations of international students in comparison to domestic students represented by factors that drive students' college choice. The weight of factors is operationalized as how important those factors are as perceived by students. Survey methods through questionnaires were employed and data were collected from a four year and above comprehensive public university campus located in California. There were a total of 1,304 usable questionnaires that were collected ( $n = 1,304$ ). The demographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table I. The sample consisted of 63 percent female students and 37 percent male students. In total, 55 percent of the sample were underrepresented minority who were defined here as African American, Latino, and Indigenous ethnicities. The remaining 45 percent were non-underrepresented students. International students were distributed between underrepresented and non-underrepresented

Characteristic	Frequency	Percent
Female	928	71
Male	376	29
<i>Class level</i>		
Lower division undergraduate	256	20
Upper division undergraduate	806	62
PB/graduate	242	19
<i>College of major</i>		
Arts and letters	235	18
Business and public administration	199	15
Education	93	7
Natural sciences	346	27
Social and behavioral	404	31
Sciences university studies	27	2
Total	1,304	

**Table I.**  
Demographic characteristics of the sample

groups as they marked this field in the questionnaire according to how they perceived themselves. The sample included lower division students who made 27 percent of the total sample, upper division students 59 percent, and post-baccalaureate/graduate students 14 percent. Finally, 17 percent of the students in the sample were studying in arts and letters, 19 percent business and public administration, 6 percent education, 28 percent natural sciences, 28 percent social and behavioral sciences, and 6 percent other university programs.

The research instrument was originally developed by the California State University system under the name student needs and perception survey. In all, 18 variables were studied that affected students' enrollment decision. Students used a three-point scale to respond, and options were coded "1" as "important", "2" as "somewhat important", and "3" as "not important at all", with a "not applicable" option. As the independent variable in this study, students' status, is a nominal one and has only two categories, either international or domestic, and the dependent variables are three-point Likert scale ordinal variables, the suitable tests for this study are bivariate analysis: cross-tabulation and Pearson's  $\chi^2$ ; each dependent variable is studied in relationship to the independent variable separately (Gorard, 2003). While cross-tabulation revealed means in relationship to expected values if there is no relationship between students' status and factors affecting their choice,  $\chi^2$  with a cutoff point of  $p < 0.05$  is used to test if there is significant difference between the groups (Black, 1999; Field, 2013; Muijs, 2011).

## Results

Descriptive statistics means and standard deviations are presented in Table II. Table II shows overall, international and domestic students' responses to the variables that affect college choice. Overall the most important three factors in college choice are availability of major ( $M = 1.22$ ,  $SD = 0.500$ ), affordability of campus ( $M = 1.25$ ,  $SD = 0.525$ ), and being admitted ( $M = 1.29$ ,  $SD = 0.567$ ). On the other hand, the overall least important three factors are: participation in intercollegiate sports ( $M = 2.63$ ,  $SD = 0.656$ ), availability of on-campus housing ( $M = 2.44$ ,  $SD = 0.781$ ), and campus size ( $M = 2.28$ ,  $SD = 0.779$ ). The different means across the two groups for all variables measured are demonstrated in Figure 2. In addition, Table III lists the factors in order of importance for each of the groups.

Test of Pearson's  $\chi^2$  produced results for seven dependent variables that had  $p$ -value below the cutoff point of  $p < 0.05$  indicating significant differences between international and domestic students. These were: on-campus housing ( $\chi^2 = 7.146$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.028$ ); recommendation from family ( $\chi^2 = 7.262$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.026$ ); academic reputation ( $\chi^2 = 7.612$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.022$ ); reputation of faculty ( $\chi^2 = 8.882$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ); participation in intercollegiate sports ( $\chi^2 = 25.854$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ); printed material or video ( $\chi^2 = 6.174$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.046$ ); and opportunity to obtain need-based financial aid ( $\chi^2 = 6.146$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = 0.046$ ). Pearson's  $\chi^2$   $p$ -values are illustrated in Table IV.

## Discussion

Since international and domestic students may have different needs and preferences, education administrators and policy makers may find this study helpful in shaping and developing their programs that may service both types of populations. The following discussion is organized under seven headings that correspond to the marketing mix framework.

