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INFORMATION MISMATCH: WHAT INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS  
THOUGHT THEIR COMMUNITY COLLEGE EXPERIENCE WOULD BE LIKE

BY

GLORIA F. SHENOY

DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Organization and Leadership  
with a concentration in Higher Education  
in the Graduate College of the  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013

Urbana, Illinois

Doctoral Committee:

Professor Debra D. Bragg, Chair  
Professor Marilyn Johnston-Parsons  
Associate Professor Yoon Pak  
Assistant Professor Lorenzo Baber

## **Abstract**

International students' main information source about the community college is word of mouth from family and friends, agents, and online sources (Bodycott, 2009; Bohman, 2010; Doku, 2007; Hamrick, 2007; Jones, 2006; Lee, 2008; Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003). Little is known about what prospective students are learning during these interactions. Through interviews with 15 students and an ethnographic content analysis of student-mentioned websites and documents, I examined what international students thought their community college experiences would be like and what led them to these expectations. Using the theory of chain migration from college choice and the theory of imperfect information from behavioral economics, I explored how students found out information about two community colleges in Texas. Insights offered by the international students who I interviewed revealed a mismatch of expectations and experiences involving the community colleges they attended, including misinformation about classes (e.g. what is a credit hour, option of choosing classes, classroom norms), school procedures (e.g. having to take placement tests, implications of remedial and developmental classes, how to transfer), and relationship dynamics (e.g. possibly being burdensome on host family, difficulty in making friends). Moreover, I found students chose Dallas area community colleges because they had a family member living in the community and these individuals, who I called "anchors," helped the prospective students apply to and attend the schools. Sometimes students came with little information, such as only images from movies and television shows.

This research contributes to the practice of recruiting international students and to researchers' understandings the ways prospective international students obtain information about the community college. Ultimately, the results contribute to the policies and actions community

college personnel can take to help international students to more appropriately match their expectations of the community college to the experiences they aspire to have as a student attending a community college in the United States. By exploring ways to make relevant information known to international students, community colleges can help students form more accurate expectations which may more closely match their experiences.

*Here's my heart, Lord, take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above*

## Acknowledgements

“Of course I didn’t know. How could you know?” she said smiling. I heard this response when I asked Tanya whether her ideas about the community college were accurate. As I reflect on this project and my time as a graduate student, her statement summarizes my own journey.

How could I have known the richness of stories and individuals I would meet through this dissertation experience? Until I started interviewing these students, putting hundreds of miles on my car, laughing with my interviewees, having my heart ache as stories of unfairness surfaced, and sincerely thanking the participants only to have them sincerely thank me for interviewing them, I did not know. To all you lovely students who opened your hearts and allowed me to ask you questions, thank you. There would be nothing to write without you.

I am grateful for my dissertation committee: Dr. Lorenzo Baber, Dr. Yoon Pak, and Dr. Marilyn Parsons, who encouraged my research and prodded me to be a better scholar. Heartfelt thanks to my advisor and chair of this dissertation, Dr. Debra Bragg, who always believed in me.

Thanks to Andrea, Chris, Colleen, David, Jan, Joy, Rebecca, Tatiana, and Wanda for helping me recruit students and obtain permissions for this project. For those at ASHE 2012 and AIRC 2012, I am grateful for your feedback. Dr. Jeong-eun Rhee, thank you for pushing me to think about my study from a critical perspective. Thanks to Connie Chuang and Natasha Jankowski for reading different versions of this, giving feedback, and asking good questions.

Marla, thanks for helping me find the mistakes, as Anna Banana puts it. Mom and Dad, thank you for your sacrifices to allow me to be where and who I am today. Thanks family and friends for praying and cheering me on. Pradeep, thank you for reading, helping me think through my arguments, and supporting me in this. I love and respect you so much. It is such a blast being on this adventure with you. Where to now, love?

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Studying in the Midwest, some of my international friends were surprised by the cornfields surrounding the campus and by how far away we were from major cities. Yet other friends knew what to expect, from taking the bus and getting a license to finding the best restaurants on campus. Where do these students get their information, and how does it align with their experience when they get to the United States to attend college? How does the information that a student receives impact their end satisfaction or dissatisfaction? How many international students come with one idea of what their experience will be like to be met with a different reality?

I started wondering what was being told to students about prospective places of study and by whom—was it agents giving information, or parents who had heard from another family member, or was it someone that had actually gone to the college, or perhaps it was a staff member from the college? This initial spark has led me to think deeply about the mismatch of information that international students receive as they form ideas about higher education in the United States to their actual experience. When I started meeting international students attending the local community college, I found their journey particularly fascinating, as these schools are typically not as well-known, yet often hold an open door policy, providing access to higher education in the United States.

Two external forces contribute to the increasing numbers of international students at institutions of higher education in the United States (IIE, 2012). Globalization and commercialization drive international students to the United States for quality programs taught in English (De Wit, 2008), and diminishing government funding for public institutions of higher

education contributes to decisions to open up seats to international students (Abelmann, Kwon, Liao, & Lo, 2012; Choudaha, 2011; Dolby, 2012; Lewin, 2012; Mohrman, 2012; Rhoades & Slaughter, 2006; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). With international students' ability to pay, administrators' recognition of the benefits of global competency, and student choice behavior mimicking consumers, the ways institutions are recruiting and attracting international students are changing and not fully understood (Margison, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010; Melcher, 2011; Rhoads & Torres, 2006).

In this introductory chapter, I begin by providing the context in which international students choose community colleges, including impacts of globalization, commercialization, and xenophobia. Then I show a conceptual model to display the interaction of the different components and interplay of theories, to be described in detail in chapter 2, that frames this inquiry. The outcome is an information mismatch between what international students hear and perceive about community colleges and their actual experiences, which leads to my research questions. After discussing the significance, gap in literature, and delimitations of the study, I conclude the introduction with key definitions.

### **Forces of Change: A Multifaceted Context**

With growing numbers of international students enrolling in American higher education institutions, there is still much unknown about this student population (Lee, 2010). The presence of increasing international students creates new tensions on campuses and surrounding communities (Cantwell & Lee, 2010; Lee, 2010; Singh & Doherty, 2004). Globalization and commercialization are drawing more international students to community colleges and other institutions of higher education in the United States, which may instigate xenophobic behaviors.

**Globalization.** Altbach (2007) clarified the difference between globalization and internationalization, stating globalization is the increase in connectivity throughout the world because of economic and political changes, whereas internationalization is the response from individuals and institutions to these external changes. For higher education, internationalization may result in a more international mission, allocating more resources for students' study abroad opportunities and/or creating programs to help students develop global competency (Siaya & Hayward, 2003).

The individual response to globalization may be to enroll in foreign language classes, become culturally sensitive through conversations, or pursue study abroad. Student mobility is one of the most visible parts of globalization in higher education (Altbach, Reisburg, & Rumbley, 2010). Millions of students choose to study abroad, for part or all of their educational experience, and this number is projected to increase.

**Commercialization.** Bok (2003) suggested commercialization of higher education comes with globalization of higher education and students studying abroad. He argued research, athletics, and student enrollment in American higher education have become about financial gains. Bok traced the move toward commercialization in higher education since the mid-1990s. With declining funding from government sources, institutions looked elsewhere for support, which meant initiating deals and partnerships with private industries. Bok claimed these partnerships compromised the purpose of higher education, academic freedom, and pursuit of knowledge.

Likewise, Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) and Slaughter and Leslie (1999) agreed with Bok's (2003) findings and argued the type of work that academics are doing has changed to be

more market-like, due to globalization. As institutions seek out alternative funding, this impacts research, values, and knowledge production (Slaughter & Leslie, 1999).

International students enter into this changing higher education environment. To aid them in their decisions, some students turn to professional agents for help. Agents aid students in navigating the system, institution applications, and national visa processes (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). Other students turn to different individuals, such as parents, friends, or Internet postings for advice (Bodycott, 2009; Bohman, 2010; Doku, 2007; Hamrick, 2007; Jones, 2006; Lee, 2008; Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003).

International students are attractive to the community colleges as a potential revenue source (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, pp. 288-289). Charging international students a differential tuition helps supplement institutions from depleting financial support from the federal and state government. Slaughter and Rhoades pointed out the impact of commercialization is seen in the use of commissioned recruiters to bring in more international students to the community college.

**Xenophobia.** Yet the force of commercialization and globalization that attracts additional international students to campuses in the United States is only half the equation. Where these students “land” also contributes to the dialogue around international students and their everyday experience. The “contact zone” between international students and domestic students or community members is an increasingly studied interaction as there are growing numbers of international students at many campuses (Cantwell & Lee, 2010; Lee, 2010; Singh & Doherty, 2004). The term *contact zone* comes from the work of Pratt (1991), who suggested it describes the space in which cultures “meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (p. 33). Moments of clash are seen in student reactions such as online video posts (Alexandra Wallace from UCLA posted a short video on YouTube in March 2011 ranting about an Asian student using a cell phone at the

library) and student newspaper articles (Sean Frye from Kansas State Collegian wrote an article in February 2012 arguing that public universities should stop admitting international students, especially because some may become future enemies). These two examples received online media attention and point to the potentially xenophobic thoughts and actions of students and community members.

Community colleges have traditionally served and continue to serve as points of access for higher education for many individuals (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawler, 2008). Rhoades and Slaughter (2006) argued institutions are pursuing services that will generate revenue at the cost of serving historically underserved populations. “Decisions about access are increasingly calculated in terms of cost, efficiency, and revenue yield and in terms of the short-term economic interests of the higher education enterprise” (p. 131). Precisely because of the costs contemplated for these decisions, there is a public perception that international students are taking the seat of local American students. It is into this tension of institutions benefitting financially from international student attendance, a celebration of cross cultural exchange, and fear that international students are taking away opportunities that international students enter.

### **Problem Statement**

Although international students may do research online, discuss with friends, and solicit advice from admission counselors, much of their experience is not discussed—for example, the challenges of making friends with American students, or feeling ostracized on their campus, or having the unexpected opportunity to join a club that explores silk screen art. With the variety of possible experiences, both positive and negative, for a first year college attendee, this is no surprise. However, I question what are common information mismatches between what

international students thought their community college experience would be like and what their experience actually is.

In an increasingly global and commercial higher education market, growing numbers of students are choosing to study abroad for their undergraduate degrees. These changes impact the local American community college as it internationalizes its curriculum and recruits international students. It also impacts current students attending these institutions and the surrounding communities as new members enter.

Assumptions of economic rational choice states students will choose the option with the greatest utility or benefit (DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005). But because little is known about *what* international students are hearing about community colleges and *how* the information gained impacts their expectation of the community college, it is uncertain if students are making rational choices. As the main way international students are hearing about community colleges is through word of mouth, what international students think their college experience will be like can have international consequences as these students continue the word of mouth cycle (Bodycott, 2009; Bohman, 2010; Doku, 2007; Hamrick, 2007; Jones, 2006; Kisch, 2012; Lee, 2008; Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003). The overall purpose of this study is to develop a better understanding of what international students *thought* their community college experiences would be like and what *led them* to these expectations. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with international students at two community colleges along with ethnographic content analysis of websites, blogs, and other printed materials that students mention, this study explores how these students heard about their community college and their ideas of what it would be like.

The economic ideal for decision making is to have *perfect* and *complete* information, but theories of behavioral economics suggest that this type of information is impossible and human

decisions are often impacted by elements external to information given (Jabber, 2012). The problem with how international students hear about community college is that on the scale of perfect and complete information, these students are only getting partial and sometimes incorrect information. As most of these international students are unable to travel to visit potential institutions, they are forced to rely more on others, including what is posted on the Internet and informed (and sometimes uninformed) individuals.

### Conceptual Model

The following image is the conceptual model for this research that ties together my understanding of how globalization and commercialization impact the increase of international students attending community colleges in the United States. Furthermore, using theories of chain migration and bounded rationality, I use this model to demonstrate the interactions at play that influence international students' expectation formation of their community college experience.

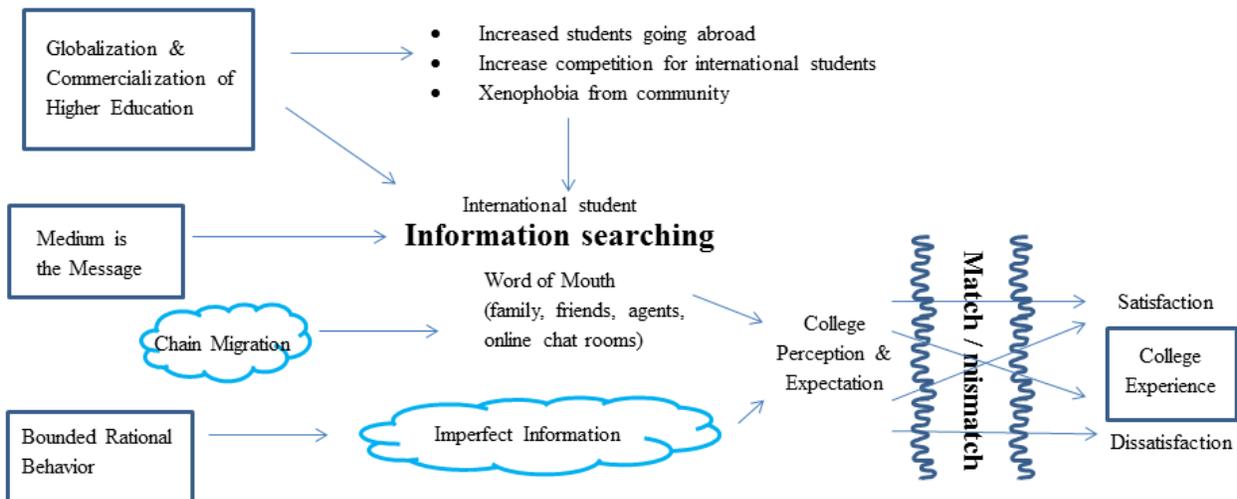


Figure 1. Model of community college expectation formation of international students.

As described in the opening of this chapter, globalization and commercialization of higher education impacts the number of students going abroad and inevitably increases the

number of places international students are studying as seen in the top left corner of the model. Moving downward on this conceptual model, as international students seek out information about potential places to study abroad, where they are getting the information impacts their college expectation and eventual satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their choice. In the center of the model, using the idea that the medium is the message, the impact of word of mouth and other sources of information may be interpreted differently because the origin of the message differs. This idea, from McLuhan (1964), is that if we see something on a postcard versus a billboard, we understand and receive the message differently. So in the center of the model, if an international student talks with their parents as compared to receive an email from a community college administrator or representative, I argue that the impact of the information is different. Finally, the theory of imperfect information, in the cloud form on the bottom of the model, contributes to information mismatch. This theory is from bounded rational behavior and states humans can never have complete and perfect information to make decisions. All of these theories and themes will be explained in more detail in chapter 2, the literature review. At the bottom right, the model ends where students' expectations of the college are met or not met, resulting in their satisfaction or dissatisfaction which is the mismatch or match between the information students find about the community college and their actual experience at the community college.

## **Research Questions**

The conceptual model provides a visual basis for the overarching research questions.

They are:

1. During the exploration stage of international students' college choice process, why do they turn to the sources of information on community colleges that they do? What are the sources telling them?

2. How does the way in which international students hear about community colleges impact their expectations of their experience?
3. What are the expectations international students have of their American community college experience prior to arrival?

Whereas some scholars have researched international student experience (Andrade & Evans, 2009; Lee & Rice, 2007; Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010), institutional choice of community college (Bohman, 2010; Crandall & Sheppard, 2004; Ottinger, 2009; Somers et al, 2006), and use of agents to find institutions (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Ottinger, 2009; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011), there is limited research on international students at community colleges—and particularly research focusing on how these students hear about this institution choice. As community colleges look for new streams of funding and with growing interests from international students, this research can contribute to how community colleges are disseminating information about their institution, thereby influencing how international students form their expectation of what their community college experience will be like.

### **Significance**

Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, and Forbes-Mewett (2010) argued that the institution, as the producer of goods, will always know more than the consumer, international students, about the product. Recruiters and leaders of community colleges can benefit from this research by knowing where some international students are obtaining their information. Providing more accurate information about their community colleges may help manage the mismatch of information between students and institutions of expectations and experiences. Knowing what students are expecting can also help community colleges meet some of these unsaid and assumed expectations or help students adjust these expectations to more realistic ones.

Using the theory of chain migration to understand the movement of international students to local community colleges may create a link between international student choice and Latino/a student choice, where this theory has been used before (Person & Rosenbaum, 2006). Adding the theory of imperfect information can help us think about both information flow to international students and Latino/a students.

Beyond helping institutions reach out to international students and contributing to the use of the theory of chain migration, this work fills a gap in literature and understanding of what information sources international students turn to and what they hear about the community college. This research helps solve issues around mismatched expectations, impacts potential future policy and practice of recruiting international students, and how potential students get information.

### **Gap in Literature**

This research contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, in the literature on college choice for international students, there is evidence that there is still much unknown about the community college for international students choosing these institutions (Robison, 2007). This research clarifies what is both known and unknown to international students about the community college. Although we know that international students choose community colleges for a number of reasons, including English ability, available finances, test scores, and personal connections, there is not much known about their views of the community college and if they know how it fits into the system of higher education in United States (Ottinger, 2009).

Second, although researchers attribute word of mouth as the major way students are hearing about community college, this concept is not contextualized in its communication

background nor do individuals discuss the content of these conversations (Bodycott, 2009; Bohman, 2010; Doku, 2007; Hamrick, 2007; Jones, 2006; Kisch, 2012; Lee, 2008; Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003). Furthermore, knowing the impact of negative word of mouth, the expectations of international students are worth exploring, especially if expectations are unmet resulting in possible negative publicity for community colleges (Ardnt, 1967; Lee, 2008). There is very limited research on what students are reading online and what they see in chat rooms and online bulletin boards.

Finally, from the literature on chain migration—how Latino/a students are hearing about institutions—Person and Rosenbaum (2006) found that students limited their college choices to the institutions that they had personal connections with. This idea has not been used for international students, but could help make sense of how international students are making college choice decisions and how much information they are collecting about the community college prior to their decision to attend.

## **Delimitations**

I delimited this study to first-time, full-time international students coming from another country to the United States, on F-1 visas, and not enrolled in English programs. Through informal conversations and conducting the literature review, I found students attend community college for a variety of reasons, including English practice and visa management. I choose to delimit the study to hold a few variables constant and focus on what information sources students turn to who are enrolling at any institution for the first time. Often international students who are attending a community college for reasons besides full-time enrollment are constrained by other variables, such as a spouse who is studying at a nearby institution. The F-1 visa is given to

international students who are studying full-time at an institution, in varying programs from high school level to language programs, and all the way up to doctoral studies. The hope with the delimitation of the population being studied is to identify common stories about information dissemination and expectation formation. For the ethnographic content analysis component, I choose to delimit the study by focusing on only the websites mentioned by students in the interviews.

