

Paper 8

Coming to America: Sixth Form Students' Reasons for Considering Undergraduate Study in the United States

Schweitzer, B. and Mather, P. Ohio State University, USA

Abstract

The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to understand the increased number of secondary school age British students considering undergraduate study in the United States. The study included events and experiences that influenced participants' interest and decisions concerning pursuing undergraduate study in the United States. It further explored the role played by various people in the students' lives: parents, friends, careers advisors, media, etc. The study included a purposeful sample of 12 self-identified British students completing their A-levels education. Additionally, interviews with nine international students completing their A-levels education at a school in the United Kingdom were included. The study also included interviews with three careers advisors and the former head of the U.S./U.K. Fulbright Commission. The interviews took place at three boarding schools in England over a one-week period.

The following conclusions were drawn after an in-depth analysis of the transcripts of the individual interviews and biographical questionnaires. The students in the United Kingdom who are considering undergraduate study in the United States are interested in universities in the United States based upon their perception of the quality of education, the ability to delay choosing a major, the opportunity for a liberal arts education and their perception of the availability of scholarships and other financial assistance. In this study we explored the events and experiences that influenced participants' interest and decisions concerning pursuing undergraduate study in the United States. We further explored the role that the various people in the students' lives played in the process: parents, friends, careers advisors, media etc. Four major research questions were explored and are explained further below. The study included a purposeful sample of 12 self-identified British students and nine international students completing their A-levels education at schools in England. The study also included interviews with three careers advisors and the former head of the U.S./U.K. Fulbright Commission. Of the self-identified British students, three participants were female and nine were male among the international students five participants were female and four were male. The interviews took place at three boarding schools in England over a one-week period. In addition, the interviews with the nine international students were included separately.

Through an in-depth analysis of the transcripts of the individual interviews at Christ's Hospital, Eton College and CATS Cambridge and biographical questionnaires, three overarching themes emerged from the data. These included: (a) characteristics about universities in the U.S.; (b) people and experiences that have influenced their decisions; and (c) considerations that will influence their ultimate decision. Under these three themes, sub themes emerged. Information about all three schools will be discussed below.

Research Question 1

1. *What processes and experiences relate to British students' interest in undergraduate study in the United States?*

Various themes emerged when exploring this research question. The overarching themes of the characteristics of education in the United States and people and experiences that have influenced their decisions informed this question.

“You can get more knowledge straight away instead of focusing on just one area”

Under the first theme of characteristics of education the students consistently looked to their experience with the educational system in the United Kingdom. This experience oftentimes pointed to some dissatisfaction with higher education policies and practices in the United Kingdom. Students were specifically dissatisfied with having to declare their major immediately, taking only courses within their major. They also expressed dissatisfaction with the overall student life experience and the lack of opportunities to participate in activities outside of their major.

This led students to identify characteristics about the higher education system in the United States that influenced their interest in considering undergraduate study in the United States. Specifically, students identified the flexibility in the degree programs in the United States. They liked the idea of liberal arts electives. The idea that they could take a diverse array of courses, and not just courses in their major area appealed to them.

In addition to the desire for a liberal arts degree program, students also identified student life as being a reason that they are considering undergraduate study in the United States. In the United Kingdom, student life is much different. The students' perceive that in the United Kingdom they generally focus only on their courses and possibly a few clubs. The wide array of options found in the United States include sororities and fraternities, varsity athletics and living learning communities in campus housing.

Students in this study also identified the quality of education as being a reason that they are considering undergraduate study in the United States. The students in this study believe that their education in their A-levels has been first rate. They believe that many of the universities in the United Kingdom do not offer the same high-class educational experience. They perceive that universities in the United States can offer them a similar level of education to what they currently have. There is a perception that the higher education system in the United Kingdom is inferior to the higher education system in the United States.

The next major theme that informed the answer to this research question relates to the experiences and influences that motivated these students to consider undergraduate study in the United States. Some of these influences include specific common characteristics observed in each student. The students in this study have an adventurous spirit. The students that participated in this study were observed to be extraordinarily outgoing. Many of the students felt that going to a university in a different culture would enhance their educational experience.