### *Program*

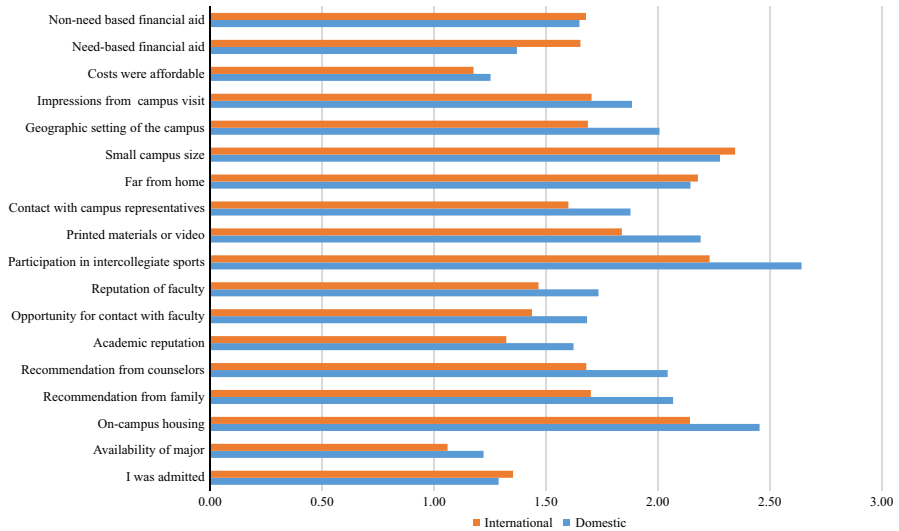
Four subcomponents of program mix are evaluated through the survey. These are: availability of major, on-campus housing, academic reputation, and participation in intercollegiate sports. Not all program subcomponents are equally important across the groups. This confirms

Student status	I was admitted	Availability of major	On-campus housing	Recommendation from family	Recommendation from counselors	Academic reputation	Opportunity for contact with Faculty	Reputation of faculty	Participation in intercollegiate sports
Domestic	Mean	1.22	2.45	2.07	2.04	1.62	1.68	1.73	2.64
	SD	0.504	0.778	0.741	0.766	0.731	0.744	0.745	0.653
International	Mean	1.35	2.14	1.70	1.68	1.32	1.44	1.47	2.23
	SD	0.597	0.803	0.702	0.690	0.653	0.716	0.776	0.652
Total	Mean	1.29	2.44	2.06	2.03	1.61	1.68	1.73	2.63
	SD	0.567	0.781	0.742	0.766	0.731	0.744	.746	0.656
Student status	Printed materials or video	Contact with campus representatives	Far from home	Small campus size	Geographic setting of the campus	Impressions from campus visit	Costs were affordable	Need-based financial Aid	Non-need-based financial aid
Domestic	Mean	1.88	2.15	2.28	2.01	1.88	1.25	1.37	1.65
	SD	0.777	0.861	0.780	0.801	0.809	0.528	0.687	0.793
International	Mean	1.84	2.18	2.34	1.69	1.70	1.18	1.65	1.68
	SD	0.779	0.863	0.721	0.780	0.775	0.387	0.797	0.723
Total	Mean	1.87	2.15	2.28	2.00	1.88	1.25	1.38	1.65
	SD	0.779	0.861	0.779	0.802	0.809	0.525	0.690	0.791

Note:  $n = 1,304$

**Table II.**  
Means of factors influencing international and domestic students' choice





**Figure 2.** Factors influencing international students' choice of American college in comparison to American students

Rank	Domestic students	Rank	International students
1	Availability of major	1	Availability of major
2	Costs were affordable	2	Costs were affordable
3	I was admitted	3	Academic reputation
4	Need-based financial aid	4	I was admitted
5	Academic reputation	5	Opportunity for contact with faculty
6	Non-need-based financial aid	6	Reputation of faculty
7	Opportunity for contact with faculty	7	Contact with campus representative
8	Reputation of faculty	8	Need-based financial Aid
9	Contact with campus representative	9	Non-need-based financial aid
10	Impressions from campus visit	10	Recommendation from counselors
11	Geographic setting of the campus	11	Geographic setting of the campus
12	Recommendation from counselors	12	Recommendation from family
13	Recommendation from family	13	Impressions from campus visit
14	Far from home	14	Printed materials or video
15	Printed materials or video	15	On-campus housing
16	Small campus size	16	Far from home
17	On-campus housing	17	Participation in intercollegiate sports
18	Participation in intercollegiate sports	18	Small campus size