As I am using qualitative research methods to address the questions asked in this dissertation, as the researcher, I am the research instrument and my views and perspectives shape the study. At the end of chapter 3, methods, I give a more thorough account of my history and interest in this topic. However, a limitation to the research can be my perspectives, impacting what I hear and do not hear in interviews with students. Although it was a news article that hooked my interest and a sense that international students were not being fairly treated, as I began my pilot study and delved deeper in inquiry into international students' expectations, I found their expectations were oftentimes exceeded. These discoveries caused me to rethink my framing of the problem, from initially hypothesizing students were disappointed by their experience to asking more generally how the information students received matches or does not match their experience. In doing this work, my hope is future international students will receive more accurate and complete information so that their expectations will be met and exceeded.

## **Definitions**

**Expectation.** Expectations act like a filter to help students anticipate what their academic environment will be like (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Howard, 2005; Kuh, 1999; Pike, 2006). When a student is on campus, their experience with the environment will give them

additional information, changing their expectation. Expectations can also impact socialization at the institution (Pike, 2006). However, when experiences fall short of the expectations, it can lead to issues of achievement and retention (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995). Research suggests careful recruitment and orientation can help correct unrealistic expectations (Hicks, 2003; Kuh, 1991, 1999; Pike, 2006). In consumer theory, Oliver (1980) suggested expectations create a frame of reference for one to interpret and judge the outcome.

**International student.** For this research, international students are defined as students studying away from their home country in the United States. The international student population is not a homogeneous group and, in fact, probably one of the most distinct group compositions on campus with diversity in race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, education history, parental education, age, country of origin, marital status, and beyond (Hanassab, 2006). Acknowledging the diverse experiences and interests of these individuals, there are some similarities in their experiences. Shared experiences of all international students include visa applications and ways students learn about educational opportunities.

**Word of mouth.** Word of mouth is a theory from the field of communication that refers to a type of information passing that resembles advertising but is not paid and is person-to-person (Arndt, 1967). Research shows word of mouth can influence individual perception and purchasing behavior (Hogan, Lemon & Libai, 2004). Negative word of mouth can be as influential, if not more, than positive word of mouth (Arndt, 1967).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

The number of students studying abroad is projected to double in the next five years (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010). This is no surprise in an increasingly globalized world. Specifically at the community colleges in the United States, there is a growing group of enrolled, full-time international students. This literature review covers three main topics: international students at community colleges, sources of information that international students turn to for college information, and theories framing the study (expectancy confirmation/disconfirmation theory, imperfect information, and chain migration). This literature review seeks to answer what is known about the current status of international students studying at United States community colleges, the reasons international students choose community colleges as a place to study, and who provides international students with information about community colleges.

Previous studies have attributed word of mouth as the main information source about community colleges for international students (Bodycott, 2009; Bohman, 2010; Doku, 2007; Hamrick, 2007; Jones, 2006; Lee, 2008; Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003). But who specifically gives the information to the students? Is it another seeking student who spoke to a representative or someone who had studied at the community college? What is being said that is influencing students to enroll at the community college—is it, for example, about the prestige of a program or proximity to a local airport? What are people writing about community colleges in chat rooms where students look before making the decision? These questions shape this literature review. As the United States sees growth in international students' enrollment at community colleges (see Figure 2), this literature review on how and what these students are hearing about

these colleges is important for information dissemination and creating an environment where expectations are met.

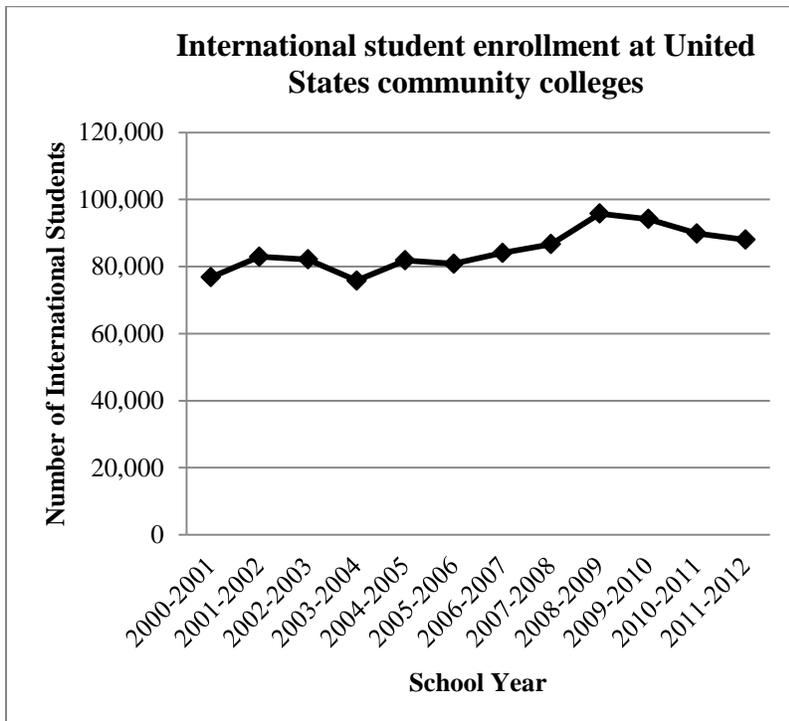


Figure 2. International student enrollment at United States community colleges, 2000/01-2011/12 from Institute for International Education (IIE) Open Doors Data, 2012.

The literature for this review is from numerous searches through databases, including Google Scholar, EBSCO, and ERIC. Keywords for these searches included international students, community colleges, junior colleges, recruitment, foreign students, college choice, expectation, and sources of information. The research on international students is still limited, and there were only a few found articles about international students at community colleges. For this review, the majority of articles are from peer-reviewed journals, including *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, *Journal of Studies in International Education*, and *New Directions for Community Colleges*. Overall statistics on international students and internationalization of community colleges are from the IIE annual data and American Council on Education (ACE) special reports. To supplement the found articles, I expanded my searches to international

students studying outside of community colleges and included a dozen doctoral dissertations on this topic.

In previous studies, scholars (Bodycott, 2009; Bohman, 2010; Doku, 2007; Hamrick, 2007; Jones, 2006; Kisch, 2012; Lee, 2008; Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003) attributed word of mouth as the reason why international students choose community colleges but have not included specifics about this interaction, as it was not the focus of the studies. Before discussing the information sources, I start with a brief overview of community colleges and international students. Then I look at reasons international students are choosing community colleges and ways community colleges have internationalized. The next section focuses on where international students turn to gather information on studying abroad. I conclude with a section on theories that will frame this study including expectancy disconfirmation theory, bounded rationality, and chain migration as ways to understand how sources of information contribute to international students' perceived satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

## **Community Colleges**

The context for this study is the community college. The aim of this section is to give familiarity to United States community colleges and the ways globalization impacts these institutions. This is a brief overview. Community colleges are incredibly diverse in their missions, functions, operation models, and served student populations (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Helfgot, 2005).

The first community college was founded in 1901 in a time when this new type of education was questioned and its place in higher education uncertain (Dougherty, 1994). After a time of growth from 1950 to 1960, community colleges became an essential part of the higher

education system, providing access to students through geographic proximity and financial affordability (Brint & Karabel, 1989; Cohen & Brawler, 2008). Current comprehensive community colleges provide services for their surrounding community through adult education, transfer education, development/remedial courses, certification programs for applied degrees, and more. Beyond offering these classes to students, community colleges often serve their community through training programs as contracted by private businesses and through cultural productions such as plays and musicals (Cohen & Brawler, 2008). Community colleges serve a diverse student population with varying needs and prior preparation (Bailey & Morest, 2006).

Although community colleges play an important role in providing access to higher education for students, federal financial support is minimal. Community colleges rely heavily on state and local funds (Vaughn, 2006). Yet with decreasing state funds, community colleges are in a financial dilemma that full-paying (nonresident tuition rates) international students may help solve (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

**The internationalization of community colleges.** The internationalization movement in community colleges started in the 1980s. Activities included curriculum change, student travel abroad opportunities, and international student recruitment (Raby & Valeau, 2007). An institutional commitment to internationalize can be seen in mission statements, academic offerings, funding for programs, and resources for international students (Green, 2007). Community colleges pursue internationalization for reasons including empowering students to be internationally competent, enhancing trade and economy, and creating opportunities for greater tolerance (Raby & Valeau, 2007).

In the ACE report on internationalization of United States campuses, Siaya and Hayward (2003) reported leaders of all institutional types (comprehensive universities, community

colleges, liberal arts colleges, and research universities) agreed that activities around internationalization were important, but there was limited institution action. Siaya and Hayward conducted phone interviews ( $n = 1027$  faculty at 559 schools), student surveys ( $n = 1290$  students at 341 schools), and institutional surveys ( $n = 752$  schools) to gather data during the 2001- 2002 school year. The authors concluded institutions should further internationalize and suggested institutions use international students and scholars as resources to provide an international perspective (p. 80).

Additionally, in a follow-up ACE report, Green and Siaya (2005) looked specifically at community colleges through a national survey of 233 institutions. Again they found a gap between the articulated commitment to internationalization and the available academic offerings, organizational structure (e.g., if study abroad counts toward graduation), and external funding for these endeavors. Green and Siaya also compared community colleges that were highly active in internationalization with those not as active. The major difference between these two groups was that highly active institutions provided space for students to talk about international ideas, encouraged study abroad, and trained faculty members in internationalization. Taking the analysis one step further, Harder (2011) took the data from this ACE report and analyzed it based on the location (urban, suburban, and rural) of the institution as defined by Carnegie classification. She found rural community colleges had fewer international activities than urban and suburban institutions.

An example of an institution that is committed to internationalization is Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) in Boston. Goodwin and Nacht (1991) selected BHCC as an exemplar institution of internationalization. President of BHCC at the time, Shively said there were three main reasons for internationalization on his campus: (a) one-third of all students enrolling

in higher education at that time were going to community colleges, and Shively saw it as the responsibility of community colleges to expose these students to a global perspective; (b) businesses in the area had increased their export manufacturing and needed workers that were globally competent; and (c) the population in Boston had become increasingly international. Shively's comments continue the theme of preparing community college students and serving its community.

**Discussion** Community colleges provide access to college for many students (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Cohen & Brawler, 2008). Due to the changing demands of an increasingly connected world, community colleges have internationalized their curriculums and missions and have sometimes provided study abroad opportunities (Goodwin & Nacht, 1991; Green, 2007; Green & Siaya, 2005; Siaya & Hayward, 2003). Leaders of community colleges agree that internationalization is good, but the actual changes to curriculum and funding for these opportunities are limited (Green & Siaya, 2005). If international students are paying their own way to attend community colleges, there may be additional benefits of internationalization without the financial burden that many administrators see as a barrier to pursuing internationalization (IIE, 2012).

In overview texts on community colleges, there are rarely mentions of international students (e.g. Cohen & Brawler, 2008; Mellow & Heelan, 2008). As they are a small and growing population on these campuses, this is not surprising, but to serve these students, community colleges would need to know more about them. Scholars who have begun doing research on international students at community colleges lament that despite the growing number of students, there is very little known about this student group (Hamrick, 2007; Ottinger, 2009 to be covered in the next section).

Sometimes the presence of international students at community colleges can be controversial as some see international students taking opportunities from local citizens (Lewin, 2012). Community colleges, as open-door institutions, end up serving an increasingly diverse student body (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Helfgot, 2005). As new student populations enter, they bring in new needs and expectations. What then is the responsibility of community colleges? Do they serve all students who come or remain true to their original mission? This literature is not comprehensive on community colleges but provides an overview of these unique and important institutions and its internationalization efforts.

### **International Students**

Annually more than 760,000 international students come to study in the United States (IIE, 2012). Although community colleges have only a small percentage of these students, in 2011-2012 there were nearly 88,000 international students enrolled. Of all community colleges, Houston Community College led in international student enrollment with nearly 6,000 international students last academic year. All community colleges may not have such a large number of international students, but most have at least a few international students on campus (Green & Siaya, 2005). Top sending countries of international students to community colleges are South Korea, Vietnam, and China, as compared to four-year institutions, where the top three sending countries are India, China, and South Korea (IIE, 2012).

Current collective efforts to attract more international students to community colleges can be seen in increased international recruitment trips and the creation of a new informative website (e.g., AACCC's <http://international.aacc.nche.edu/Pages/Default.aspx>, a website specifically aimed at international students about community colleges). In 2010, the United States

government began sponsoring EducationUSA, which provides training and resources for institutions interested in recruiting international students to their campuses. In addition, in the last few years, the United States government has built two websites (<http://educationusa.state.gov/> and <http://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/>) that aid in these communications efforts.

**College choice for international students at four-year institutions.** There is a large field of literature addressing the college choice process. Challenging the dominant discourse for college choice is literature discussing the process for students of color. The journey international students take when choosing a college is similar to this subgroup. McDonough (1997) argued there is not equal access to information for all potential students, and some minority students are being left behind. Through interviews and focus groups with high school juniors and seniors ( $n = 106$ ), Perez and McDonough (2008) explored Latino/a college choice. They framed their study with the theories of social capital and chain migration. Perez and McDonough found Latino/a students rely heavily on family, friends, and high school counselors for information. They also found that students trusted those who had gone through the college experience, even if they had only weak ties with these individuals.

Agarwal and Winkler (1985) were the first to propose factors contributing to college choice for international students: (a) opportunities of higher education in students' home country, (b) cost, (c) students' ability to pay, (d) benefits of studying in the United States, and (e) political reasons. Similarly, Zikopoulos and Barber (1986) surveyed international students ( $n = 1,065$ ) at randomly selected United States universities and colleges and found the main reason students were attracted to their chosen institutions was the institution's prestige and perceived quality of education. The main sources of information were publications from the institutions whereas the

greatest influence on college choice was family and friends. Likewise, Hamrick (2007) also found perception of quality of education as a major “pull” for international students choosing United States institutions.

The college choice process differs for international students and American students. International students must first look at the institutions around them before exploring what other countries’ higher education can offer. This step is influenced by a number of factors, including political climate and country reputation (Altbach, Reisburg, & Rumbley, 2010). In addition, students must contemplate if they can afford the expenses. While American students may have similar thoughts about financing their education, there are comparatively fewer institution choices and outside factors.

**International students’ choice of United States community colleges.** Although there are similarities of international student choice for college between the four-year institutions and community colleges, there are also distinct differences. While there is not much research on international student choice at the four year level, there is even less at the community college level. This section pulls literature on student choice for community college and research dealing with factors of why international students choose community colleges.

In a piece written *to* international students, Abel and Sementelli (2002) stated there are three requirements for studying in the United States: (a) English language ability, (b) available financial resources, and (c) a strong academic record. The requirements vary institutionally. Community colleges are an alternative for students who desire a United States education experience who may have lower English language ability, fewer available financial resources (as tuition is lower than most four-year institutions), and/or a weaker academic record.

In addition to English ability, finances, and academic records, there are other driving factors found in Bohman's (2010) study. Bohman interviewed international students ( $n = 13$ ) at four community colleges in Illinois. Students chose community colleges in Illinois because they felt like they fit in better in the United States, did not have enough access to higher education in their home countries, and lauded the reputation of United States institutions. The main information sources were individuals and family members. The finding on the impact of prestige is similar to four-year institution studies on international student college choice.

However, Doku (2007) found international students ( $n = 18$ ) picked the community college for a variety of reasons, including that they had studied in the community as a high school student or there were family friends in the area. Others had family members with company connections who knew of the college's reputation, while another student was on a government exchange program that dictated which institution she would attend.

Similarly, Ottinger (2009) interviewed international students ( $n = 15$ ) who were attending Missouri community colleges and found that some students chose to attend community colleges because they had been high school exchange students in the area and had previewed the experience. Other students enrolled in English language programs at community colleges because they did not feel ready for a four-year institution and college level classes. Finally, financial reasons encouraged other students to choose community colleges (e.g., sports scholarships or personal misfortunes). However, many international students still do not know about community colleges as an option nor how they fit into American higher education.

Therefore Ottinger warns,

Expecting international students to select a community college by simply sending information to them, by holding one day college fairs in their home countries, or by having a descriptive page on the web is unrealistic, without other guidance about what a

community college is, and how it plays a role in the American higher education system. (p. 131)

The community college in the United States plays multiple roles in educating students, and for international students who may not have an equivalent institution type in their country, having this understanding is important.

Likewise, Zeszortarski (2003), through surveying ( $n = 110$ ) and interviewing ( $n = 20$ ) international students at one community college in California found that 80% of interviewed students had prior connections to people in the United States. Zeszortarski questioned how international students at the community college fit into the context of globalization and found that students expected their education would help them be more globally competent. The big city, public transportation, flexible scheduling, quality of education compared to home options, English competency levels after education, diverse study body, and international student services were all attracting factors for interviewed international students.

However, some international students attend community colleges for more untraditional reasons. Chung (2008) described how short-term non-immigrant parents sometimes will use community college enrollment as a strategy to improve their children's English. In Chung's ethnography, she interviewed 17 families and 40 other supporting individuals (teachers, fellow church members, pastors, etc.) from 2005 to 2007. Her study focused on the phenomena of South Korean families bringing their children to America for English education due to "English fever." These temporary moves helped prepare the children for an increasingly globalized and cosmopolitan world. One of the family types Chung wrote about is the family that is self-supported (as compared to sponsored families that a foreign government pays to relocate). Typically, in self-supporting families, the mother comes to the United States for English instruction with her children as the father remains in South Korea to support them financially.

Even though the mother enrolls in an English program at the community college, Chung emphasized that this move is not for her sake but for the children's English educational opportunity. In other families, after being in the United States and seeing the English improvement in their children, "some mothers actually enrolled in the local community college to maintain their visa status and extended their stay for their children after their husbands returned to Korea" (pp. 57-58).

**Challenges.** Challenges for international students in the United States include heightened security after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks, application complexities, and an unclear policy and central coordination from the federal government on immigration which contributes to information mismatch. After September 11, 2001 many prospective international students have assumed that visas are harder to obtain (Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010). The implementation of the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), an international student tracking database funded by the Patriot Act in October 2001, requires more paperwork for international student advisors and less time for advising students (Rosser, Hermesen, Mamiseishvili, & Wood, 2007). By 2003, it became a federal mandate to use the database system.

A federal policy on immigration and recruitment would help with advising and information dissemination for students looking to study in the United States (Goodwin & Nacht, 1983; Kass, 2007; Pfaffenroth, 1997; Ruther, 2002). Fiske (1981) worried about ethical issues, including some of the tactics of recruitment agencies, as sometimes they are used to help international students find institutions. Agencies help with the application process (for visas, scholarships, and schools). Fiske feared that students were being shoved into an institutional mold instead of finding an institutional match.