Media also played into some students' experiences. Although this was not a major contributing factor, it was prevalent many times in the conversation when I was no longer recording. Students referred to movies, television shows and celebrities to illustrate their vision of undergraduate study in the United States. The media did not seem to be the major factor; however the media helps shape what these students' conceptions and expectations concerning undergraduate study in the United States. Many of the students pointed to their experience of visiting the United States as a major influence. Specifically, the students who have already visited universities in the United States seem even more enthusiastic about studying in the United States than the students who have not yet visited. CATS Cambridge

In the findings from the interview transcripts, the CATS Cambridge students identified experiences with the educational system in the United Kingdom and their experience in their home country and how these experiences relate to their interest in applying to school in the United States. These experiences with the educational systems at home and in the United Kingdom make the liberal arts system found in the United States appealing to many of the students. Most of the students felt that the educational system in the United Kingdom made them feel that they were being pushed into a box. For most of these CATS Cambridge students, it is not a matter of them applying to U.S. schools over schools in the United Kingdom. They are simply applying to schools in the United States in addition to schools in the United Kingdom.

Since the education system in the United Kingdom requires students to choose a major early on, indecision about their particular professional and life goals was also a major reason cited for considering the U.S. higher education system in addition to the U.K. higher education system. The students who are interested in studying in the United States have a wide cross-section of interests. They are not yet ready to commit to a specific major.

The student-participants at CATS Cambridge were not originally from the United Kingdom. Thus had generally more extensive cross-cultural experience than did the other interview participants. The chance to experience another culture was important for some of the students. Many of the students felt that going to a university in a different culture would enhance their educational experience. Some of the students' motivations were specifically to experience American culture. Their experience in England has influenced them to explore yet another culture. Additionally, for some of the students, their experience in their home

country has pushed them to want to come to the United States. Some communicated a hope to experience the “wealth” of the United States and others sought to experience the political climate of a democracy.

The students at CATS Cambridge have been influenced by a number of different people in their lives. They stated that various friends and family played roles in their decision to consider undergraduate study in the United States. There are also a number of external forces influencing their decisions such as finances, affordability of universities, scholarship opportunities and prior travel in the United States. If these students stay in the United Kingdom for undergraduate study, they will have to pay a higher tuition rate because they are deemed international. As a result, many of these students view undergraduate study in the United States as a more affordable option. There is a perception that schools in the United States give more scholarships than schools in the United Kingdom. Some were influenced by their visits to the United States and their desire to return.

Research Question 2

2. *How do particular students' characteristics (e.g., socio-economic class, race, gender, etc) relate to their interest in studying in the United States?*

Socio-economic class was a major determinant concerning which universities students applied to and how they viewed where they were applying. The students at Eton College come from mainly upper class backgrounds. For the most part, they apply to universities based on their interests; financing their education is a secondary thought. They seemed more interested in the prestige that a university education at an Ivy League institution could offer than in exploring the wide variety of upper tier universities available. In fact, if a university does not have an internationally recognized name by the general population in the U.K., they did not believe it would be of value to attend there.

The students at Christ's Hospital chose target universities based upon affordability. Specifically, when the interviews concluded, one student explained that she was only applying to institutions with needs blind admission policies. The only university she was applying to that did not have a needs blind admission policy was the University of North Carolina (UNC). She was applying to UNC in hopes of receiving a full-ride scholarship (Moorehead Cain) and having all of her education subsidized by the university. Three out of the four students interviewed at Christ's Hospital were applying to UNC to the Moorehead Cain Scholar's program.

In essence, participants' socio-economic backgrounds related primarily to how they would make their final decision. Further, it also relates to their consideration of possible colleges and universities. The students' socio-economic status played a major influence on colleges and universities they are willing to consider and how they are going to go about making their final decision. Those students from upper class homes were interested in Ivy League schools without concern for cost. Those from lower income families considered schools based on the ability to received financial aid and scholarships.

CATS Cambridge

The students at CATS Cambridge come from privileged backgrounds with the exception of one student. Their parents are willing to pay large amounts of money for their education. However, the students in this study come from a variety of different cultures. These cultural backgrounds play a role in their interest in studying in the United States and the types of colleges and universities they are considering.