**Table III.** Factors affecting college choice in order of importance for domestic and international students

arguments suggested by Ivy (2008) that the importance of the marketing mix components and subcomponents are different in different contexts and to different audiences. For instance, overwhelmingly, both international (88.6 percent) and domestic (80.8 percent) students perceive availability of major as an important factor in their college choice. In fact, this factor is ranked as the most important variable influencing the decision to select a campus. This suggests that campuses that provide a wider spectrum of programs are more likely to attract both types of students. As for on-campus housing, only 10.8 percent domestic and 20.0 percent international students think that this factor is important. The significant difference between the groups with regard to this variable may be explained by the fact that as international students move from overseas to their American college, they perceive it safe and convenient to book and move into

**Table IV.**  
List of *Chi* test values  
for Difference between  
international and  
domestic students

18 independent variables	Pearson's $\chi^2$ ( $p < 0.05$ )
1. Admitted to college	0.635
2. Availability of major	0.186
3. On-campus housing	<i>0.028*</i>
4. Recommendation from a family	<i>0.026*</i>
5. Recommendation from school/counselor	0.063
6. Academic reputation	<i>0.022*</i>
7. Opportunity for contact with faculty	0.073
8. Reputation of faculty	<i>0.012*</i>
9. Participation in intercollegiate sports	<i>0.000*</i>
10. Printed materials or video	<i>0.046*</i>
11. Contact with campus representative prior to admission	0.166
12. Far from home	0.967
13. Small campus size	0.613
14. Geographic setting of campus	0.073
15. Impression from campus visit	0.514
16. Costs were affordable for me and family	0.447
17. Opportunity to obtain need-based financial aid	<i>0.046*</i>
18. Opportunity to obtain non-need-based financial aid	0.219

**Notes:** Figures are rounded to three decimals and significant variables. \* $p < 0.05$ , are italic

college managed housing. Domestic students, on the other hand, may have other options, since they may prefer to live with their family and commute to campus or live in private accommodations. Moving to academic reputation, Chen (2007) suggests that this is the most important factor for college choice for international students. Similarly, in this study it is found important although it is not the most influential factor. Furthermore, there is a significant difference between groups; the importance weight of this factor as perceived by international students is higher than the case for their domestic counterparts. Academic reputation ranks fifth for domestic and third for international students. The higher importance level perceived by international students may be relevant to their need for college degrees that would be recognized in their context as they go back to their home countries (Ham and Hayduk, 2003). Finally, the fourth subcomponent of program, participation in intercollegiate sports, is perceived significantly as more important for international students than for domestic ones. This probably relates to international students' need to be involved in campus activities other than their classes. Domestic students may have social networks and activities off campus with which they are able to engage; on the other hand, international students are generally more dependent on their college recreational and social activities (Guoa and Chase, 2011).

### Place

Two components of how place affects students' college choice is assessed by the survey. These are: far from home and geographic setting of the campus or surrounding city. Neither international nor domestic students think that distance from home is important,  $M = 2.18$ ,  $M = 2.15$ , respectively. These data contradict Teranishi *et al.*'s (2004) findings that place is an important factor in college choice. Within the context of this study, domestic students prefer far campuses where they have the option to move out of their parents' homes and start an independent college life. For international students, on the other hand, being far from home is a taken for granted condition as they travel to their American college from overseas. It is still arguable, however, that some international students from Europe or the Middle East, for instance, could have chosen to study in the UK, which is more proximate to their home countries. Similar to distance from home, the geographic setting of the campus or

surrounding city is not an influential factor for domestic students as only 29.3 percent of them think it is important. Again, international students perceive this factor differently; only 17.1 percent of these students see that it is not important. This may be explained by international students' expectations to access communities, services and activities around their campus (Abubakar *et al.*, 2010).

### *Promotion*

The promotion mix is assessed through how prominent printed materials or video are in making decisions to select a college. The degree of importance of this variable is perceived as significantly higher by international students in comparison to domestic ones,  $M = 1.84$ ,  $M = 2.19$ . In the case of international students, 34 percent of respondents believe that it was important and 34.3 percent think it is somewhat important. Nonetheless, 18.3 percent of domestic students perceive it important and 30.6 percent somewhat important. The significant difference between the groups may relate to international students' dependency on printed material and video to collect information about a campus and envision the environment of their future study abroad experience. Domestic students, on the other hand, are more likely to have access to visit a campus before they make their choice.