**Benefits.** The benefits of having international students at community colleges are cultural and economic. “International students contribute to United States higher education in various ways, including enhancing international understandings and the global and cultural understanding of United States domestic students (Bevis, 2002; Chase, 2009; Chase & Mahoney, 1996; Desruisseaux, 1998; Ewing, 1992; Harrison, 2002)” (as cited in Hagedorn & Zhang, 2013, p. 57). It is estimated that international students (in all programs and institution types) and their dependents in 2010-2011 brought around 20 billion dollars to the United States economy through tuition, housing, travel, and other expenses (NAFSA, 2011).

**Discussion.** International students hear about study abroad opportunities in a variety of ways. They choose community colleges because of prior experience with these colleges, financial reasons, and personal contacts (Bohman, 2010; Chung, 2008; Doku, 2007; Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003). Although college choice is dependent on the quality and opportunity that students perceive, for international students to choose community colleges, they also should understand how they fit into the system of higher education in the United States (Ottinger, 2009; Raby & Valeau, 2007). One of the challenges is the lack of a central location for information, specifically about community colleges (Goodwin & Nacht, 1991; Kass, 2007; Pfaffenroth, 1997).

Only a few studies focus on international students at community colleges. The studies were mainly qualitative dissertations with small numbers of students being interviewed (Bohman, 2010; Doku, 2007; Ottinger, 2009). Zeszortarski (2003) was the only study that used mixed methods. Only one dissertation has been rewritten for peer-review publication (Bohman, 2010). The lack of peer-reviewed publications shows room for more rigorous research on this topic. The strength of these studies is that many countries were represented. A potential weakness is that most of the studies are geographically limited. The research of Bohman (2010) and Chung (2008)

took place in Illinois, Ottinger (2009) in Missouri, and Doku (2007) in the Midwest. Only two dissertations were based outside the Midwest. Behroozi-Bagherpour (2011) was based in Texas, and she looked at international student retention at Houston Community College. Zeszortarski (2003) did her research in California and explored how international students' expectations and experiences are understood within the framework of globalization. In addition, there are a number of dissertations and studies on undocumented students in California, but those students do not hold F-1 visas, to which this research is delimited.

Finally, the alternative reasons international students are enrolling at community colleges, such as maintaining visa status (Chung, 2008), is a topic that is emerging, and there is very little known about this in the literature I found. The various reasons international students are attending community colleges would be a worthwhile study, as it pushes the community college mission to be inclusive of yet another group.

### **Sources of Information**

The research on international students' choice of community colleges and four-year universities mentions parents, friends, and college websites as sources of information. Different studies (Bodycott, 2009; Bohman, 2010; Doku, 2007; Hamrick, 2007; Jones, 2006; Lee, 2008; Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003) attributed the conversations students have with those around them as word of mouth, but do not further discuss what is communicated during these conversations. I begin this section by giving a background on word of mouth as defined in the communications field and then expand to the different sources of word of mouth as mentioned in the literature.

**Word of mouth.** Word of mouth refers to a type of information passing that resembles advertising but is not paid and usually occurs between person-to-person (Arndt, 1967). With changes in technology, face-to-face interaction is no longer necessary as electronic word of mouth (eWoM) emerged in this field (Buttle, 1998). There is consensus among marketers, sociologists, and advertisers that word of mouth can influence individual perception and purchasing behavior (Hogan, Lemon, & Libai, 2004).

In the literature about international students hearing about and choosing community colleges, a number of scholars used the phrase *word of mouth*—be it from family or friends—as a major influence (Bohman, 2010; Doku, 2007; Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003). Complicating this notion of word of mouth is literature in the communications field that argues negative word of mouth is also important. Negative word of mouth has not been discussed in the college choice literature, but communication research shows it can be more powerful than positive word of mouth (Arndt, 1967). The impact of negative word of mouth makes it worthwhile to think about current students' educational experiences, which may influence what they say to friends and family when they return home. As Lee (2010) pointed out, it is one thing to recruit international students successfully and another for them to have a positive experience.

In 2004 Lee (2008) conducted an online survey of international students ( $n = 501$ ) enrolled at a large southwestern four-year institution and found that students from non-European countries had a more difficult time adjusting, partly due to racism and cultural differences. Some students were disappointed in their experience because they had based their choice only on college rankings. Not considering student culture, environment, and the resources of the institution may set students up for disappointment. Lee (2010) found that being treated fairly, as

a proxy for discrimination, was the most important factor prompting international students to recommend the host institutions to others.

Lee's (2010) study is just one example of the influence of word of mouth. The following sections are divided by word of mouth influence from different groups: (a) family and friends, (b) recruiters, agents, and consultants, and (c) blogs and chat rooms. In each of these sections, I summarize the research citing each specific group as an information source for international students' college choice (both community colleges and other institutions).

***Family and friends.*** Family and friends are the most cited group for word of mouth. In large surveys and individual interviews, research points to family and friends as being highly influential on college choice for international students. A private company, i-graduate (International Graduate Insight Group) produces annual survey results on international students and the use of agents. The 2011 survey ( $n = 150,000$  international students) showed 45% of students were influenced by friends and 32% were influenced by family in their college decisions (Archer & Winters, 2011).

Jones (2006) used the International Students' Innovation Decision Process as a framework to understand the impact of perception of benefits and risks of students from Thailand and Australia. Her study was based on Rogers' theory of Innovation Decision Process (1995), which explored factors influencing international students when making the decision to study outside their home country. Jones (2006) found sources of information for these students included employers or organizations who paid for the international students to study, parents, friends, direct promotion by the schools, Internet, newspapers or magazines, relatives, education fairs, embassies, independent agents, and Australian Education Centers. In a survey sent to international students in Thailand, 64% of the respondents ( $n = 154$ ) found out about the

institution through their employers. Crediting family, relatives, and friends' influence as word-of-mouth communication, Jones found in both her survey and in-depth interviews that these individuals were a major source of information.

Similarly, Bodycott (2009) using interviews and surveys found that Chinese students often obtained information on study abroad through personal contacts and international school fairs. Bodycott surveyed mainland Chinese parents ( $n = 251$ ) and students ( $n = 100$ ) at international school fairs and conducted follow up group interviews in three Chinese cities. Unique to this research was the focus on the parents of students. Bodycott found that because parents and families were funding the education, their expectations of institutions played an important role in the decision making process. The destination choice for study abroad for parents was driven by cultural, political, and socioeconomic factors (p. 366).

Likewise, Bohman (2010), whose work was discussed in the earlier section on international students' choice of United States community colleges, also found that family and friends were influential in a student's decision-making process and suggested institutions strategically use alumni networks to foster greater international student enrollment. The sources of information for students are the first step in Bohman's decision-making model. Family and friends gave the initial idea of study abroad. Also discussed earlier, Ottinger (2009) also found students relied on those they trusted for information and advice.

***Recruiters, agents, and consultants.*** In an article on recruiting agents in the *World Educations and Reviews* monthly newsletter, Clark (2010) made a distinction between recruiters, agents, and consultants. An educational agent, using De Luca's (2007) definition, is someone (individual or corporate) who gives advice, support, and placement for local students who are interested in studying abroad. Clark (2010) added a financial term to this definition. A recruiter

is someone paid by the institution by head-count or on a retention basis, while a consultant gives families information about study abroad that is unpaid by the institution. Clark acknowledged the complexity, because sometimes families pay consultants to help navigate the application process. It is illegal to have commission-based recruitment in the United States as specified by Title IV in the Higher Education Act, but things are less clear with international recruitment. Although parents and families may be paying consultants to find a good match between a student and an institution, what they do not know is sometimes consultants suggest only institutions with whom they already have a relationship so they can gain a finder's fee.

Paid recruiters raise many issues, such as how much help is too much to get a student into an institution. When recruiters and consultants are getting paid by both the student and the institution, there is a sense of unjustness, especially when the involved parties do not realize that the individual is being doubly paid. Yet the question becomes, if not through agents, how is information getting to students, as agents play a role in how students hear about opportunities? The i-graduate report, *ICEF Agent Barometer 2010*, found that the agents surveyed ( $n = 673$ ) had collectively placed 239,915 students in exchange programs, language study, associate, undergraduate, and graduate studies (Archer, 2010). They also found that 92% of the agents gave away promotional material and 51% charged for the visa processing help.

In addition, Hagedorn and Zhang (2011) published a number of studies on the use of agents by Chinese students. In the summer of 2009, they traveled to Zhengzhou, a city in north central China, and surveyed students ( $n = 471$ ) at five high schools on whether they would use agents if they were planning to study abroad for college. Of those who were planning to use agents, Hagedorn and Zhang interviewed 60 students and found the main reason was the lack of knowledge about the application process. During the fall of 2010, Zhang and Hagedorn (2011)

invited Chinese undergraduate students ( $n = 900$ ) at four United States campuses to complete surveys on whether they used agents for their college applications and the reasons for their choice. Of those students, 257 completed the survey. They found students used agents because the application process was confusing. Services needed most from the agents were choosing best institution fit, initiating necessary contact, preparing application materials, and preparing visa applications. Agents understand the college application process, but the quality of the agents and whether they truly are serving the long-term interests of students and families is less known.

Further, Robison (2007) researched ethical concerns about agents through a case study of a Midwest college. She interviewed two agents and 12 recruits at one college and surveyed 22 international student officers at other Midwest colleges and universities. Robison found that some agents gave a lot of helpful information to international students, while others did not. Half of the institutions surveyed were not using agents due to lack of funding and distrust. Students interviewed discussed how agents helped them with mock visa interviews, translated documents, communicated with schools, helped with visa applications, and arranged travel for students. Negative interactions with agents included having information filtered, which left some students frustrated or panicky, and having to pay agents for obtaining scholarships. Campus officials appreciated agents because they were able to reach new students but remained cautious when negotiating contracts and commissions with agents. Robison concluded that students from countries with limited access to the Internet would remain dependent on agents, and therefore their experience with agents is important for enrollment and future recruitment.

For those students with access to the Internet, Altbach (2011) proposed a website sanctioned by the institution for accurate communication and abolishing agent use. He argued

that agents prevent good information flow, and a system of open and transparent communication is needed instead.

**Blogs and chat rooms.** Chat rooms and blogs are mentioned as alternative information sources, but only in passing in the literature. Clark and Sedgwick (2005) mentioned when international students shop for an institution, they go to chat rooms for information. For example, in China there are sites that are virtual bulletin board where users can post comments and respond to other posts. This type of site is popular for information exchange. Individuals interested in higher education would most likely visit a bulletin board service (BBS) hosted by the Chinese Service Center for Scholarly Exchange (CSCSE) at <http://www.cscse.edu.cn/>.

Yet, not all online sources are considered equal during the information gathering stage. Archer and Winters (2011) showed that of the 150,000 international students surveyed, only 4% used Facebook and other social media to pick their institution. Which sites students go to for information and how they hear about these sources have not been discussed in the literature I found. When discussing online communications, it is pertinent to take into consideration that the amount of access to Internet may limit some individuals from this type of information, as mentioned in Robison's (2007) study.

**Discussion.** When students look for information about a school in another country, often there is limited information available. The chance that an international student's friends and family have gone to the institution the student is considering may be slim. Students seek out people who have gone to a specific school or choose the schools that those close to them know about. Otherwise the student may seek out help from a professional or go online. Thus as Allen and Higgins (1994), Bohman (2010), and Lee (2010) argued institutions should maintain and

foster good relations with their international alumni as they can tell prospective students about their alma mater.

Word of mouth has become colloquial and used as such in research on international students' college choice. In this section, I have defined and contextualized word of mouth through research in communications and advertising, which can help with thinking about its potential impact (Arndt, 1967; Buttle, 1998; Hogan, Lemon, & Libai, 2004). International students trust those closest to them; it is not surprising family and friends have great influence (Bodycott, 2009; Bohman, 2010; Jones, 2006). Through a variety of research methodologies, the cited research is in agreement about the impact of family and friends. As a new and growing trend, the research on agents and their use is more limited, but there is agreement between large-scale surveys and small-scale individual interviews on why students are using agents—namely, students do not know how to navigate the application system (Archer, 2010; Clark, 2010; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Robison, 2007; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011). Finally, there is very limited research on international students' use of blogs and chat rooms for information on community colleges and other college choices (Clark & Sedgwick, 2005). Blogs and chat rooms are filled with information on community colleges, but the specifics are unknown (Archer & Winters, 2011). In fact, with all these information sources, the research has not focused on what is said and why it is influential.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This final section discusses theories to understand how the sources of information impact international students' expectations. I begin by describing three theories: expectancy disconfirmation, imperfect information (stemming from bounded rationality theory), and chain

migration. I end this section by discussing how these theories are helpful in thinking about how international students hear and then think about community colleges.

**Theory of expectancy confirmation/disconfirmation (ECT).** The first theory, expectancy confirmation, posits how the expectancy of an experience is connected to the experience itself and then the resulting satisfaction or dissatisfaction. ECT is based on the work of Oliver (1980) from the field of consumer satisfaction. Oliver approached outcomes with the idea that expectations create a frame of reference for one to interpret and judge the outcome. In consumer behavior, consequences of purchases are measured in either complaints or repurchases. The four basic components to this theory are expectation, performance, disconfirmation, and satisfaction. If the disconfirmation is positive, then consumers experience satisfaction, and if the disconfirmation is negative, then customers experience dissatisfaction.

The Expectancy Disconfirmation Theory is not without limitations. Yüksel and Yüksel (2001) argued that there are varying degrees of dissatisfaction, identified a range of definitions of expectation, questioned the conditions for satisfaction, and pointed out that some customers' expectations were met, but they reacted indifferently. For this literature review, I am interested in the limitations they grouped as "prepurchase expectations." Yüksel and Yüksel noted their product, hospitality and tourism, is actually a service. Customers, therefore, are satisfied or dissatisfied with something intangible but base their expectations on things that are tangible (e.g., facilities, personnel appearance). The final outcome is evaluated afterward on things that are intangible (e.g., value, experience).

Yüksel and Yüksel (2001) also pointed out that experienced customers not only made better choices while repurchasing, but also had more realistic expectations. Customers with no previous familiarity with a certain travel experience could not adequately form an expectation.

These inexperienced customers relied more on external sources of information to shape their expectations, which were less realistic (p. 112).

Expectation in the context of education has its own particularities. The College Student Expectations Questionnaire aims to measure this in a survey given to incoming students. The survey gives colleges insight in what areas students are uninformed or misinformed and lets the institutions inform students for more realistic expectations (Miller, Bender, Schuh, & Associates, 2005, p. 2). Miller, Bender, Schuh, and Associates (2005) argued past experiences inform guesses of what a future experience will be like making it pertinent to align student expectations to their actual experiences. The end satisfaction and the potential for success are closely tied with how realistic and accurate the expectation is.

Expectations can also act like a filter and promote or dissuade certain behavior. For example, if international students arrive on campus thinking they will have many opportunities to practice English, and they see a conversation partner program, they may be more inclined to join this program than students without this expectation. Students' expectations are formed, in part, by the messages that institutions send through their websites, ambassadors, and alumni.

**Rationality and imperfect information.** The micro theory to understand how students are using information to form ideas about community colleges is borrowed from behavioral economic theory of bounded rationality (Simon, 1955). The theory of rationality is based on maximized profits. Building off this idea, the theory of imperfect information proposes that individuals (or organizations) have constraints to their information processing when making decisions. Individuals have incomplete and imperfect information, which is amplified by lack of knowledge and limitations in the human mind to make decisions (Simon, 1997). Using this theory, I argue that the less complete and perfect the information international students are

receiving about community colleges, the more mismatched their expectations will be, while the more complete and perfect the information international students are receiving about community colleges, the more matched their expectations will be.

**Chain migration.** Although the theory of chain migration was introduced in the earlier section on college choice for international students at four-year institutions, this section will elaborate on the origins and use of this theory. MacDonald and MacDonald (1964) first proposed the concept of chain migration around how ethnic neighborhoods were formed. In their historic research on the networks southern Italian immigrants used to migrate to the northern United States, they wrote, “Prospective migrants learn of opportunities, are provided with transportation, and have initial accommodation and employment arranged *by means of primary social relationships with previous migrants*” (p. 80, emphasis original). The migrants came mainly from three sources: job bosses who recruited new laborers and were commissioned for new recruits, other previous migrants, and family members.

Person and Rosenbaum (2006) applied the model of chain migration to Latino/a students’ college decisions. Through interviews ( $n = 33$ ) and surveys ( $n = 4,365$ ) of students at 14 two-year institutions (half public and private) at a large Midwestern city and the surrounding suburbs, they found Latino/a students show greater reliance on family and friends for information on college, which may limit their search. The social capital that informs students about certain choices may later keep them from being involved on campus and encourage sticking to their ethnic enclave. For some occupational programs, students were recruited. Common to the recruited students for these programs is lack of any parental personal experience with higher education. “Although these numbers are small [of those recruited by the occupational program], they indicate that college recruiters may be one of the few sources of college information

available to students from families with low levels of education” (p. 55). In the survey data, Latino/a students, as compared to other ethnic groups, were statistically significant in their lack of understanding of graduation requirements.

**Discussion.** Chain migration theory can provide an understanding for how international students hear about community college as an option. This flow of information from one student to the next can be word of mouth, in person, or through electronic means. For example, one can post his or her experience on a forum or online community. A key component of chain migration is information flow, which fits with the previous discussion on word of mouth. A limitation Person and Rosenbaum (2006) found was that students sought out less information overall in their college search process when they relied on someone they trusted who was already at the institution. This component of chain migration aligns within the theory of imperfect information.

When international students are making decisions, they cannot be completely rational, as higher education is not a perfect market, and no one can have perfect and complete information (Long, 2007). Therefore, international students base their expectations on incomplete and imperfect information, which may or may not result in satisfaction. The basic framework of ECT may be extended to college choice with whether students recommend an institution.

For this literature review, I am focusing on the component of expectancy and how international students form expectations for their experience at community colleges, especially by what they are hearing and from whom they hear it from. Like the inexperienced customers in the tourism studies, international students are turning to those around them for more information, but this may result in less realistic expectations. I heed Yüksel and Yüksel’s (2001) caution about using ECT and acknowledge the limitations of not being able to capture the link between satisfaction and expectation. Using these three theories frames this study of the mismatch

between information students are receiving, from a variety of individuals and sources, which influences their expectations for the community college and their actual experience. It is how the different sources of information contribute to this mismatch that I proposed to study.

## **Discussion of the Literature**

International students attend community colleges for a variety of reasons. Some aspire to transfer to a nearby four-year institution, while others are learning English in a real-world environment, and others are managing their visa status (Bohman, 2010; Chung, 2008; Doku, 2007; Ottinger, 2009). If international students' expectations for attending community college are understood, perhaps their needs can be met or information given to help manage expectations. If students have a positive experience, then the chances for word-of-mouth advertising is high, which, according to literature, is the *main* way international students hear about this educational opportunity (Bodycott, 2009; Bohman, 2010; Doku, 2007; Hamrick, 2007; Jones, 2006; Kisch, 2012; Lee, 2008; Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003).