Two of the students in this study are from China. When asked where they are considering undergraduate study, they both identified only Ivy League institutions. Adam explained that his parents sent him to CATS Cambridge because of its proximity to Cambridge University. In spite of being told by the personnel at CATS Cambridge that attending there does not have an impact on being accepted at Cambridge, his parents felt that a school this close to Cambridge must have close ties to the university, thus helping his chances for admission to Cambridge University upon completion of his A-levels. The status that the university can add to his resume is important to his family.

The students from Europe were less flexible about location. They explained that they were primarily considering Ivy League institutions located in the United States. All of the students from Europe want to return home after they finish undergraduate study. As such, they believe that an education at any school outside of the Ivy League will not help them find employment at home.

The two students from Africa were much more open to investigating a variety of institutions. When I spoke with each of them, they were more interested in studying in the United States for the experience of being in the United States. They were less concerned about the prestige of the school and more concerned about gaining the experience of living in a democracy and a developed nation. They both explained that going home for university was not really an option. They were adamantly opposed to studying in England for their undergraduate degree.

Research Question 3

1. *Who and what influence students to consider undergraduate study in the United States?*

All of the students stated that they always knew they were going to university; however, the idea of going to university in the United States was a fairly recent notion. Many of the students identified the information being presented at their school as being a reason they were considering undergraduate study in the United States. The presentation of information occurred in the form of university representatives visiting and presenting information on their university.

"I don't want to be sceptical but I'm pretty sure that the universities in Great Britain might be degrading"

Students in this study identified many different characteristics of undergraduate education in the United States that influenced their decision to consider looking at universities in the United States. Many of the students started to consider undergraduate study in the United States after learning and hearing about the prestige that follows an education from a university in the United States. Additionally, some participants began to consider undergraduate study in the United States because they felt that their major would be better taught at an American university.

The prestige of universities in the United States seems particularly important for the students attending Eton College. Attending a prestigious boarding school, they have come to expect a certain level of prestige to be attached to their education. The students at Eton perceive their education as elite and prestigious and they are unwilling to exchange that prestige for matters such as economical issues in choosing a post-secondary institution. Because they perceive that the universities in the United Kingdom are not as good as they once were, they are interested in looking elsewhere to get the educational experience they have come to expect.

"I want to experience more of the world."

The adventurous spirit described in question one can also be applied here. The students cited a desire to see more of the world. Without this spirit of wanting to see more and willingness to leave their home country to see and learn, they would never consider going outside of England for undergraduate study. Friends and family oftentimes influenced students. Many of the students have extended family living in the United States. Some of the students' families want for them to experience a different culture. As result, some family members are encouraging them to look at schools outside of the United Kingdom and more specifically in the United States.

The students were questioned about what kind of information they have received thus far in the process. The information varied between the two schools. The students at Eton College had the benefit of admissions professionals visiting their school. Additionally, the students at Eton had many fellow classmates who have already matriculated to universities in the United States. The students that attend Christ's Hospital went about looking for information in a different way because they did not have the benefit of foreign admissions officers coming to their campus. Their careers advisor was the first point of

contact in obtaining information about studying in the United States. Additionally, students looked at websites and then would make contact with the schools in which they were interested.

Many of the themes found in the interviews helped to inform the answer to this question. Simply put, family members, careers advisors and other outside influences helped manifest students' interest in considering undergraduate study in the United States. From there, the information received and the schools they consider vary based upon their educational background and the resources available.

CATS Cambridge

Outside influences play an important part in student's decision to consider undergraduate study in the United States. The influences cited in this study include friends, family and overall cost of study. For some, friends are a major influence in encouraging student's interest in undergraduate study in the United States. Some of the students started to consider undergraduate study in the United States when a friend suggested it. International students in this study have to pay international student fees at the universities in the United Kingdom. If they come to the United States, they have pay tuition and fees. The students in this study are under the impression that United States institutions offer more scholarships and financial aid than are offered in the United Kingdom. As a result, when they started considering paying for university, they examined an array of options, including undergraduate study in the United States.