### *Price*

Three subcomponents of price are investigated across the two groups: costs were affordable, opportunities to obtain need-based financial aid, and opportunity to obtain non-need-based financial aid. The affordability of costs is the second most important factor in college choice across the 18 variables measured in this study after availability of program discussed above for domestic as well as international students. Ivy and Naude (2005) have stressed the importance of price in students' college selection and further argued that price affected perceptions of value and quality. The percentage of students who marked this variable as important is 80.0 percent for international students and 75.53 percent for domestic ones and there is no significant difference between the groups. Need-based financial aid is also important for both groups with domestic students placing more weight on this factor,  $M = 1.65$  and  $M = 1.37$ , respectively. In fact, there is a significant difference between the groups on this factor which may be explained by the fact that domestic students have more access to such aid through state and federal programs while international students are restricted to limited scholarships. In comparison, the difference between the means for non-need-based aid was small, ( $M$  difference = 0.03), with both groups seeing this factor as less important.

### *Process*

To reiterate, the process mix, as defined by Kotler and Fox (1995), relates to how admission and teaching are managed. Hence, three subcomponents of this mix are examined: admitted to college (overall  $M = 1.29$ ), opportunity for contact with faculty ( $M = 1.68$ ), and contact with campus representative prior to admission ( $M = 1.87$ ). Amongst the 18 subcomponents evaluated, being admitted is the third most important variable for domestic students and the fourth for international students. The campus where this study was conducted is a public four-year non-selective university where domestic students are largely first generation college students and come from the region around the campus. They may have made a single application for one college and appreciated being admitted. For international students, accessible admission is also important as requirements such as high scores in TOEFL, SAT, GMAT, or GRE in more selective campuses are normally challenging for non-native speakers of English language (Vu and Vu, 2013).

Moving now to opportunity to contact with faculty, the campus surveyed in this study has a teaching focused mission rather than research; it has a ratio of 26 students to one faculty member. This is found to be an influential factor in students' choice especially for international

students; 62.9 percent international students and 44.2 percent domestic students perceive this factor as important. Lastly, contact with a campus representative prior to admission also has a relatively heavy importance weight in comparison to other college choice motivators. In fact, only 14.3 percent international and 14.9 percent domestic students think that this variable is not important at all. Unlike the case in Pimpa (2005), international students in this study seem to appreciate communication and guidance for admission.

### *Physical facility*

Within the physical facility mix, two subcomponents were investigated: small campus size and impression from campus visit. Campus size is one of the least important variables; only 11.4 percent international students and 17.8 percent domestic students perceive this factor important in their college choice. The impression from a campus visit is relevant to students' decisions as 37.1 percent international students and 33.6 percent domestic students think that it is important. After international students arrive in America, they may transfer between colleges based on the architecture and facilities such as car parking, libraries, eateries, and recreational centers available on different campuses.

### *People*

The seventh and final marketing mix in this study is people. This mix is the most important in Ivy and Alfattal's (2010) context. In this study, none of the subcomponents measured was among the five variables rated as most important. Recommendation from family was significantly different between the groups as 37.1 percent international students and 19.9 percent domestic students think that this factor is important in their college choice. This may relate to the previous observation that a good number of domestic students in the context of this study are first generation college students whose families may not have been able to provide information for college selection. By contrast, international students normally seek advice from family and extended family on different study abroad options before they choose their destination (Lee and Morrish, 2012). This links to the second subcomponent of people mix, recommendation from school counselor. Again, international students seem to value advice from schools counselors and sometimes education abroad agents who provide information about different destinations and the conditions relevant to those destinations (Zhang and Hagedorn, 2014). The mean for international students on this variable is 1.68, which is very close to the mean for recommendation from family, 1.70. In comparison, means for domestic students are also relatively close to each other with 2.07 for family and 2.04 for academic counselors.

The last subcomponent of people mix is reputation of faculty. The study reveals a significant difference between how international and domestic students perceive the impact of this factor. On this variable, 60.0 percent of international students think that it is important, 11.4 percent think it is somewhat important, and 28.6 percent think it is not important at all or irrelevant to their college selection. In all, 39.9 percent domestic students, on the other hand, indicate that reputation of faculty is important, 33.6 percent indicate it is somewhat important, and 26.6 percent think it is not important at all or irrelevant. International students' perception of the importance of this factor may be linked to the value these students placed on academic reputation. As discussed above, international students seek to obtain foreign degrees that are recognized in the context of their home countries. Another explanation for this variable relatively high weight of importance is relevant to faculty profiles; students may have been encouraged to choose their college because of background similarity between them and faculty as the campus where this study is conducted hosts many members of faculty from international origins. This is in line with Edwards and Whitty (1997) findings that the presence of people of similar religious, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds in a college positively affected prospective students' choice.