Serving a diverse student body, community colleges are starting and restarting points for countless Americans (Bailey & Morest, 2006). Community colleges give students opportunities to become globally competent through changes in mission and curriculum, and now, cross-cultural interactions on campus (Green, 2007; Green & Siaya, 2005; Goodwin & Nacht, 1991; Raby & Valeau, 2007; Siaya & Hayward, 2003). The benefits flow both ways. At community colleges, international students have an opportunity to get an American education with smaller classes and more individual attention. An additional benefit for the community college is the out-of-state tuition that international students contribute. Although the number of international students has grown in the past few years, with increasing competition and challenges of studying

in the United States as compared to other nations, it is uncertain if this number will continue to rise.

International students choose certain community colleges because of others' previous experience with them, whether a close or distant friend (Archer & Winters, 2011; Bodycott, 2009; Bohman, 2010; Jones, 2006). If knowledgeable family and friends are not available, sometimes international students turn to agents for help, which raises ethical questions both for the institution and student (Clark, 2010; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Robison, 2007; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011). Blogs and chat rooms are another information source that needs more research (Clark & Sedgwick, 2005).

I am using Expectation Confirmation Theory to understand international students' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their community college experiences as influenced by their initial expectations (Oliver, 1980). Combined with the theories of chain migration and imperfect information, I expect that the information sources, pre-expectations, experience, disconfirmation, and satisfaction can be linked.

One of the themes Robison (2007) discussed in her analysis of interviews with students who had used agents was power and control. She wrote, "One of the ways people hold power over other people is through the control of information" (p. 172). The information students receive from friends, family, agents, and chat rooms varies in its completeness and perfectness (accuracy). The individuals who are the sources of information have power over what the students have access to and form their expectations around. Theoretically, with the Internet, prospective students have access to more voices and experiences.

The number of students worldwide studying abroad is projected to increase in the upcoming years (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2010). This rise, coupled with decreasing

funding at federal and state levels, leads to an interest in enrolling international students at community colleges. But to serve their needs, more research on how they are hearing about community colleges and what they expect out of their experience at these institutions will be important. If international students' expectations are met, the chances for positive word of mouth are greater than if their experience is a negative one. If community colleges know the sources of information and what is being said, they can interrupt the communication flow with accurate material, whether through online channels or brochures left with agents, to help students have more accurate expectations.

## **Conclusion**

There are nearly 90,000 international students at United States community colleges, which is a significant increase from 5 and 10 years ago (IIE, 2012). The top sending countries are Vietnam, South Korea, and China. International students choose to study at community colleges because of personal connections, having lived in that community, or friends in the area (Bohman, 2010; Doku, 2007; Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003). For others, the choice is made for them—wanting to keep their children in English schools or government programs which have predetermined partner schools (Chung, 2008; Ottinger, 2009). For others, the decision is based on available finances and English ability (Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003). International students receive information about community colleges from family and friends, agents, and online communities, generally through word of mouth communications (Archer, 2010; Archer & Winters, 2011; Bodycott, 2009; Bohman, 2010; Clark, 2010; Clark & Sedgwick, 2005; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Jones, 2006; Robison, 2007; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011).

If the medium is the message, I suggest that how international students hear about community college—whether directly from their parents and friends or through reading an online posting from a fellow classmate—will shape their expectations for their experience. Tracing the sources of information flow can enable institutions to place information strategically so that students may have more accurate picture of their future experience at community colleges. Lee (2008) found that with more information, international students had more realistic expectations, which aligns with how having more perfect information allows for clearer expectation formation in the theory of imperfect information. The proposed research is to trace where international students are getting their information and the expectations they are forming for their community college experience.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods**

My question about the type of information international students are receiving and how this informs their expectations of their community college experience stems from a wish to understand where the information about community college is coming from and how this matches or does not match an individual's experience. This chapter focuses on the design of this study, taking into account the literature on international students at community colleges, the identified gap in literature, and the need for additional research to formulate the research questions for this dissertation.

#### **Research Design**

Through a series of interviews with international students at two community colleges, I explored how these students heard about their community college and their expectations of their education experience. In addition to these interviews, I examined websites and other documents students went to for information about community colleges. Using the data collected from the websites, the comments were used for additional conversation starters in following interviews with informants.

This interpretative qualitative study looked at how ideas were formed about the community college and how different individuals in an international student's life might impact these ideas. The interviews began by inquiring how international students picked a community college to attend. Through each subsequent interview, the components of influence were broken down and discussed. When each part was examined individually (impact of a website, a parental comment, or a discussion with a friend, for example) and then put back as part of the whole, it

changes the understanding of the phenomenon. Examining each piece, the complexity of the whole increased (Morehouse, 2012; Stake, 2010). The research questions for this project were as follows:

1. During the exploration stage of international students' college choice process, why do they turn to the sources of information on community colleges that they do? What are the sources telling them?
2. How does the way in which international students hear about community colleges impact their expectations of their experience?
3. What are the expectations international students have of their American community college experience prior to arrival?

The primary way to answer these questions was to ask international students what their expectations were. International students were asked to remember when they were applying to community colleges when answering the questions. I was strategic in the timing of the interviews: the students had been in the United States for only a few weeks, so their expectations were more readily recalled. As the main research questions were how and why, the way to answer them was primarily through qualitative means such as interviews and content analysis.

**Setting.** This qualitative research project was bounded by place and time. There were two sites: both are community colleges in Texas in a large city. The community college institutional type was selected because it changes to serve its different constituents, has distinctive international student programs, and there are growing numbers of international students enrolling. There is a lack of literature about this new student population attending the community college. Community colleges serve a unique role in American higher education, which prompts the question of if students are aware of this when they enroll. In some ways, enrollment at the community college may require more information.

The specific research sites were selected for two reasons. First, the Institute of International Education reports annually on the previous year's international student data,

including the top 40 schools that enrolled the most international students in the report, *Open Doors* (IIE, 2011). Using the 2011 report, the two community colleges were selected from the list of the top 40 associate's degree granting institutions. Selecting institutions from this list was one way to preserve anonymity for the participants and interview students from a diverse range of countries. Second, as noted in the literature review, much of the research on international students at community college is conducted in the Midwest. In the *2011 Open Doors* list for the top 40 associate's degree granting institutions, there were four geographic clusters: California, New York, Texas, and Washington. Curious about the clustering, I chose to base the research in Texas. Texas turned out to be a unique place to situate this study. With a larger community college district and state-wide mandates serving low-income and first generation students, in some ways these institutions are the ideal for international students to enter (Smith, Miller, & Bermeo, 2009).

Two institutions were selected for greater general applicability. A total of 15 students from the two community colleges participated. The period of time for observations and interviews was from August to October 2012, the first few months that the participating international students were in the United States, adjusting to their community college experience.

In the following description of the two participating institutions, some details have been modified to preserve anonymity. The two selected two-year, public, community colleges have a number of similarities. Both are located in the greater Dallas area, are part of different large community college districts, have multi-campus, and are classified under the Carnegie Classification as serving an urban population. Both schools were *not* actively recruiting international students, yet had a large international student population.

Sunterra College was founded in the late-1970s and currently has three campuses. Sunterra College is one of several colleges in its district and enrolled around 11,000 students in 2011-2012. Of those students, 1.5% were international, which is down from 2010-2011 when 3% of their students were classified as international. Nepal and Mexico were leading countries of origin for Sunterra College's international students. In 2010, the most recent data available, there were 650 Nepalese students and 230 Mexican students enrolled in Sunterra College district.

Tuition and fees for fall semester 2012 at Sunterra College for 12 credits was \$550 for those in-district, \$1,000 for those out of district, and \$1,600 for non-residents (Fall 2012 tuition and fees, 2012). At Rosa College, tuition and fees for fall semester in 2012 was \$400 for those in-district, \$800 for those out of district, and \$1500 for non-residents.

Rosa College was founded in the mid-1980s, serving around 53,000 students at its four campuses. It has over 100 degrees and certifications available for students. In 2010-2011, of the 5,000 new first-time, first-year students, 3% were international student. In 2011-2012, the new international student enrollment as first-time, first-year students was slightly lower at 2.6% of 4,900 students.

I choose to interview starting in late-August/early-September because I wanted to capture student expectation before being influenced by their community college experience. However, interviewing in the beginning of the school year proved to be challenging. Whereas students were not yet swamped with school work, there were many activities demanding attention from students. Students wanted to start their semester strong and would flock to the library which sometimes made it difficult to find a place to conduct the interviews. Students were not the only ones busy. Staff members were getting back into pace and could not help me recruit students as planned. At one institution they were unable to send out the recruitment email to students until

mid-September because that was when the school's listserv of international students was updated with all new students. In addition one confirmed institution for this study backed out unexpectedly at the beginning of the summer. While a second institution was found, this affected when I could start interviewing students.

**Permission to conduct research.** To receive permission to interview students for this study and the pilot study, two steps were taken. First, I received ethical human subject approval from my home institution, University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, after submitting documents to the Institutional Review Board at the College of Education. Then I contacted the two institutions for their participation. All three institutions had their own IRB procedures which included describing the project, giving a list of sample questions asked during an interview, and approval from administration. After receiving the host institution's permission to conduct the study, the international student coordinator, or someone in a similar position, became my contact person at the institution.

**Participants and sample.** The participants for this study were chosen through purposive sampling, a technique to choose intentionally individuals from which the research can gain a deeper understanding about the investigated phenomenon (Patton, 1990). There are many ways to be purposive in one's sampling. For example, one can purposively choose extreme cases to learn from an outlier experience, or participants can be selected because they experienced a certain phenomenon of interest to the researcher.

The contact person at each school had the recruitment posters hung and e-mailed, on my behalf, potential students the last week of August 2012. After the initial invitation e-mail was sent between end of August and mid-September 2012, interested students contacted me directly. (Due to system updates, Sunterra College was not able to send out my email to first-year students

until mid-September 2012, which pushed back some of the interviews.) I was mindful that these students had just arrived in the United States and was careful to explain the voluntary nature of the research so they did not feel obligated to participate. Additionally, these initial exchanges gave me an opportunity to select participants purposively.

The criterion that I used to select participants for the first interview was maximum variation. I looked for individuals who varied in ways they heard about the community college. From this initial group of 15 students who were interviewed, four students were invited for an additional conversation. Although I planned on interviewing only first time, first year international students, four students had been enrolled longer. These interviews actually provided a greater perspective, especially as some students had time to contemplate in what ways their expectations were not being fulfilled, so I kept those interviews as part of the study. For most of the interviews, when I asked the last question, the main ways which students formed their expectations and found out information about the community college had been answered. Those that I invited for additional conversations had more complex information flows. The complexity was fleshed out during the additional interviews. Two of the second interviews focused on students who had mentioned in the first interview that they all were influenced by something they had seen online. The other second interviews focused on students who had more to say about relative and friend information influence. One student, who had multiple sources of information, was asked to do a third interview. She was selected in this purposive sampling because she was information rich and had maximum variation among those being interviewed. The sampling technique used in this dissertation research was based on purposive sampling. But I also used a tier method in which at first there was a large group, and later in the process there were only a few participants who had abundance knowledge to share about information

dissemination and expectation formation for international students at the community college (Stake, 2010).

Ideal participants for this research were students from a variety of countries who heard about the community college through various means. There has been research done on use of agents, so participants chosen for this study mainly had *not* used an agent, as sometimes the agents limited the institutional choice for students. However, no students in Texas that I had contact with used an agent. Students in the pilot study did mention agent use. In addition, when choosing students for additional interviews, I looked for students with whom I had built a rapport, who were willing to discuss their journey to the community college, and had something more to say about their journey to the community college. This aligns with my philosophy that the interview process is sharing and not simply information gathering (Sincoff & Goyer, 1984).

The goal for the current study was not to draw comparisons between countries of origin or to generalize these findings to the experiences of all international students at community colleges. However, the aim of this research was to provide a rich, holistic description of expectations for one group of students who navigated their way to two Texas community colleges. The following table summarizes those who participated in this study, their country of origin, course of study, gender, and where and from whom students found information about the community college.

Table 1

*List of Participants*

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Course of study	Gender	Source of information
Ale	Eastern Europe	Government	F	Friends
Amy	West Africa	Business	F	Brother
Bibek	Nepal	Media/Computers	M	Cousin/Internet

(table continues)

Table 1 (continued)

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Course of study	Gender	Source of information
Christi	Southern Africa	Science	F	Sister
Christina	Central America	Psychology	F	Cousin/Internet/Friend
Hass	South Korea	Mathematics	M	Friend of Friend/Internet
Jackie	Vietnam	Biology	F	Aunt/Internet
Jon	East Africa	Accounting	M	Sister
Luke	South America	Computer science	M	Sister
Moyo	West Africa	Neuroscience	F	Aunt
Ray	West Africa	Accounting	M	Uncle
Sky	Nepal	Science	M	Uncle
Tanya	Southern Africa	Nursing	F	Aunt/Counselor/Internet
Veronica	Central America	Business/Finance	F	Sister/Internet
Yona	Eastern Europe	Hospitality	F	Internet

Students choose their own pseudonym. As some of the students were from countries where there were only a handful of other students I choose to further disguise their countries of origin so they could remain anonymous as promised.

### Data Collection

**Pilot study.** In March 2012, I conducted a pilot study where I interviewed five students from an Illinois community college. The pilot college, Brookfield College, is a public two-year institution with a single campus classified as serving a rural population. Brookfield enrolled 10,000 students of which 200 were international students. The pilot study was conducted to test out questions and possible areas of inquiry for future interviews.

**Data collection timeline.** The data for this research project was collected during the fall of 2012 from August until November. I contacted the schools for participation after receiving IRB approval from the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign at the end of February, 2012.

During the summer of 2012, I relocated to Texas for the study and visited both schools. In these visits, I met the international student coordinator and re-explained my project. One school decided they had too many commitments for the Fall and backed out of the study. Another institution was then contacted and agreed to be part of the project. In the middle of August 2012, I brought recruitment posters to these contacts and they e-mailed first year international students on my behalf at the end of the month. In addition, during the summer I started coding and analyzing websites that were mentioned in interviews during the pilot study for the ethnographic content analysis portion of this research project.

I began interviewing students the last week of August 2012 and continued interviewing every 2 to 3 weeks. We met at a public location such as a cafeteria on campus, café, library study room, or student lounge. In between weeks of interviews, I transcribed the interviews of the previous week and analyzed them for themes to develop during the following interviews. I sent reminder e-mails a day before an interview to confirm the meeting with participants.

At the start of each interview, I would remind the participant of the voluntary nature of the study and ask how the student's week had gone. If I had a previous interview with the participant, I would give the student a copy of the preceding conversation to allow the student to make any changes and also to remind the participant of our prior conversation. Sometimes interviewees would take the transcribed interviews home with them to make changes and give them back to me at a following date.

I concluded the last set of interviews in October 2012 and member checked these interviews in November 2012. I transcribed the rest of the interviews in November and December 2012 and conducted further analysis of the data while writing the up the findings

during the winter of 2012. At the end of the semester in December 2012, I contacted the students that had participated in the study to thank them.

After interviews were completed, I compiled all the websites that were mentioned by students during the interviews for the content analysis portion of the research. Sites examined included both school's websites, links to social media from these websites, and one EducationUSA website. In total, 2,507 Facebook posts (four accounts for the length of existence of each page, the earliest from July 2009 to December 2012), 2,133 Twitter tweets (three accounts for the length of existence of each account, the earliest from August 2009 to December 2012), 214 Flickr pictures (two accounts, pictures delimited to those from the past year), 36 YouTube videos (two accounts, videos delimited to the past year), and one MySpace account were categorized and analyzed.

**Reliability.** As a researcher exploring the experience of others, I constructed the reality of community college information dissemination and expectation formation for international students based on the data collected from participants. There are several strategies to improve internal validity in qualitative research: using multiple sources of information (e.g., field notes, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis), triangulation, member checking, research reflexivity (reflective journals), engagement with the data, maximum variation between participants, and rich descriptions (Merriam, 2002). Using different sources of evidence in the same context to analyze a phenomenon can help it be more valid, as explained by Denzin (1984) as data source triangulation.

For this study, I relied on interviews and ethnographic content analysis as multiple sources of information. Interviews were conducted because the participants knew something that I do not (Stake, 2010). In this case, the topic that I did not know about was the process of

exploring options for study and forming ideas about community college as an international student. During the first interview with students, we discussed broadly the process of searching for information during their exploration stage. The second interview focused on where students obtained information, including websites and the comments left by users on websites. Specifically this interview was constructed to explore the impact of the information on students' expectation of the community colleges. If students had more to say about expectations of the community college at deeper levels, including interactions with peers, teaching styles, and campus appearance, I conducted a third interview; however, most of these topics were covered in the first two interviews. Interview questions were asked in an open and sequential manner that was developed to help participants talk about how their ideas of the community college were formed and what influenced their thinking (Sincoff & Goyer, 1984; Spradley, 1979).

A second way of collecting data was capturing documents that students referred to and that institutions provided. After interviews with students, I followed up and looked at the websites they mentioned and read the materials that the school provided them. In particular, if the international students and I went online together, I went back to those websites. All these documents, both online and offline, were collected for analysis.

Triangulation is defined in many ways. I think of triangulation as points at which the data collected converges. Not all the stories and ways international students form their expectations and ideas about community college will converge, yet in those places that they do converge, I seek to understand the multiple perspectives of that data point. For example, if students are clustering at one website for information about a particular community college, whether it is the college's website or a third-party website, in my interviews with students I may bring up an anonymous student's reaction to a comment or a page to seek out comprehension of the impact

of the website. Using both interviews and documents may create opportunities, as the example shows, for concept development as these two sources of data interact with each other (Altheide, 1996).

Member checking can improve validity. Therefore after interviews were over and I transcribed them, I member checked with students the tentative findings to see if there was any inaccuracy in my analysis or anything I was missing. Through presentation of the data and findings to students and student advisers, I was able to get a sense of whether these findings were plausible. Presenting at conferences (Association for the Study of Higher Education and American International Recruitment Council) and speaking with professionals who worked with international students helped test out findings and implications as well.

Another way to improve internal validity to the research project was to identify critically my own position through reflexivity. Through the use of a reflection journal, I pondered how my assumptions and worldviews impacted the study and my investigation of the phenomenon. At the end of this chapter, I conclude with some of these thoughts. These journals were used to capture emerging themes, subjective feelings, and any striking nonverbal behaviors during the interviews. Later, these journal entries helped contextualize the comments made by participants and document my interaction with the project.