Another influence cited is the influence of family. Many of the students were encouraged by family members to consider different universities in the United States. Some have extended family living in the United States and one student has a sibling attending university in America.

Research Question 4

3. *How do British students anticipate coming to a decision whether or not to pursue undergraduate study in the United States?*

The students at the two different colleges where the interviews took place come from different and diverse backgrounds. The students at Eton College mainly come from privileged backgrounds while the students at Christ's Hospital come from lower income backgrounds. All of the students interviewed at Christ's Hospital were on scholarship and extremely thankful for the opportunity they were given. Students were questioned about how they would make their ultimate decision when faced with whether or not to go to university in the United States. For the students attending Christ's Hospital the ultimate decision came down to finances. For the students at Eton, the final decision comes down to prestige and where they are accepted. Although some of the students at Eton were only applying to universities in the United States, the sentiment seemed to be universal. If they were unable to gain admission into a top school in the United States, then they were willing to stay in the United Kingdom for university. For the most part, they plan to attend Cambridge or Oxford if they stay in England.

CATS Cambridge

The participants were directly questioned about how they were going to make the ultimate decision. The students said they would first examine where they have been accepted and then weigh the options. The factors they will consider include quality of education, cost and feasibility.

Conclusions

Throughout the research literature there was a consistent pattern. Extant scholarship suggested that when selecting a university important factors affecting student choice include location, academic reputation, programme of study, and future employment opportunities (Moogan & Baron, 2003). Veloutsou (2004)

explained that potential students consider other attributes such as reputation, location, infrastructure, costs, and quality of life. Previous scholarship on student decision-making focused on decisions students make within their own countries. This study expands the literature, by extending this to the increasing phenomenon of international enrolment in particular, British students interested in studying in the United States.

Patton (2000) conducted an exploratory study examining “What characteristics of degree programme do overseas students particularly consider when deciding whether or not to enrol?” Participants frequently cited “recognition of the degree in their home country, the courses offered, fees, the duration of course programmes, course flexibility, the availability of part time coursework, and the prestige and reputation of the university” (Patton, 2000, p. 347). Additional factors included, “concerns about government, business, and industry recognition of the course ,as well as relevancy, time factors, and reputation” (Patton, 2000, p.347).

The findings of this study support the existing research literature as follows:

1. The students in the United Kingdom who are considering undergraduate study in the United States are interested in universities in the United States based upon their perceived prestige and quality.
2. For some students, the final decision will come down to scholarships and affordability. Some of the students are basing their university selection on the prevalence of need blind admissions policies.
3. Students believe that the quality of life in United States higher education is superior to that offered in the U.K.
4. Students are looking at schools in the United States because they believe the schools infrastructure is better than the schools found in the United Kingdom. Specifically, they believe that more money is invested in schools in the United States allowing the schools to offer more opportunities and provide better facilities.
5. Students are primarily looking at schools with international reputations because they believe schools that do not have an international reputation will hinder their future employment opportunities.
6. International students are interested in studying in a developed nation with a democratic government.

In addition to supporting the existing research literature, additional themes emerged.

1. All of the students in the study identified the ability to delay choosing their major as being a contributing factor in their decision to consider undergraduate study in the United States. The idea of liberal arts degree programs offered in the United States is very appealing to these students.
2. Another difference is in the area of student life. The students in this study were intrigued and persuaded to consider undergraduate study in the United States based upon the university life culture found in the United States.
3. International students are interested in studying in a different culture.

Discussion and Implications

The students in this study described many different influences and experiences that have encouraged and moved them to consider undergraduate study in the United States. The students were dissatisfied with the requirement to choose their major and career path at such a young age. The wish to delay this major life decision led them to consider universities in the United States. They cited this reason under the guise of wanting a liberal arts education. It is interesting that they cited the idea of a liberal education, because, their reason behind wanting a liberal arts education is to be well rounded and not about buying into a sophisticated understanding of what being well educated means.