**Study limitations**

Similar to other research into education, this study has some limitations. The main limitation is relevant to the fact that the research instrument used ignores some possible subcomponents of the marketing mix. It is suggested that more mix subcomponents are researched in further studies such as online course offerings, campus website design and accessibility, and class time options and frequency. A second limitation to the present study is that it was conducted at a single type of higher education institution, a four year and above comprehensive public university campus in California. Findings and conclusions may be relevant only to such context. The final limitation to this study evolved as the discussion section of this paper was being developed; findings are explained and discussed based on literature in contexts other than the USA as well as on the author's own experiences in international education leadership. Future similar studies may consider using explanatory mixed methods design where qualitative data can be collected to further validate and explain quantitative findings.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, this paper investigated factors affecting students' choice of a higher education campus as their study destination. The objective was to compare the weight of those factors between international and domestic students at an American setting. The marketing mix was used as the theoretical model for the analysis and a number of relevant studies were reviewed.

Previous researchers (Harvey, 1996; Simões and Soares, 2010) have investigated either population leading to general conclusions. This study is unique as it provides a more comprehensive understanding of both populations at the same time. Furthermore, this study derives some of its importance from the setting where it was carried out as there has been paucity of research in the context of the USA. McMahon's (1992) was conducted over 20 years prior to this study, and its claims did not seem to endure the test of time. McMahon proposes that international students come to the USA mainly from countries of weak economies and weak educational systems; thus, students are motivated to select American campuses by the quality of American education and strength of American economy. This is not the case at the time this study was conducted as Institute of International Education (2015) reports; among the main places of origin of international students in 2014/2015 academic year were Canada, China, Germany, Japan and South Korea. These countries are ahead of the USA in some aspects of their economy and education. According to the 2014/2015 Competitiveness Report, for instance, Canada ranks the 11th and Germany the 12th internationally in the quality of higher education and training systems while the USA ranks the 27th. In addition, according to the same report, Japan and South Korea are ahead of the USA in their quality of math and science education.

The results of this study found differences between international and domestic students with regard to their perceived weight of importance of factors influencing their American college choice. Seven factors within the marketing mix subcomponents of program, people, promotion, and price were significantly different. Domestic students' choices were more influenced by the availability of need-based financial aid. These students could be eligible for federal and state support in the shape of grants and loans, as well as other institutional support programs; and these students' decisions were more dependent on the availability of such aid. On the other hand, need-based financial aid was found to be of less importance to international students who seemed to expect that they would need to afford to pay for their own study expenses. Furthermore, international students' college choices were more reliant on factors such as a college reputation of quality and its consequent word-of-mouth. Reputation was more important for international students who seemed to need their degrees to be of high recognition upon their return to their countries. Relatedly, international students were more influenced by recommendations by family who might have experienced international education before and who might provide advice based on (dis)satisfaction with their

previous experiences. In addition to these, international students perceived printed materials and videos, availability of on-campus housing, and availability of opportunities to participate in recreational activities or intercollegiate sports to be of higher importance for their college choice compared to domestic students. International students were more dependent on printed materials and videos because these students typically needed to learn about their future college in the USA while they were in their home countries. Printed materials and videos represented more important communication channels to international students compared to domestic ones, who probably employed other methods to collect information about their college. Finally, international students were more likely to appreciate on-campus life represented by opportunities to live on-campus and participate in on-campus recreational activities. This could be explained by the fact that international students were less likely to have family and other social networks on and around their colleges, which they could employ to provide for such recreational and social engagement needs.

Thus, strategic internationalization and diversification plans and initiatives of colleges may need to invest mostly in international branding and reputation building, on-campus housing for international students, social activities, and printed materials and video. American colleges are invited to pay closer attention to international students' needs and aspirations, as these are in numerous ways distinct from those of the domestic population.

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### About the author

Eyad Alfattal manages international programs at the California State University, San Bernardino. Eyad is a Researcher and a Specialist in Internationalization and Marketing Education. He has experienced international education in different roles, as a Student studying abroad, as an Educator of international students, and as an Administrator and Leader of international programs. These experiences were in different contexts including Syria, Turkey, the UK, and the USA. Eyad Alfattal can be contacted at: [ealfattal@csusb.edu](mailto:ealfattal@csusb.edu); [eyadfattal@yahoo.com](mailto:eyadfattal@yahoo.com)

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