In addition, after collecting the data, for two months, I sat and “drowned in the data” before emerging with a clearer sense of themes and potential findings. I also used purposiveness in selecting participants for this study to maximize the diversity in the participants’ experiences. Finally in the presentation of this dissertation, I have included rich descriptions of my conversations, observations, and document analysis not only to allow the reader to understand my reasoning, but also to form their own interpretation of the data.

I see my role as the researcher as the instrument of data collection. As students were new in the area, I wondered if any students would be upset if our relationship did not continue after the interviews. However, most students were already beginning to form their own friendships and saw the interviews as a time for conversation about ways to help the school improve its process of information flow. My students eagerly shared how they formed their expectations and ways information flow could have been better. While I left communications lines open for students to contact me after the interviews, none did. I did use my knowledge networks to help students when I could. For example, when students had questions about academic activities or expressed interest in joining extracurricular activities, when I knew of organizations and offices at the community college, I would inform the students of these opportunities. When students expressed confusion about classes or transfer processes, I urged them to talk with their advisors and professors.

### **Data Analysis**

I carried out data collection as I data analyzed, as seen in the research timeline found at the end of this chapter (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 2002). I chose to analyze data and collect data at the same time, so the analysis could influence the type of questions asked during interviews (Charmaz, 2006). Having time to analyze the emerging themes from the interviews also helped me be aware of possible gaps in the phenomenon I was studying, giving me an opportunity to look for pertinent data.

The process is one that is interpretive, which allows themes and concepts to emerge from the data rather than a deductive process (Merriam, 2002). After each interview, the themes were coded so emerging themes could be addressed and probed further in the following interviews. I

did this by writing down ideas that were repeated during the interview immediately after the interview or within 24 hours of the interview. In addition, in the following week after the interviews, I listened to the recordings and again wrote down ideas that were repeated or if there was contradictory information. I used open coding, which meant I used words, phrases, and themes repeated that emerged from what participants said during the interviews. To avoid being overwhelmed with data, I began data analysis after each interview and wrote up field notes within a day of collecting. I also kept a researcher reflective journal to record observations, thoughts, emerging themes, and other insights.

After each set of interviews I wrote up a synopsis of what I was hearing, which I brought to member check at the start of the next interview. In October and November while finishing up interviews, I took time to digest the data and transcribe all the interviews. This process allowed for extended time to be immersed in the data (Morehouse, 2012; Stake, 2010). All interviews that were transcribed, recordings of the interviews, and any additional data collected were saved in a password protected file and computer. For physical documents, they were held in a secure place. After 12 initial interviews were finished, I began coding using the themes and categories that emerged from the initial readings. I then grouped the codes into categories which began my emerging themes. In the last three interviews, when I saw what my participants were telling me fell into these created categories, I realized that I had reached a saturation point.

A second way of collecting and analyzing data for this project was ethnographic content analysis of the institution website, other informative websites, and physical documents. Ethnographic content analysis, like interpretive research, allows the categories and topics to emerge from the analysis without preconceived categories in which to analyze the documents, or what Strauss (1990) described as “in vivo codes” (Altheide, 1987). This methodology was

developed in contrast to quantitative content analysis and was used to understand the meaning being communicated (Altheide, 1996). As the data was collected and analyzed during the study, this allowed for reconceptualization of topics and for the analysis to impact the study. With the researcher as central to the process, ethnographic content analysis is the interplay of constant discovery and constant comparison to discover categories and themes.

Using open coding, I used the consistent question, *what is this source telling the reader about the community college*, to analyze the data about the community college for the comments that signaled the individual attended or was attending the institution (Strauss, 1990). Again I let the categories of comments, pictures, and videos surface from the collected data.

### **Data Presentation**

Keeping with the tradition of qualitative study, this project explores how meanings are constructed around the information received about community college from the perspective of international students. Striving to understand the complexity of how expectations form and how students navigate and make sense of different pieces of information, I present these topics in this dissertation and do not attempt to simplify the messiness (Merriam, 2002). The data and themes presented will have rich descriptions to give the reader a sense of who participated in this research study and how they formed their ideas about the community college through different conversations and readings.

### **Limitations**

Qualitative research is limited in its scope and cannot be generalized to larger populations. Only a few individuals were studied, but they were studied in great depth (Stake, 1995).

Additional limitations include that when individuals form an idea of something, it is not just one moment but many moments that cement the ideas. Understanding that international students' expectations of community colleges are a dynamic undertaking: as students arrive on campus, the expectations have already changed and continue to change before I interviewed, while I interviewed, and after I interviewed students. I was unable to fly to other countries and follow potential students who were thinking about attending community colleges as they had conversations and searched online for information to find out, at that moment, what they thought it would be like. Even if I could have, these individuals might have been unable to articulate these ideas, because sometimes expectations are not known until they are not met.

Students and I had conversations in English, which for the most part was not their first language. Some meaning was inevitably lost by using their non-dominant language. Speaking in a second language may have inhibited clear communication, and interviewees may not have been able to articulate their thoughts fully.

## **Reflexivity**

I, as the researcher, was the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing the data, which means that who I am and the story of my involvement and experiences with international students impacted how I collected and analyzed the data (Merriam, 2002). This research stemmed from my personal interests in communications and friendships with international students. The idea was sparked by a news article quoted at the beginning of the dissertation. I was startled by what I read. My previous graduate study was in the field of advertising and communications, which made me curious about how different types of communication were impacting students' expectations.

My positionality as a first-generation Chinese American female born and raised in Wisconsin, speaking Mandarin Chinese at home and English at school, and learning the impact of culture on who I was as I negotiated American culture are factors influencing the data collection and analysis. I have not been an international student. This inexperience with the navigation of the academic system and figuring out a new culture positions me as an outsider to this phenomenon. I have been befriended by a number of international students who have invited me into their lives and left lasting impact on my life and heart. All these experiences contribute to my worldview and impact this study from sparking my initial interest in how international students hear about their college of choice to questioning fairness of price they pay, both financially and experientially.

Although I have not been an international student in the United States, I am the daughter of an international student who immigrated to the United States after completing his graduate studies. My parents have shown compassion toward international students. When they were students, they found friendship and community with their fellow students, and later, when they had established themselves in Wisconsin, our family welcomed international students into our home. I remember Thanksgiving dinners spent hosting Chinese students with elaborate meals (full of Chinese dishes, with a small turkey on the side). When I went to college, I was involved in a living learning program in which the uniting topic was diversity, antiracism, and culture. The floor was made up of one-third white American students, one-third minority American students, and one-third international students. Many students were from missionary families but saw themselves as third culture kids because they had grown up in another country such as Senegal, Thailand, or Japan. They looked “American,” but felt very much not American. From these new

friends I learned about distant places, homesickness, not fitting in, the superficiality of the American greeting, “How are you?” and much more.

In graduate school, I quickly became involved in a student organization that welcomed international students and explored faith and culture through community. I became a student leader in this group and interacted with students from around the world, from starting freshmen to exchange scholars who were professors in their home countries. I have been privileged to befriend students through potlucks, informal hang outs, and meaningful conversations during their three-month to four-year stays in the United States.

During the summer of 2011, I questioned where I was heading with my academic career, and the pieces of my academic history, student organization involvement, and interest in higher education collided. If institutions are claiming international student enrollment in higher education institutions in the United States is a win-win situation—gaining greater financial stability through international student tuition and increasing transfer rates—the situation needs to be a “win” for the international student as well (Abelmann, Kwon, Liao, & Lo, 2012; Andrade & Evans, 2009; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2013; Kisch, 2012). Caring about students’ opportunity for education, I am pleased that the context of my research is community colleges, institutions that open doors for many individuals. Although this section is intentional space for reflexivity, I remain committed to thinking intentionally about how my experiences influence this research and my perceptions of findings about expectations international students have of community colleges.

## Research Timeline

The table below describes the timeline for data collection and analysis. For sample interview questions please see the Appendix A.

Table 2

### *Timeline for Data Collection and Analysis*

Date	Stage of research
January 2012	Submitted project to ethics review board
February 2012	Preliminary approval from the ethics review board, pending institution approval. Contacted pilot institution in Illinois and two community colleges in Texas. Pilot institution granted permission.
March 2012	International student coordinator sent out a recruitment e-mail to all international students at the Pilot College. Students responded and I interviewed five students from China, Indonesia, and South Korea.
April 2012	Two institutions in Texas gave permission for the study to be done (Appendix B) and final ethics review board approval given.
June/July 2012	Familiarized myself with the campuses in Texas and met the international student coordinators at Rosa College and Sunterra College. Began coding websites that students mentioned in the pilot study for emerging themes and ideas. Original second institution backed out and found a replacement second research site.
August 2012	Rosa and Sunterra international coordinators sent out a recruitment e-mail on my behalf to first year international students (Appendix C). Interested students contacted me directly and I set up 15 interviews for the first round of interviews.
September 2012	First and second round of interviews continued. After interviews, transcribed the data and began looking for emerging themes. Went to the websites students had described for ethnographic content analysis of comments left.
November 2012	Member checked transcribed interviews with interviewees. Initial findings presented at ASHE and AIRC annual conference, soliciting feedback from conference goers.
December 2012 to January 2013	Data analysis and writing. Completed online analysis of any mentioned websites from fall interviews.
March 2013	Defend dissertation.
April 2013	Deposit dissertation.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

International students look online, discuss with friends and family, and sometimes talk with admissions counselors about studying at a community college in the United States. However, much of the community college experience is not discussed and left up to students' imaginations, including the nature of friendships, climate of where the school is, and dynamics of classroom interactions. As more international students discover community colleges as an avenue into higher education in the United States, it is important to know how these potential students are learning about the school and what they think the experience will be like. As expectations can form a kind of filter for potential students' experiences, understanding what students think the community college will be like can help manage student expectations through more accurate information flows.

The purpose of my research is to explore the access to information international students had of the community college and how different sources are influential in the expectations students form. To answer these questions, 15 international students were interviewed at two community colleges in Texas. In addition, any mentioned websites from the initial interviews were visited with the students in a second interview. Later, I conducted an ethnographic content analysis of these sites.

This chapter of the dissertation presents the findings. Three main areas of findings emerged from the collected data: information pathways to the community college, impact of the information (or lack of), and challenged expectations. I present the findings in these three areas by starting with a vignette, a scene which brings the reader in for a few moments and introduces

an issue (Stake, 1995). These short stories lead into nine specific findings that are expanded upon.

Words in quotations used in the findings names come directly from interviews with students.

Findings of the research are:

Information pathways to the community college

1. “Having a person”: Students connected by a person to the community college
2. “You need new information”: Sources of information closer to the community college were trusted more
3. “The first concern was like the spot, the second was financial aid. Third, of course, what I want to take”: Three factors driving students’ decision making

Impact of information (or lack of)

4. Media helped shape students’ images of the community college and the United States
5. “I guess I didn’t understand what developmental classes was”: Lack of information and understanding about placement tests, prerequisites, and transfer
6. “Yes I read. But you don’t know what everything means.” Academic terminology on school websites contributes to confusion

Challenged expectations

7. “So completely hard”: Unexpected relational challenges
8. “I started trying to meet someone to marry here”: Visa regulations make students cautious about futures
9. “Why wouldn’t you come to this place? There are so many people here that want to help you succeed”: Care of staff, flexibility of schedules, and unexpected resources are positive surprises

To summarize my major findings, I have created a table that consists of the participants and the themes that emerged from the data analysis.

Table 3

*Summary of Participant Responses*

Participants	Information pathways to the community college			Impact of information (or lack of)			Challenged expectations		
	“Having a person”	Closest source to school	Factors driving decision	Media impact	Lacking information	Academic terminology confusion	Relational challenges	Concerns about future	Good surprises
Ale	Friends in Dallas	School website, “everything is on the website”	Opportunity and price. “You can finance yourself”		Lacking info on transfer	Credit hour	None. “I am okay by myself”	Wants to be a lawyer in the U.S. but not sure of how to finance	Encouragement from professors and school resources
Amy	Brother in Dallas, who “took care of everything”	Brother went to campus for her	Opportunity and location		Lacking information on transfer		Falling out with brother and sister	Very nervous and uncertain about future	Appreciates care of staff at IS office, where “they want you to succeed.”
Bibek	Cousin went to community college	School website but is was “not intuitive,” so listened to his cousin	Location, price, and majors available	Withdrew application to another school, as the Wikipedia noted gun shootings	Not sure difference between 2 and 4 years		Cousin introduced him to friends	Considering opportunity to study on the East Coast	
Christi	Sister in Dallas	Sister had a friend who went to the community college	Location, price, and opportunity	Television portrayed, “once you go to the United States you’re going to be rich”	Lacking information on transfer	Dual credit	“How am I supposed to make friends?”	Plans to transfer to four-year institution	Been able to save a lot of money and IS office is warm and friendly

(table continues)

Table 3 (continued)

Participants	Information pathways to the community college			Impact of information (or lack of)			Challenged expectations		
	“Having a person”	Closest source to school	Factors driving decision	Media impact	Lacking information	Academic terminology confusion	Relational challenges	Concerns about future	Good surprises
Christina	Cousin who lives in the United States, Internet, Friend in Dallas	School website, but “it’s not clear and thus, “not too helpful”	Price and location, “closer to [her] country”		Understood transfer. Lacked information on testing and visa	Core classes, bachelor, university v. college	“I was just coming to school and back home,” lonely	Planning to transfer and being careful in choosing classes	Been able to save a lot of money and IS office is warm and friendly
Hass	Friend of a church friend in Dallas	School website, which “gave a lot of good information”	Quality of education	NBA and Hollywood was all he knew about the United States	Lacking info on prerequisites	College v. University		Feels pressure from U.S. government to know what he’s doing next	Teachers wanted to get to know him and “always encourages” him
Jackie	Aunts in Dallas, “suggested she go to the community college”	School website	Opportunity, location, price. “It costs a lot to study abroad, but you know the chance comes” and you take it.		Lacking info on transfer		Relationships are good	Plans to transfer but not sure of finances and process	Likes meeting people from all around the world and elective classes
Jon	Sister in Dallas	Sister, who visited the school	Price and opportunity	Movies portray U.S. as wealthy and comfortable	Lacking info on transfer	Credit hour, transfer	No, sister taking care of him	“I’m not sure if my classes are counting.” Uncertain of if he’ll transfer	Appreciates support of staff and help for achieving graduation goals

(table continues)

Table 3 (continued)

Participants	Information pathways to the community college			Impact of information (or lack of)			Challenged expectations		
	“Having a person”	Closest source to school	Factors driving decision	Media impact	Lacking information	Academic terminology confusion	Relational challenges	Concerns about future	Good surprises
Luke	Sister in Dallas	Sister took classes at the community college	Opportunity	Thought it would be like New York or Hollywood like movies			Likes that he’s getting to know his sister better	Hopes to transfer	Enjoys the diversity of students, caring professors, elective classes, and no graffiti on walls
Moyo	Aunt in Texas (not in Dallas at the time)	Aunt, but “you need new information”	Opportunity and price. “If you want to cut down cost on your schooling, it’s better to start here.”		Lacking info on transfer		Supportive host family, but looking for alternative finances	Transferring to a four-year institution but is lacking a few classes	Enjoys seriousness of classes and being motivated by other students
Ray	Uncle in Dallas	Uncle, then school website	Money, “it’s a way to save money”	Television in general helped shape what he thought	Lacking info on transfer		Disappointed with relationship with class mates and family	Hopes to transfer to a four-year	Enjoys elective classes and getting to know professors
Sky	Uncle in Dallas	Uncle who knew of the community college	Opportunity, Price, Location		Lacking info on transfer and prerequisites		Hosts were newly married, so he moved out	Thinks he wants to transfer but unsure what to major in for now	Internet is really fast. Lots of different opportunities (major, activities)

(table continues)

Table 3 (continued)

Participants	Information pathways to the community college			Impact of information (or lack of)			Challenged expectations		
	“Having a person”	Closest source to school	Factors driving decision	Media impact	Lacking information	Academic terminology confusion	Relational challenges	Concerns about future	Good surprises
Tanya	Aunt in Dallas and counselor at the Education USA center	School website that “tells you the exact thing.”	Opportunity, Money, Location	Hollywood where they “show you to best part of America.”	Lacking info on prerequisite and how that impacts course availability	“I might have read it but I don’t know what it means.” Blackboard, professors, credit hours	Hosts were too bossy, so she moved, felt like a burden, hard to make friends	Finding a job so she can stay in the country, warns students to be practical	Extracurricular activities and having new opportunities
Veronica	Sister in Dallas	Sister in Dallas	Opportunity, Location, Money		Lacking information on remedial classes, pre-tests, and transfer		Hard to make friends and she “doesn’t have as many friends as she’d like.”	Wants to transfer	“Good professors,” who are “really prepared”
Yona	Did not have a personal contact	School website (found wrong information)	Major, Location, Money		Lacking info on transfer			Looking to transfer	Friendly staff, and many want to help, flexible class schedule

The first major theme, information pathways to the community college, answers the first research question: During the exploration stage of international students' college choice process, why do they turn to the sources of information on community colleges that they do? What are the sources telling them? I found that my students had a person, their anchor, whom they turned to for information and trusted information closer to the community college. The second theme, impact of information (or lack of), answers the second question: How does the way in which international students hear about community colleges impact their expectations of their experience? My students were influenced by the media when forming ideas about the community college. There was confusion and questions about placement tests, the transfer process, and prerequisites. When students did not have information about aspects of the community college, they did not know what to expect. Finally, the third major theme, challenged expectations, answers the final research question: What are the expectations international students have of their American community college experience prior to arrival? Students had expectations about friendships and their future that were challenged. Good surprises, things that students did not expect, included how caring and helpful staff and professors were, having flexible classes, and finding college resources. The remainder of this chapter explicates these nuanced findings, providing further detail and interpretation of results pertaining to the three research questions.

### **Information Pathways to the Community College**

We sat outside since it was a nice day, and Ray liked the fresh air compared to the icy air conditioning the school was blasting inside. As we talked, Ray described his journey to that community college from his home country in West Africa. Ever since Ray was young, he dreamed of attending school in the United States. His uncle, his mother's brother, moved to

Dallas about 14 years ago. Life there seemed so glamorous, based on what he heard from his cousin and saw on television. When Uncle Tim asked Ray if he wanted to come to the United States for college, he jumped at the opportunity, as he had already begun looking online at different schools and was hoping for a door to open. He remembered looking at the online pictures of smiling students, trying to imagine himself there. His uncle and aunt volunteered to host Ray as he completed his studies. They told him about the community college that was near their home. One thing they mentioned to Ray was that the community college is significantly cheaper than other schooling options. With money being tight at home, it sounded like a good fit. Ray's uncle stopped by the community college and filled out an application for him. All Ray had to do was send in some papers and pretty soon everything fell into place: his I-20, visa application, and even his flight. His cousin helped connect him with the school's Facebook page, which he spent time on along with the school's website. He arrived in the United States just six months after his uncle suggested the community college as an option.