It was also surprising that students felt they could obtain a higher quality education attending a university in the United States. Many of the students felt that they could go to Oxford or Cambridge in the United

Kingdom and receive a high quality education. Beyond those two universities, one would be unable to receive the quality of education at a U.K. University that will equal the quality of their current educational experience. The media has influenced many of these perceptions. There has been much speculation about why students are considering undergraduate study in the United States in the media. Additionally, there has been negative publicity surrounding the amount of funding allotted to universities in the United Kingdom. There has been media coverage surrounding the university lecturers threatening to strike if they do not receive additional compensation. One student explained, "I don't want to be sceptical but I'm pretty sure that the universities in Great Britain might be degrading in a way as the funding is going down." He felt that only a few universities were worth considering in the United Kingdom. He said that, "Trinity Cambridge is still up there and a few others, but apart from that the other colleges are losing. As a result, I won't have the level of teaching that I've come to expect at Eton."

In addition to experiences influencing student's decisions to consider undergraduate study in the United States, the influences of friends, family and careers advisors also played a role in student's decisions to consider undergraduate study in the United States. Some student's parents encouraged them to consider going to the United States for undergraduate study. For others, the interest started when their careers advisor shared information on undergraduate study in the United States. These people have played a large role in students' consideration of undergraduate study in the United States. Without these influences, many of the students would probably stay in the United Kingdom possibly dissatisfied with their educational experience. Once they received encouragement from their friends, family members or careers advisor, they were more willing to consider undergraduate study in the United States. The idea of leaving their home country seems less foreign and scary and more like a real possibility.

The historical class differences became apparent when interviewing students at the different schools. As discussed earlier, students attending Christ's Hospital are primarily scholarship students from low-income families whereas students attending Eton College and CATS Cambridge come from wealthy upper class families. Although the government has worked hard to eliminate the class differentiation in the United Kingdom, the perception of social class is still prevalent. The Guardian conducted a study in 2007 to determine the perception of social class and social mobility and whether the perception of class differences still exist. The Guardian study found that 89% of people in the United Kingdom believe that their social standing determines how they are judged. Almost half of those feel that it still counts for "a lot" (Glover, 2007). This study shows that social standing still influences people in the United Kingdom.

This social class system is apparent in multiple areas of their lives and can specifically be seen in educational opportunity. Amanda Root (*Times Higher Education Supplement*, 2007) explains, "About half of all Oxbridge students still come from public (ie private, fee-charging) schools, yet such schools educate only about 7 per cent of the school-age population." The Sutton Trust (2008) conducted a study to determine university admissions by individual schools. The study determined that 100 elite schools accounted for a third of admissions to Oxbridge during the prior five years. These 100 schools make up less than 3% of 3,700 schools offering sixth form education in the United Kingdom. Of these 100 schools both Eton College and Christ's Hospital make the list. It should be noted that Eton is in the top ten while Christ's Hospital is in the bottom ten. The schools with the highest admissions rates to Oxbridge are highly socially selective. The Sutton Trust study also found that the top 200 schools and colleges make up 48% of admissions to Oxbridge. The other 3,500 schools and colleges account for the remaining 52% of admissions, with one per cent of their university entrants going to Oxbridge (Sutton Trust, 2008).

When conducting the interviews at Christ's Hospital and the interviews at Eton College, the primary researcher observed a difference in the ways the students viewed their chances at gaining admission to highly selective institutions. The Eton College students expected to gain admission to highly selective institution whether at Oxbridge or an Ivy League school. The students at Christ's Hospital were thankful for the opportunity to attend a good sixth form college. They explained that they worked extremely hard to gain admission to Christ's Hospital and did not want to let their parents or themselves down by not gaining admission to a highly selective university.

The social class difference also became apparent with the students' adventurous spirit. The students at Christ's Hospital had not visited the United States. They had not had the travel opportunities the Eton

College students had been afforded. As a result, the adventurous spirit of the Christ's Hospital students is a driving influence in their decision to consider undergraduate study in the United States. Because the Eton College students have had the opportunity to travel and visit the United States, their desire to study in the United States is driven more by the perceived opportunity for success. While the Christ's Hospital students desire success and are considering undergraduate study in the United States because of this desire, this desire is influenced primarily by their adventurous spirit. The Eton College students are partially influenced by their adventurous spirit, but primary influence is the perceived success a degree from a highly selective university in the United States will afford them.

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