Through my ethnographic content analysis of both schools' Facebook accounts, there are many pictures of groups gathered smiling at some event. The majority of posts on Facebook and tweets on Twitter are about campus events. At Sunterra, over a third of the tweets on Twitter were specifically about campus events ranging from college visits to film viewing times. Almost equally present were announcements from Sunterra about the school in general, for example, if an office was closing early, to weather related closures, to if the school was recognized for an award. Students were constantly reminded to register in time for the new semester. Rosa College used their Twitter account in a different manner, with only half the number of tweets as Sunterra about campus events and announcements. Around a third of tweets were greetings, asking how students were doing, what plans students had over the holidays, or an inspirational quote.

Another popular theme in 16% of the tweets from Rosa were highlights of news items about higher education, ranging from new uses of technology in the classroom to growing student debt. Finally, Rosa also used Twitter to inform students of local events, ranging from road closures to festivities and weekend outings in the local community. Mostly, however, the two schools in my research used their Facebook and Twitter accounts to inform current students of events and other important information versus using it as a recruitment tool.

From the collected data pertaining to Research Question One on information pathways, information flowed to international students about the community college from a specific person, usually a relative in the local area where students ended up attending school. In this section of the findings about information pathways, interviewed students talked about how one specific person was their main information source. Often this person gave students the initial idea of attending school in the United States, acted as a financial and location anchor, and shared their experiential wisdom. Students trusted information sources that were closer to the community college, and they looked for information on price, location, and class offerings.

**Finding 1: “Having a person”:** Students connected by a person to the community college. Like previous research (Bohman, 2010; Doku, 2007; Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003), the majority of students “had a person,” who I refer to as their “anchor.” As Tanya from Southern Africa told me, “Usually people apply because their relative is there. Nobody just applies somewhere where you don’t know.” Out of the 15 students I interviewed, 12 mentioned family members as the major source of information and influence. These family members ranged from sisters to aunts to cousins. Often students from their home country would express interest in studying in the United States, and many had a relative already in the United States that drew them to apply to specific community colleges. Tanya mentioned how she looked on a map to see

nearby colleges after finding out where her aunt lived. Relatives were willing hosts. Bibek from Nepal admitted wherever his cousin was, he would have ended up in the same place. Family has strong draw. The person helped international students with the initial idea of going to the United States for school, being place-specific in their college search, having a financial anchor, and learning from that person's previous experiences.

***Initial idea.*** Christi was finishing high school in Southern Africa when her sister suggested that she come to Texas for school. Christina was starting her studies in Central America when her friend in Texas commented that her English was good and she should consider getting her degree in the United States. The person helping Jackie was her aunt. Jackie from Vietnam said,

I have two aunts living in here and one of them really wanted me to come here and live and study here. So, she suggested when I was in high school but my parents said, we cannot afford the tuition fee, so that's why I had to take high school in Vietnam. And after I passed the exam to go to the University, she called me and reminded me again.

Jackie's aunt not only gave her the initial idea for pursuing her degree in the United States but also was persistent in her invitation to Jackie to come. Like Bohman's (2010) decision-making model, family and friends gave the initial idea of study abroad, which encouraged or resulted in the first step towards pursuing a degree at the community college in the United States.

***The person as financial and location anchor.*** An individual who supported the international students, someone who was providing stability in many levels—financially and emotionally—became an anchor for their pursuit of college in the United States. Anchors stabilize boats, and without an anchor a boat can drift away. In a similar way, international students often are at a loss of where to start looking for a college; they seek information that they can trust and who better to trust than family or friend. Students told me, they just hoped something would happen (that would allow them to come to college in the United States). So

when an aunt, cousin, or friend mentioned an educational opportunity, these students tie their hopes to their newfound anchor. With relatives or friends living in a specific place in the United States, students looked for schools close to where their hosts or contacts (their anchors) lived. A friend acted as the anchor for Christina from Central America.

My friend who lived here, she's like, oh this is the cheapest state. And when she came to the U.S., she didn't come as a student. She lived in New York, and Miami, and Atlanta and all that was really expensive for her. She finally settled here. So I'm like, okay. And at the same time, I have her as a friend in Dallas. So let's do Texas, it's better. She was, like, seven years older than me. So all of her experiences I learned from.

When her friend said, "Texas, I just focused on Texas," Christina concluded as to why she chose to look for a school in Dallas. Christina trusted her friend's experience to help her become anchored in Texas as she explored higher education options in the United States.

Sometimes family members volunteered to host the student. In these cases, the host took care of everything—all the way from applying for admission to paying the tuition bill. A student who relied on an anchor was Christi, from Southern Africa. She told me, "Well, my sister did everything. She gave me papers, and I was like, okay, okay, okay. I will do that. Yea, so she applied for me." In the instances when hosts were paying, they would laud the fact that community colleges were less expensive than other higher education institution types. These comments were to help the international students make a financially prudent choice.

Family members talked about the benefits of the community college, including the lower cost and being geographically closer than other institutions. One way to save money was taking the same classes as what is offered at a university but take them at the community college. Pursuing this route, Christina's cousin told her, "[Community] college saves you a lot of money, and they are the same core classes you have to take in university." Saving money made sense to Christina, but she was not sure what "core classes" meant.

*Learning from their experience.* Having family in the United States meant that prospective international students could learn from their family member's experience at the community college and living in the United States. The information students gained varied from cost of living in the place where they were residing to how to navigate the community college system. Connecting her community college attendance to the cost of college, Moyo from West Africa told me,

When I got here, because I have aunties and uncles and guardians who have gone to school here, and people who were in my church that, like, working the international office or something. So, you know people just advise you, if you want to cut down on your own schooling and stuff, since you are going to pay international student fees, it's better to just start with the community college, where it's cheaper—then you just transfer your credits to the four-year college.

So Moyo, who had been accepted to a four-year institution, upon arrival, transferred to a local community college based on the advice she received from those around her, including her host and her host's contacts, some who worked at the local community college. Those from her church had the know-how to help Moyo save money by encouraging her to start at the community college.

Whereas current students had people help them enroll at the community college, some students were using their experience to help inform their friends and contacts back home, thus extending the sharing of information to other international students. Ale, from Eastern Europe told me that her friends who are looking at coming to the United States for school often think, "I will go there [somewhere they have a friend], not somewhere I don't have information." Her friends look for "someone who can tell them exactly what's going on, what's going to happen when they come here." Ale now serves as an anchor to her friends. If they are looking for a school in the United States, they will follow her lead, because she can give them information of

how to start school and what school is like. An anchor in the United States, who had gone through the community college system, could help a searching international student.

**Finding 2: “You need new information”:** Sources of information closer to the community college were trusted more. International students trusted their anchor for the initial idea of coming to the United States for college. Next, they found the information sources closer to the school more reliable. For example, students who had access to the school website trusted what they read on the website more than what they were hearing from their anchor who may be physically close to the school. Yet, for other students, their anchor and eventual host was as close as they could get to the school, so they took the hosts’ words as more trustworthy compared to what they were hearing from other sources. Tanya told me she “just trusted the website, because it’s the school’s website.” Plus, Tanya pointed out that the Internet has equaled the playing field for information seekers. “Nowadays,” she told me, “you can’t be misguided. Because if somebody says something and you go to the website, it’s going to tell you the exact thing. The website is the school’s website, you’re not hearing it from somebody.”

Yet this can be challenging when the website presents incorrect information. Yona, from Eastern Europe, trusted a school’s website, but it was wrong. She was looking for a specific program and narrowed her choices of community colleges to two schools. She committed to one, and even leased an apartment nearby when upon arrival she was told the program had been cancelled the year prior. She trusted what she found online, only to find what she had found was out of date and inaccurate. Frustrated at the school and committed to her major, she ended up transferring to the other community college.

School websites have a plethora of information, from tuition to requirements. Sky from Nepal told me, “Everything is on the college website: why do we have to come over here, why

do we want to enroll in this college, why this college is popular and different than others.” Ale echoed, “Everything is on there about the financial things, what you have to pay, it’s a really useful website. I think everything is over there.” Other students found it easy to figure out what classes they had to take and where to buy their books by studying the college’s website before even stepping foot in the country. While websites have plenty of information, students did not always understand what they were reading and other times did not know how to navigate to all the right pages for information.

Websites outside of the school website were also helpful. Bibek, looking at another option in Michigan, “looked up Detroit in Wikipedia” and found, “oh, no, it’s a bad spot, there’s gun shootings and everything downtown,” which made him “not want to go there.” Trusting what he read in Wikipedia, he withdrew his application. Christina looked online at the United States government website and found out about the temperature, climate, and even tax rates of Texas.

Yet sometimes access to information was the issue of how close students could get to the school. Veronica said simply, “online, that was the best I could do from Mexico, since I was in another country.” Jon from East Africa found things online to be confusing, so had his sister come on campus to ask questions and pick up forms on his behalf. Bibek, like Jon, was not familiar with the website, and eventually asked his cousin to go on campus to figure out what he needed to do for admission.

Because of their social status in Southern Africa, Tanya felt certain students had greater access to information than she did. Her family did not have a computer at home, and so she could only research the community college when she visited the EducationUSA Center. Tanya noticed

the other students at the center were the “rich people. Mainly kids from ministers and presidents and mayors. I went to a really good school in my country, but I didn’t know about the center.”

When Tanya and I looked the school website together, she laughed when we saw a “click here” button, because she remembered she did not know what that meant back then when she was looking for colleges. She was just learning to navigate on the computer.

It is unclear where students stop their information seeking. Amy from West Africa, for example, trusted her brother who lived in Texas. He volunteered to help and became her only source of information. Later she found out his first time on campus was to get her application forms.

Hass commented, “Rankings seem really reliable, or accountable that you can count on. A lot of Korean students when they apply for college, the most important index they consider are the rankings.” For Amy, Christi, Jackie, Jon, Luke, Moyo, Ray, Sky, and Veronica, what they heard from their relatives was sufficient, Hass looked at rankings, and Tanya, in addition to talking with her aunt, talked to a United States representative at a EducationUSA center and looked online for help.

Once students arrive, most quickly realize the importance of the international office. Christina urged new students, “Go to your advisor as much as you can to understand the degree plan and responsibility.” Moyo agreed but also lamented,

The mistake I made was I didn’t actually go to see an advisor, you need to first go see an academic advisor at the community college to walk you through the process. They know, they know all the classes that you have to take, so you don’t have to waste your time.

While family members are a great source of information, Moyo put it frankly,

Your aunt has been in the school system and maybe she was there four years ago and things are not the same anymore, so you need new information. What’s going on right now? People don’t know that and they follow the old things.

Numerous studies show students rely on those they trust for information and advice (see, for example, Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003). Results of this study support this idea and contribute to the question of whether information sources are trustworthy.

**Finding 3: “The first concern was like the spot, the second was financial aid. Third, of course, what I want to take”: Three factors driving students’ decision making.** Students talked about reasons they chose the community college aside from their host anchoring them to a specific place. The price of education, location of the school, and if the school offered their major became driving reasons why students chose the community college.

*Price matters.* Most of my students agreed that cost was the top driver to enroll at the community college. Yona argued that is “how you compare—looking at what you want to study and how much it will cost you [at] a different place.” So, for Yona the decision to go to the community college was somewhat a consumer based decision—where can I get the “product” for the best price? As students shopped around, the tuition at four-year institutions was a stark contrast to what the local community colleges were charging. Christina said, “When I was looking at the budget, I was like, oh, this is pretty expensive. It’s like \$35,000 a year.” She found a community college and kept researching it, despite concerns about quality, because the tuition was half of the university tuition she was considering. She suggested other international students follow her footsteps and start at the community college because:

There’s more chances [international students] can do trial and error and it’s gonna cost you less. Because the financial part for us is very important. You fail a class? It’s a lot of money compared to what somebody from here spends. I guess community college is a good start.

In these students’ view, community colleges are the best “buy” for their money, allowing them to experience American higher education for a modest cost relative to four-year institutions.

For other students, it was not just price comparison but an affordability issue. Ray said, “People ask me why I didn’t go straight to University and I tell them I really cannot afford it. For me, [going to the community college] is a way to save money.” Yona said similarly, “I actually started at the community college because it was more affordable. It was the only reason.” Tanya puts it simply, “My mom is a teacher, she gets paid \$150 US dollars. So even if I go to the community college, she cannot afford it, but you just keep your fingers crossed that somebody might help me pay for it.”

Institutions themselves emphasize the cost difference as compared to the local four-year institutions. Having a lower tuition impacted the institutions that hosts considered for the international students. Only two students interviewed did direct comparisons between four-year institutions and the community college prior to arrival. Most students trusted their anchor in aiding them with information about any institution of higher education. In text on Sunterra’s webpage that is specifically directed to potential international students, the college emphasizes affordability. On Rosa College’s website, there is a financial information worksheet specifically for international students to figure out the estimated expenses for a year at the college, including tuition, books, and housing. While students did not mention using this financial worksheet, almost all students knew about the \$19,000 they needed to show in a bank account to enroll at the community college.

***Place bound.*** Already touched on in my discussion of the first finding, students, if they have a person often will end up in the same location as their information source because they are hosted by them. For students without an anchor or someone willing to host them, the decision to go to the community college was still mostly about people. Bibek commented, “I was looking for, especially places, where it was located, because that was important to me. I wanted to be here

because there are a lot of Nepali people, I know here, in Texas.” People from the same country were a drawing point for not just Bibek from Nepal but also Ale who met up with fellow East Europeans almost every weekend, and Christi from Southern Africa. Dallas is diverse, which allowed some students to be connected to others from the same country.

Another factor that drew students to the Dallas area was climate. Christina from Central America commented that a reason she picked Texas was because the climate reminded her of home. She liked that “it’s not going to snow much” in Texas. A number of students mentioned not wanting to study somewhere because of the weather, being unaccustomed to snow and cold.

*Majoring in my future.* After the factors of price and place, students mentioned intended majors as a point of consideration for enrollment at the community college. However, aside from Yona who committed to a school based on her major and then switched because she wanted to study one major specifically, most students were still deciding their major. Bibek had some interest in movie making and looked online to see if Sunterra offered those types of classes. He also mentioned that the school did not have all the courses that he wanted to take.

### **Impact of Information (Or Lack of)**

Christina’s laugh echoed in the patio around us during our conversation. We chose to sit outside while she ate her lunch. She was telling me about the frenzy she went through before deciding to apply to the community college she ended up attending. She already had some interaction with American higher education in her home country, and she has some idea of what to expect. Her friend in Dallas encouraged her to continue her education in the United States. After learning a little bit about the community college system from her cousin and, with her

friend's encouragement, she started looking at a community college in Texas. Then, she came and visited. In our conversation she told me, the school

gave me a good feeling the first time I came, especially the international center. They're really warm in there. And they try to answer as many questions as they can give you. But there are so many things that an international student should know and they kind of just learned as times goes by.

Christina was the only student who I interviewed who had a chance to visit the campus before finalizing their decision to come to the institution. However, Christina still had a few surprises when she moved. Logistically, she was surprised when asked to take a placement test and only later learned the impact of her performance on these tests. When fellow students did not respond to her "good mornings, good afternoons, and good evenings" greetings, she felt they were being rude, leaving her feeling depressed. She later realized she did not anticipate such cultural differences, including hospitality. Christina was used to open doors and people constantly with one another. Although she knew the temperature in Texas would be the closest to her home country she was surprised when she realized another big difference from home was that there are no mountains.

In this section of the findings, I discuss how media and other information students found in their search impacted their ideas of what the community college would be like, especially of classroom dynamics. Results presented in this section address Research Question Two about the impact of information on students' expectations for their college experience. There was confusion resulting from lack of information found about prerequisites, placement tests, and logistics of transfer. Although students went online and read, they were not clear about meanings of college, credit hour, and other academic terminology.

**Finding 4: Media helped shape students' images of the community college and the United States.** Students look all around for images of what school in America will be like.

Sometimes the students I interviewed used Google Image search, where they typed in the school's name and looked at what came up. Other times they watched movies and television shows from the United States about higher education in general, and those sources shaped their ideas and expectations of the community college. Tanya mentioned to me that the only image she had of a classroom in the United States was what she had seen in *High School Musical*, a popular movie from Disney that takes place in a Hollywood version of an American high school. She laughed, saying that no one in her classes ever breaks out in synchronized songs. She thought students would be more outspoken with their teachers than they were.

Moyo saw pictures of the community colleges that she chose to attend online and remembered thinking how beautiful the campus was. Browsing Moyo's community college Facebook page, Rosa College, a third of the pictures on the account were of buildings around campus. Half of the pictures, however, were of events on campus from guest speakers to outdoor fun events. These pictures gave Moyo a sense of events that happened on campus, along with what the campus looked like. There were not many visuals, however, of what interactions in the classroom were like. The implications of pictures seen by students on the social media pages of schools will be considered in the discussions chapter.

On Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube pages that show the schools, classroom-focused media were limited compared to other types of images and information. Tanya thought classes would be like classes anywhere. She was not accustomed to moving from room to room for classes nor was she prepared to pick out her own classes. Sky was surprised as he recalled his first day "in photography, [his] teacher was too fast, [he] was looking at her and, ah! What is she saying? There was a PowerPoint, and there was some writing over there so, [he was] just writing and watching her and, thinking what's she talking about?" The way classrooms are run are

different in the United States, and students were not expecting that. Moyo was surprised that her teacher wanted her to call him by name, while Hass enjoyed his teachers wanting to get to know him.

After arrival students recognized how ill-conceived their ideas of what American higher education was like, but the media images, pictures on the website, and what students heard from family were at least something as compared to nothing. Hass said, “I barely knew anything about the United States besides Hollywood movies or something like that or NBA games.” The impact of only knowing about the United States from movies is that some students like Luke, imagined all the states to be uniform. Luke from South America had images of New York and California when he thought about the United States, but certainly did not imagine the geographic landscape or heat of Texas. Tanya insightfully acknowledged that Hollywood, “shows you the best part of America.” She was enticed by these images, and they made her “want to come to America,” although now she warns her friends, “what you see on TV is not America, they show you the part that’s going to take your heart.” Although television shows and movie makers may argue they are not portraying reality, from the perspective of someone who has not been to the United States, how can they imagine something different than what they are being shown?

**Finding 5: “I guess I didn’t understand what developmental classes was”: Lack of information and understanding about placement tests, prerequisites, and transfer.** While media shaped students’ images of the community college and their expectations of classroom interactions, there was a lack of information about placement tests, prerequisites, and transfer.

Christina, whose story opened this section of the findings, told me,

I had to go through a lot of tests before starting. I was not prepared for that. Before, I did the TOEFL test so that was already scary for me. And then, they asked me to take an Accuplacer test, and based on whether I passed or not . . . when they told me, if you don’t pass, the classes you take, you are going to be behind, they are not college level. I was

like, oh my God. So that scared me a lot and I was just two weeks before my classes started. I felt like I was misinformed, but it was just the process. And yea, I guess I didn't understand what developmental classes was.

As Christina reflected on these experiences, she said, that it would be important for those at the community college to tell students about the college placement tests and their implications before they arrive, so they can mentally prepare to take the tests and understand the importance of doing well on these tests.

Students also sometimes ended up in remedial and developmental classes without realizing those classes did not count toward their degree. Veronica found out after a semester that her classes would not count toward a college degree. There was a test she needed to take before she could enroll in certain classes.

The TSI is a test to see if you can take college level classes, because if you don't take the TSI can't take college-level classes. It doesn't matter if you took the ESL classes, no it doesn't matter. If you took the ESL classes it's like you didn't even have that semester. That's the only thing that bothers me, because I already spent six months, in those classes, and it didn't count as nothing.

There was a mismatch between what Veronica thought was counting toward her degree and what classes she was actually enrolled in. Upon realizing that her developmental classes were not counting, she was frustrated that no one said anything to her prior to her asking and after she already "wasted" a semester.

The confusion these students had about placement tests is also a problem that seems to be ubiquitous to the community college, and it has repercussions for many students, not just international students (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2009). During my content analysis of both schools' websites, there were detailed instructions about how to get to the school (applying, securing the I-20, documentations needed for enrollment), but students had to navigate on their own to figure out steps after arriving on the college campus, such as taking placement tests,

picking out classes, and joining extracurricular activities. Or in the case of Tanya, figuring out prerequisites was not part of her expectations of her community college experience, as she told me.

When I came here, I thought I was just going to go into nursing school, I didn't know you had to do prerequisites; that stuff is not cleared up. People think when you are going here to do dental hygiene, you're going to get into dental hygiene school, but know you have to do prerequisites and then apply for dental hygiene, I don't know why they call it dental hygiene, you're not getting here to do dental hygiene. You do the prerequisites first. You can't learn that on the computer. It's there but it's not clear.

While information about prerequisites and placement tests are available online, when Tanya and I sat down to look at the dental hygiene webpage, she pointed out that she did not understand what they meant. She thought she could just come and take the prerequisites at the same time as her dental hygiene classes. However, some classes are not offered every semester and her initial placement tests did not allow her to take some classes until she first fulfilled her required classes. Because she needed certain remedial classes, Christina figured out that she could not take the prerequisites until a later semester.

Students knew about the idea of transferring from the community college to four-year institutions, but only one student could give me specific details of *how* to transfer when asked during the interviews. All the students wanted to continue their studies at a four-year institution. Veronica pointed out that,

you can see in the Web, you can see which universities you can transfer to, but they don't say much more. They don't explain beyond that. They just said that this is university that we have a certain plan with and you can transfer to that. That's it. That's not really helpful because you need to know that there are certain subjects for each career. And if you don't have the credit you have to stay one more year at Rosa, one semester or two semesters to accomplish that subject and then transfer to the University.

There are costs—financial and time—when students do not receive information about transfer, remedial classes, prerequisite classes, and placement tests. Not knowing about these community

college procedures, my students did not expect these extra steps to their goal of a four-year degree.

**Finding 6: “Yes, I read. But you don’t know what everything means.” Academic lingo on school websites contributes to confusion.** Students consumed the literature about their specific community college; however, even if they read everything, they did not understand everything they were reading. There was confusion of what “college” meant in community college. Coming from countries where bachelor’s degree may be equivalent to high school degrees, students were uncertain about what to expect from the community college. Christina said, “The [Central American] system is completely different than the U.S. system. When we graduate from high school, we called that a bachelor’s degree.” The confusion with college became affiliated with students’ perceptions of the quality of the education available at these institutions. Christina continued,

I always thought college was for someone who didn’t do very well in high school and then they had to go to college, and then that will prepare them for university. So I didn’t want to be downgraded. So I’m like, I don’t want to go to a college.

Hass agreed that college compared to university had connotations about the quality of education,

All Koreans think college is less and university is higher quality. When I explain to my friends that I am now in community college, and after two years I can transfer or graduate, they thought, *oh you are going to low quality school* or something.

The way *college* is used in other countries implies different levels of quality of education.

Besides the use of college, Tanya gave a personal example of her confusion over the term, “credit hour.” She said,

I thought maybe you should come to school for 72 hours, coming to school for three months, that should be 72 hours, so are you going to be done? I thought maybe I would be done, because nursing in my country takes six months. So I thought maybe if you go to classes for 72 hours, you’ll be a nurse.

Whereas 72 credit hours actually takes most full-time students at least two years to complete. Other academic terminology that caused confusion included: Blackboard (an online course system which was confused with an actual blackboard), faculty/professors, and inconsistent use of the terms “programs” versus “majors” on different school websites (making it difficult to compare institutions). A student saw that an assignment had been posted on Blackboard when they were looking online at the school. They assumed that one would have to go to the classroom to see it on the blackboard. She shrugged as she realized when she began classes, that Blackboard was actually some course system. She told me that it would have been nice to have a better understanding of how classes worked at the community college prior to arrival.

One difference seen between the two research sites was clarification of these points of confusion. Sunterra College had about double the staff members in the international office than Rosa College. Students at Sunterra told me that they had confusion about remedial classes but most were able to find answers through their advisors. However, the students I interviewed at Rosa still had remaining questions about how to transfer and what developmental classes meant. Students at both schools were not aware or prepared to take placement tests when they arrived.

### **Challenged Expectations**

Sky looked around the cafeteria, deciding it was too noisy for us to talk, and suggested we go outside. It was a warm fall day, so we chose a bench underneath a tree to have our conversation. He was full of excitement as he told me how his life changed in the last few months as he moved from Nepal to North Texas. He flashed quick smiles between his stories, his words tumbling out, and an occasional head tilt to the left letting me know he did not quite understand my question. When I came to the question, “Is there anything you don’t like about

Sunterra?” there was a pause. He looked at me, shook his head, and then waved his hand. “Skip.” I tilted my head to the left, my eyebrows furrow in confusion. “Skip,” he said again. Finally understanding he wanted to skip the question, “Oh, okay,” I answered. I paused, thinking of where to take our conversation as I looked out at the lake and enjoyed the warm breeze.

“Actually,” Sky interjected his thoughts into our conversation,

I like everything and I don't like everything, so I want to skip this question. That's what happens, you like everything, you like the school, the professors, the teaching, but you don't like some things. And I don't want to compare those some things to everything.

I nodded.

Many students are like Sky and Jackie, who “came here to study,” as it's “been [her] dream since [she] was a kid.” She told me, “I wanted to study abroad and live independently from my parents and family, so I can grow up and be myself.” So one winter day when Jackie was on her bus commute to school, and it was so cold she wanted to cry, she said to herself, “Oh, no, it's my dream. That's my dream. Now, I have to work with it.” It is no wonder when asked if anything has not met her expectations, Jackie answered, “No, I think it's all my dream, it's very good.”

When asked if what she had read about her school matched what she was now experiencing, Tanya answered, “It's like a blind date. You don't know what you're going to see. You try to match things up, like okay it says this in the book, and then these pictures are like this, you try to match it up.” However, even with the best matching, students still were confronted with surprises. In this section of the findings, I address Research Question Three by discussing how students' expectations were challenged. Unpleasant surprises included not being able to make friends as easily as expected and constantly worrying about what will happen next. There

were also good surprises too, such as the level of care of staff and professors, the ability to choose and plan one's schedule and classes, and having a variety of resources.

**Finding 7: "So completely hard": Unexpected relational challenges.** Relationship challenges for interviewed international students range from feeling lonely and not having any friends to feeling burdensome to their hosts. Making friends was not something Christina worried about in Central America. "I never thought of, *oh I need to make friends*. That never, ever crossed my mind. Still I only have two friends, but I'm happy with them, I don't need more. It's extremely difficult [to make friends]." Veronica told me simply, "I don't have as many friends as I would like to have." Not having friends can be challenging especially during holidays. Tanya observed,

Coming as an international student, is not just sitting down and reading books. It includes social life, economics; it includes everything. On Thanksgiving, everyone's going to go to their families. If you don't have families here, what are you going to be doing? This crushes people. People fly back home, and they can't afford to come back here.

Another relationship that was strained was the one between the international student and their hosts. For Amy, Sky, and Tanya, this meant moving out of their living situation. Amy's brother accused her of being ungrateful and at the end of their apartment lease, she moved out to get her own apartment. Sky moved in with his uncle, who turned out to be newly married, which made Sky feel uncomfortable, so he found a friend and moved out. Tanya no longer wanted her aunts to tell her what she could or could not do.

Hosts do a lot for the international students, things these students did not realize would become burdensome. Moyo said, "I really look forward to getting a scholarship or something, because my sponsors are getting tired" of paying for her schooling. Tanya, on the other hand, relied on her hosts for rides, because the school

wasn't close to my aunt's house. They drive me. And now I know, oh, you have to take bus here. But here, there are no buses. So, now someone has to drive me to school. Now, I'm of worried because I don't want to be a burden to people. Now people have to drop me off at school, and pick me up.

Even if hosts are gracious in helping students out, these students begin to see ways that they could become a burden to their hosts.

**Finding 8: “I started trying to meet someone to marry here”:** Visa regulations make students cautious about futures. International students told me they were cautious in their studies, what they studied, and how to approach the future because of visa regulations. Tanya discussed being strategic in her major choice.

Everyone else is doing nursing, because that is what is quick, to get a job and, you know, because if you are an international student, you are also under restrictions with Homeland Security, so you do not relax, to go out of status. You have to choose something that will get you into school, to graduation, and from graduation to get a job. That way your visa is okay, you can't spend time sitting at home, because they will tell you to go sit in your country, you can't sit here. So you have to choose wisely.

When I asked her who helped her to be wise, she shook her head. She said, “No one, because no one really knew what major would get you a job or guarantee the visa,” but Tanya confidently told me that her major provided a much better chance of allowing her to stay in the United States, because there were not enough nurses right now here. Demand for nursing is quite different than other occupations, such as her friend who wanted to major in music. She warned him, there are enough musicians here and he would not obtain a visa.

Sky, who had just arrived, embodied the new student who did not know what he wanted to do. In the land of opportunity, there are many open doors, perhaps too many possibilities. For Sky, he did not know which door to choose. He told me, “I am planning to transfer to the University after sometime, maybe. I don't know. I guess. I'm not sure yet, what I want to do. I'm not sure what I want right now. I'm totally confused.”

Sometimes students become anxious about their visa status, which made them seek out different options for their future. Amy, for example told me,

A day before my 60-day grace period, you know, I started trying to meet someone to marry here. To make tuition easier for me, for myself. I came across the guy, call Haman. He promised he would pay for my employment authorization if I would marry. Sure, okay. Let's do it. But I kept getting twists and turns. I'm like, no if we don't get married, I might as well turn myself into immigration and tell them, send me home.

Amy had reached the end of her line. The reality of ensuring a future and a valid visa made students contemplate seriously their studies in ways that they had not expected.

**Finding 9: “Why wouldn't you come to this place? There are so many people here that want to help you succeed”: Care of staff, flexibility of schedules, and unexpected resources are positive surprises.** There were plenty of things that surprised international students that challenged their expectations in a good way. With most of the good surprises, students did not have any expectations in these areas that explain why they were surprised. Students praised the way staff and faculty supported them emotionally and helped guide them through the community college. Yona said, “The people are really friendly, they really try to help you.” Faculty members made an impression on students too. Ale said,

One of my professors, when she saw in the middle of summer that someone took her class, add her class to their schedule, and right then, she sent the email: “I am Professor M, I just saw your name on the list, and I look forward to teaching you.” So who doesn't like to come to the place where someone is waiting for you like that?

The personal connection that faculty members put forth were noticed and appreciated.

Students were also surprised when they were told, “now you have to pick your classes.”

Tanya responded with,

Pick my classes? They were just like yeah and he gave me a paper of classes that you can take, and you pick, whatever, 4 out of 300 classes. But on the computer you can't find that out. Maybe it's there, but I don't think. There's a lot on the computer, but it's hard to find.

Tanya acknowledged that it would be difficult to post all available classes, but also did not know she would be told to pick her classes. Jackie loved the fact that she could take music classes as well as her science classes, which would not have been an option back in Vietnam.

Sometimes it was things outside of the classroom that surprised students and encouraged them to be good students. Ale was impressed by the services available to her outside of the classroom like video checkout, lab equipment, and gym use. Luke liked the space, because school walls back home, “has a lot of graffiti, and here it’s very different. These simple things really motivate you to study.” Sky was blown away by computer and Internet access. He told me,

You can e-mail your homework to your professor. In this country Internet is too fast. In our country the Internet is too slow. If this happens to my country, it would take one hour to e-mail one document, that kind of like crazy. In this country we can send them in one second. I can just type it in, I don’t have to write it in, and show the paper to the class, I don’t have to borrow some time from the class, I can just e-mail it in and write it down, and submit it in my e-mail. If I forgot I can just tell him in class that I will e-mail it to you. That’s it. It’s a good thing about this country, this college. I don’t know about other colleges, but it’s a good thing for me.

### **Conclusion**

Limited information informs international students and influences the expectations they form about their community college experiences, but they do not realize the information is partial or inaccurate until they arrive in the United States. Prospective students talk with family, friends, and sometimes the school about the opportunity of attending a community college. Many students felt they had adequate information when coming, even if they talked to only one relative before making their decision. These conversations students had prior to leaving for the community college in their home country were about the opportunity and not about what attending the community college would look like. Not having information about this future experience, students’ expectations were influenced by what they saw on television and movies.

As one person became my students' anchor, the information they received was mainly that the community college was closer to their anchor geographically and the tuition was cheaper than other higher education choices. Students were told they could take classes that would transfer. However, most students did not know what that meant or how that worked. None of my students had information about classroom and community college norms, such as switching classrooms every after class and informal student and professor interactions.

Sometimes students shifted their trust from their anchor to information coming from the school. Other times, what students heard from their anchor was enough. There were challenges with information access as students formed their expectation of the community college. While some students were able to find information about pricing of credits and prerequisite classes, other students did not understand everything they were reading and could not navigate to the pages with this information. Most my students were confused about placement tests and implications of taking remedial and developmental classes.

In hindsight, there is a great deal these international students wish they had known because ultimately, their experiences attending a community college in the United States did not match their expectations. Expectations are important to think about as they act like a filter for prospective students (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Howard, 2005; Kuh, 1999; Miller, Bender, Schuh, & Associates, 2005; Pike, 2006). Students did not expect challenges with instability in host and anchor relationships, friend making, and the contemplation of future steps. My students were also surprised by how much people wanted to help them; resources available at the community college, including the library and gym; and the sense of empowerment they felt by being able to pick their own schedules and classes. If students knew about these good surprises and potential challenges before arriving, they could expect them and create a filter that

would encourage them to participate in a different way. In the next chapter I discuss the implications of these findings.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to discover how international students formed their expectations about their community college experience and what those expectations were. The sites for the research were chosen because there is little research on international students at the community college in the Southern part of the United States, as mentioned in the literature review. There were also large numbers of international students studying in these community colleges. These two factors helped with the recruitment of students for my research and preserving the anonymity of participants.

The original questions driving my research asked who was telling students about the community college, what these sources were saying, how the sources of information impacted what students thought the community college would be like, and what prospective students actually expected of their community college-going experience. Through interviews with 15 international students at two community colleges in Texas and ethnographic content analysis of mentioned websites and social media mediums (e.g. Twitter and Facebook), there were a number of findings about international student information pathways to the community college, the impact of information, and challenged expectations. I found students relied on a person to help them get to the community college. Their contacts gave them the initial idea of attending a community college in the United States, helped ground them to a specific location, and provided students information through their own experience. The sources closer to the institution were trusted more, yet it is not clear where students stopped their information search about the community college.

Findings about the impact of information that students gathered included the impact of media. Television shows and movies created a picture for potential students of what the community college would be like but did not help clarify any confusion about academic terminology. Students took in a lot of information but often did not know what it all meant.

Many of the students interviewed had the dream of attending school in the United States since they were young, so when the students' experiences did not meet their expectations, they were reluctant to dwell on these thoughts. Surprising my students upon arrival was the level of difficulty to meet and make friends, strained relationships with their hosts, and challenges figuring out how to transfer and plan out their next steps. There were also many good surprises, including the care and compassion of staff and faculty members at the community college, flexibility and choice in coursework, and general availability of resources at the institution.

This research fills in a literature gap about international students at the community college, particularly about what students were hearing about the schools before they left their countries and what they thought college would be like. In this section, I discuss the findings situated in the larger literature on international students in community colleges or higher education, and I interpret the results and conclude with implications of the findings.

**Information pathways.** Long (2007) argued that more research on expectations and the role of access to information plays is needed, which my research attempts to address. Through an economic lens, Long presented work on student transitions to higher education, noting that although quantitative and economic studies have contributed research to understanding access and persistence of students in higher education, more studies need to be done to understand student performance, expectations, and information flows. My interviews with students revealed that international students have a limited idea of what attending a community college will be like,

because often, these students base their expectation on one perspectives of a trusted family member or friend.

As in the previous literature, students learned about the community college through word of mouth. However, students interviewed in the Dallas community did not just hear about the community college through the grapevine but through one specific person, the person whom they trusted and helped them get to the school, the person I called an anchor. Instead of finding that the “medium is the message” as McLuhan (1964, p. 23) suggested, it seemed that, when coming from the community college, the source of the message had a more powerful influence on the students than the medium. For example, the medium of the message would be a student reading something online compared to hearing something from an agent at an educational fair. The different sources of information would be different mediums, *how* students hear about the community college. However, I found students trusted sources closer to the school, not discriminating between the medium of the message. Thus, what is important is *where* the information about the community college originates. My study participants talked about the validity of information they gathered from staff of the community college, particularly in the international student office, and from the school’s website. Although the information students found were from different mediums, the information came from the same source—the community college. Information coming directly from the school was trusted more than the information gained from friends and family who were physically close to the school. Perhaps, the *messenger* of the message is more pertinent to international students when examining the information they gather about the community college.

The *messenger is the message* because prospective students are looking for someone to trust. Yet anchors who bring students to a specific geographic location for school may not have

accurate or complete information. Information from family and friends is important; however, when students access information directly from the institution, this information is given greater weight. If institutions do know more about themselves than potential students ever will, as proposed by Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, and Forbes-Mewett (2010), then the implication is *how* institutions can communicate what they know about themselves so that students may form more accurate expectations and *if* students have access to this information.

***Chain migration.*** One theory I anticipated could help describe international student enrollment at the community college was the theory of chain migration. MacDonald and MacDonald (1964) proposed the concept of chain migration to explain how ethnic neighborhoods were formed in 1880 in the United States and Person and Rosenbaum (2006) applied this model to Latino/a students' college decisions. My interviews with students suggest that the international student population is obtaining information about the community college through a similar chain pattern. All but one of my students had a family member connect them to the community college. This is very different compared to the student population in Lee's (2008) study, where only 13% of the surveyed international students ( $n = 501$ ) relied on family members for information. The information flow between local family members and potential students can be partially informed by chain migration theories in higher education.

Previous research on chain migration highlights areas where my students deviate and conform to preexisting patterns, which aids in considerations of how students are learning about the community college. With the 15 students interviewed in my study, only one had acquired specific information about transferring. This student had asked an international student adviser about the transfer process after she arrived on campus. The lack of knowledge about transferring and graduation requirements is similar for international and Latino/a students. Latino/a students

who relied on someone already at an institution sought out less information in their college search, Person and Rosenbaum (2006) found. Several international students whom I interviewed stopped their information search when they found their anchor, a person they could rely on. Person and Rosenbaum found that interviewed Latino/a students at 14 community colleges in a Midwest city had a lower understanding of graduation requirements, compared to other ethnic groups. Both student groups, international and Latino/a, had a lack of information which may be due to where students are obtaining their information.

The students I interviewed were not ethnically segregated on their community college campus, a characteristic of Latino/a students who follow chain migration connections to the community college (Person & Rosenbaum, 2006). Some students did tell me other students with the same nationality as theirs drew them to the geographic location. For example, Ale liked that she could be with friends from her Eastern Europe country on the weekends. However, when students discussed their friendships, the friendships were not always referring to friends along nationality lines. I found it interesting that many international students were friends with other international students. All my students found establishing friendships with American students to be challenging. In contrast to studies of Latino/a students, the person who helped international students to learn about and apply to the community college did not attend school with them, which might explain why the social networks that Latino/a students were part of at the community college were not evident for international students.

The international students I interviewed had to find their own way at the community college campus because their information sources were not on campus with them, unlike the Latino/as who follow the model of chain migration. Initially, Luke, Tanya, Jackie, and Christi came to campus just for classes and immediately after they were done, headed home. There had

not been an expectation set in their minds for campus involvement. Slowly they discovered the gym, study groups, and student clubs and activities. As activities occupied more of their time as they began staying on campus more often. Being part of an ethnic enclave can limit extracurricular activities students are part of. For the Latino/a students interviewed by Person and Rosenbaum (2006), ethnic enclaves were a potential drawback because they weakened the students' involvement in campus events, yet this was not the case with the students I interviewed. The reason my students were not involved on campus initially was because they were not aware of the opportunities to be involved.

Only three students, Ale, Bibek, and Luke, had information from people who had been students on their campus. This aspect of chain migration is very different than most Latino/a student journeys to the community college (Person & Rosenbaum, 2006). Latino/a students who are searching for a college listen to and gain information from current students at a community college; however, this did not happen with most of the students in my study. Yet, once international students arrive at the community college, information flow may resemble the Latino/a student chain migration model as international students begin gaining information from other international students. In the same way Latino/a students form their own enclave, there is potential for international students to form an enclave of all international students.

Returning to the original chain migration theory as proposed by MacDonald and MacDonald (1964), immigration migration, another way for immigrants to be part of the chain is to be assisted by those who have gone ahead. In some ways then, the international students finding their way to the community college follows the chain migration theory more closely. Students' anchors were established geographically and brought students over, and so

international students are connected to the geographic location, but not necessarily the campus. This is a gap in the chain for international students.

So although there are similarities between international students' migration to the community college and Latino/a students using chain migration, the chain for international students is less defined. When my students first heard about the community college, they relied on someone, their anchor, but if they chose to do more research, the trust and information searching shifted to information from the school. Once my students got on campus, they pick up the chain and gained information from other international students. Yet my students were not part of an ethnic enclave but did sometimes participate in perpetuating misinformation with other international students. Using chain migration to understand how international students are learning about the community college is helpful to comprehend the start of information gathering (anchor) and the end of the chain (arriving on campus and participating in an enclave).

***Globalization.*** One of the forces that I originally proposed driving more international students to study at community colleges in the United States was globalization. In this section I interpret my findings in the context of globalization. Chain migration is an example of how globalization impacted how my students heard about the community college. When the concepts around chain migration were formed (MacDonald & MacDonald, 1964), the world was not as interconnected through technology as it is today. Yet, international students are still at times dependent on their host for housing and connections to the community college. Unlike the experiences of Italian immigrants migrating to the United States in 1880 to 1914 (MacDonald & MacDonald, 1964), potential international students in 2013 can find a lot of information about where they are going prior to leaving their home. Through the use of social media, students may have developed virtual connections prior to stepping foot on campus. Perhaps to fully understand

why international students are coming to a community college, it may be necessary to understand migration patterns in recent decades that feed into why certain community colleges are seeing more international students introduced by local family members. In other words, as chain migration theory is rooted in migration patterns, it may be useful to understand why Dallas is attractive to certain ethnic groups.

Relatives and friends informing my students about the community college were impacted by globalization. Through individual response to globalization, parents of students believed that an education in the United States was worthwhile and made sacrifices for their child to have an opportunity to individually respond to the changes brought by globalization demonstrating internationalization. Christina's friend suggested she pursue an education in English, and Veronica recognized the advantages graduates of a school from the United States had over other applicants in her country. These are direct effects of globalization as individuals see the impact of an English education in the United States. Community colleges allow international students to participate in the American higher education system, because of their lower price point as compared to four-year institutions in the United States, and they have an open door policy. The price difference is important because affordability was a major concern of interviewed students.

Another way globalization impacted the students I interviewed was the way media impacted their expectation of the community college. In the interconnected world of globalization, movies and television shows from the United States are exported around the world. This media export gives access to prospective international students of what life in America may be like and what the community college campus experience is like. Thus, Luke imagined all States to be like New York or California. It was what he had seen about the United States. The heat of Texas surprised him, as did the landscape and people. Luke had imagined more cowboys

in Texas. Another common assumption that my students had was that money would be a lot easier to come by. After all, not many students in the movies and television shows they watched had jobs.

The perceived value of a community college education in the United States may be associated with both what is observed about other graduates who return to student's home countries and what is exported by media. Prospective students and their families base their ideas on these information paths and the dream of an American education is born, and aspects of this phenomenon are informed by theories on globalization.

***Flow variables: Geographic destination and institutional type.*** From my own and other research, it seems that where international students are heading, where students are coming from, and what institutional type they apply to and attend is associated with the type of information they are searching for and receiving. For example, a Chinese student looking for a four-year institution in the Midwest may look for different information than a Russian student looking for a two-year institution near his aunt's house in Texas. By comparing my findings to previous research (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Bohman, 2010; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Lee, 2008; Ottinger, 2009; Zeszortarski, 2003; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011), I observe and interpret emerging ideas about different information flows for prospective international students. I then discuss different implications for access for international students coming from different countries for higher education in the United States.

***Geographic destination.*** My findings are different from previous research on international student enrollment at the community college. A geographic difference in the location of the college attended or other variables may be influencing the students' enrollment. Talking with my students, they were drawn to the community college because they had a person

who was their geographic anchor in the Dallas metropolitan area. Those interviewed by Bohman (2010) had previous experience traveling or living in the United States, whether studying abroad or as part of an exchange study that influenced their decision to study at the community college. The majority of the 13 students interviewed by Bohman returned to the Midwest for their community college education because of their prior experience and connection with an American lifestyle. Bohman's interviews revealed that previous residence in the United States added to reasons students chose to return for further education. Only one student in my study had visited the United States prior to thinking about attending the community college.

The students I interviewed were also different than those presented in Ottinger's (2009) study. Ottinger interviewed 15 international students in Missouri to see why they chose to study at the community college. None of my students had studied abroad prior to attending the community college, had been student athletes, or had socially privileged circumstances like those in Ottinger's study. However, the students in my study did have similar motivations to the students in Ottinger's research, including getting encouragement from a host and parents and having the dream of an American education.

My students liked picking their own classes and not having to be at the school all day if they did not want to. The students in Zeszortarski's (2003) study on how community college international students regarded globalization, also appreciated flexible scheduling of classes at the community college. The international students Zeszortarski interviewed discussed the quality of education in the United States, with English competency being an especially attractive factor. Zeszortarski also discussed the benefits of transfer. I did not hear these sentiments from the students I interviewed; however, one large difference between my study and Zeszortarski's research is that half of her participants were from Asia. Again, it seems what students are hearing

about the community college may vary by geographic origin, with Asian students being more likely than students from other nationalities to value ranking systems and visit agencies for help with applications.

One reason students in Zeszortarski's (2003) study chose their specific community college was because of the geographic location. Students appreciated that the community college was in a big city and that there was public transportation available to them. Although Dallas is a large city with public transportation, none of the students I interviewed mentioned it as a consideration when making their decision to attend the community college.

Having an anchor ties students to a specific location, which may help explain findings such as Mamiseishvili (2012), who looked at the academic and social engagement of international students at two-year institutions. Using the data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study, Mamiseishvili found location was an important factor for international students' decision to enroll in community college in the United States. Her thought behind why international students picked these institutions was lower cost than four-year colleges and universities, along with transfer opportunities, small class sizes, and fewer test requirements. Potentially linked to lower cost, I found another potential benefit is having free housing and someone from the family to help the international student to make the transition to college.

*Institution destination.* There is also a noted difference in information flow for international students seeking their education from a four-year institution as compared to a community college. The students in my research did not turn to an agent, nor did they visit any education information fairs as compared to the behaviors of international students reported in

previous findings (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011; Lee, 2008; Ottinger, 2009; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011).

Only one student in the interviewed group was from East Asia in this study, and he mentioned that rankings were a consideration for him, but he was also looking at four-year institutions. None of the other students brought up the use of rankings, perhaps because there are not as many known ranking systems for community colleges. Lee (2008) had different results, as she found East Asian students relied on heavily on rankings data to make decisions about which institution to attend. Tanya visited the EducationUSA centers where she saw that there were books that had the top 100 institutions but did not use them as she already knew which institution she would be attending. As the students in Lee's study were going to four-year institutions, this may point to differences in ranking use and information flow between international students headed to a four-year as compared to the two-year institution, which was the focus of my study.

Whereas the international students interviewed for my research mentioned cost and available programs, the driving reason for attendance was their host's location. These findings stand in contrast to Barreno and Traut (2012) who surveyed students ( $n = 80$ ) at a west Texas community college and found "the top six reasons for selection of [the community college] were transferability of courses, available academic programs and quality, campus location, cost, available educational facilities and technology, and advice from family and friends" (p. 863). Only Christina mentioned knowing about courses that would transfer between the community college and a four-year institution. Most students did not know about available facilities and technologies. Barreno and Traut urged institutions to stay relevant to students and give them the information they need and keep their websites updated with pertinent information about cost and services offered. In addition, because students were hearing about the community college from

family and friends, Barreno and Traut pointed out institutions can also give information to these individuals about financial aid and admissions. Similarly, my research suggests community colleges can reach out to international students' hosts and anchors with information about what their college experience is likely to entail.

If this emerging idea that information flows are indeed different between geographic destination, origin, and institutional type, then community colleges may be able to tailor messages specific to different groups. These messages may contain information that is relevant and therefore appear valid and useful to those certain groups of prospective students. This also confirms there is great diversity within international students, be it where students are coming from, where they are going, where they are thinking about studying, and demographic differences (Hanassab, 2006).

### **Information impact.**

*Perfect information.* The premise of my argument is that having perfect and complete information is the ideal for decision making about college enrollment, choice, and attendance (DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005; Simon, 1955, 1997). From my interviews with the 15 international students, students received little information about what the community college would be like and sometimes received misinformation, which impacted their expectation formation. An example of this is when students applied for visas. Christina heard rumors if she attended a four-year institution, she would be more likely to get a student visa, which made her uncertain of the quality of education at the community college. Yet this was a rumor, not accurate information, but nonetheless the erroneous information impacted what she thought the community college would be like.

Perfect information is the ideal, yet because this type of information is impossible to acquire, the goal should be greater accuracy in information flow from institutions to students (Jabber, 2012). The work institutions put into informing students about application procedures is no small task, yet students have limited information about what happens after being admitted. International students are required to engage in many more steps to enroll at a community college (e.g. obtaining an I-20, verifying transcripts, documenting financial ability, etc.) than a student from the United States, but the information that international students receive about the application process may be more voluminous than what they receive about what their community college experience will be like. Since some information is better than no information, sources such as the media and a relative who has only driven by the community college can help fill in students' ideas of the community college with ideas that are more or less accurate.

*Community college.* One draw of the community college is that students can pay a lower tuition by taking college-credit classes that transfer to a four-year institution. However, many of my students were uncertain about whether their classes could transfer and did not know the procedures for transferring. Researchers disagree on the impact of starting at a community college on bachelor's degree attainment (Leigh & Gill, 2003; Long & Kurlaender, 2009; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2009; Rouse, 1995). For example, some argue that it takes students longer to attain their degree (Long & Kurlaender, 2009). Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person (2009) found, however, students who had low academic confidence were aided by starting at the community college and, based on their success, actually had higher degree aspirations. In my study, Hass and Ale found the personal interest of faculty members to be encouraging, supporting Deil-Amen's (2011) research, who reported that connections with faculty members at the community college aided students in feeling more comfortable with the

school environment. All students interviewed in my research wanted to attain their four-year degrees.

LipmanHearne (2013), a higher education marketing and communication firm, recently found cost and available majors are the most important variables to American students' college choice. In a survey of 11,000 prospective students, LipmanHearne found students looking at two-year institutions valued class flexibility and convenient location, and they echoed what students in my research said were factors drawing them to the community college. However, present in my study but missing from the analysis of LipmanHearne is the idea that international students make choices when opportunities arise, and this phenomenon drives their application to the community college. While finances, location, and major choice have influence, my international students seem to be determined to go to a school, and when an opportunity arose, they took it. The choice is about any attendance rather than attendance at a particular institution.

When my students were prospective students learning about the community college, they received more information about how to apply versus what the community college would be like. They lacked information on transferring that other research (LipmanHearne, 2013; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2009) has pointed to as reasons students are choosing the community college. My finding then contributes information on why this student group is choosing to study at the community college.

***Clearing uncertainty.*** Another impact of the information students were able to find was having their uncertainties clarified. Hamrick and Hossler (1996) proposed the information students found during the college choice and information gathering phase as having a cumulative effect on students' final decisions. A student's search was "a continuous process of reducing uncertainty about colleges" (p. 182). Thus, with more information gathered, Hamrick and

Hossler hypothesized students would have greater satisfaction with their college choice. Their findings are confirmed in my study as the international students discussed how the information they found impacted them. Christina remembered when she started her search, she thought that four-year institutions were outside of her budget. She found “government schools” (public institutions) cost less, and her cousin told her about community colleges. When she first heard about this option, she was uncertain about whether the community college would work for her, but she continued to do research. The information she gathered about state schools and transferrable courses lead her to enroll at Sunterra College. The information gathered helped Christina to seize her dream of attending school in the United States. The potential for more accurate information about the community college may be contribute to more accurate expectations resulting in potentially more satisfied students.

### **Challenged expectations.**

*Expectation confirmation theory.* When thinking about international students forming expectations about the community college, I had proposed using expectations confirmation theory to understand how expectations were related to satisfaction. Understanding this study in the context of expectation confirmation theory is important, because it allows me to posit that students have preconceived ideas of the community college that impacts their satisfaction or dissatisfaction (Oliver, 1980). As educational experience is something intangible, the performance and the expectations are based on what is tangible (e.g. buildings, access to technology, etc.), and if the original expectations are met, students are satisfied. Thus, the formation of expectations becomes important because the more accurate they are, the greater potential for end satisfaction. Expectations can help students socialize to an institution that will impact their retention and goal achievement (Braxton, Vesper, & Hossler, 1995; Pike, 2006).

Expectations from the interviews with my students that were exceeded included walls without graffiti, DVD rentals from the library, and gym facilities. These surprises were reasons my students gave of their satisfaction with their educational experience at the community college.

Yüksel and Yüksel (2001) argued that those making repeat purchases often have more accurate expectations; however, most students do not have the luxury of trying college again. Students have a dream of going to school in the United States. Upon arrival, if things are not quite what they thought, they push through because there is no option to be disappointed and dissatisfied. As one respondent pointed out, some of her friends dwelled on these thoughts, fell into depression, packed up, and went home. Their dream was unfinished. Jackie and Sky both spoke about how coming to study in the United States was their dream, and they would not even contemplate ways in which their dreams were not fulfilled. Sky asked me to skip this question.

Yet, Christina observed how the community college was a cheaper alternative to the four-year institutions she was exploring, giving her the opportunity to try it out. Mistakes did not cost her as much at the community college as compared to a four-year institution. Community colleges do give international students the opportunity to make repeat purchases by continuing their education at the community college, because of the lower tuition. The same amount of money would pay for one semester or one year at a four-year institution, and if they were disappointed, there would be no second try.

Whereas previous literature (Agarwal & Winkler, 1985; Altbach, Reisburg, & Rumbley, 2010; Bohman, 2010; Hamrick, 2007) discussed academic quality as a drawing point for colleges, I found that the opportunity of coming to the United States was a draw for the students in my study. Globalization played a role in shaping the dream my students had for their community college education. The students were concerned with the quality of education from the

community college, yet it was a secondary concern as compared to their desire to study in the United States. Seeking the opportunity for education in the United States versus valuing the academic quality may be a difference between international students choosing to study at the community college as compared to those interested in four-year institutions.

***Psychological contract.*** Another way that the phenomenon of international students forming ideas about the community college can be explained is through the theory of a psychological contract. Researchers in organization behavior suggest that when employees are recruited and hired for a job, there are two forms of contracts formed between the hiring organization and the new employees (Argyris, 1960; Rousseau, 1989; Schein, 1980). “The term psychological contract refers to an individual’s beliefs regarding the terms and conditions of a reciprocal exchange agreement between that focal person and another party” (Rousseau, 1989, p. 123). The other form of agreement is an implied contract, based on the individual’s relationship with an organization. The main difference between these two forms of contract is the psychological contract deals with an individual, whereas an implied contract is about the relationship. A psychological contract is based on an individual’s belief that the organization will reciprocate something. For instance, an employee works extra hard on a project, believing the organization will recognize the good work with a bonus. In my research, the international students appear to think since they are making sacrifices to attend an institution in the United States, therefore it will yield tangible benefits. For example, tangible benefits that students may expect include guaranteed employment in the future, improved English abilities, or development of a network of American friends. The contract between the student and school is negotiated through trust (Rousseau, 1989), so when an employee or student does not receive what they thought they were going to, there is increased dissatisfaction, sometimes anger at the injustice of

the situation, and termination of employment or enrollment, in this situation. To manage psychological contracts, Rousseau suggested organization assess their employees' expectations.

Rousseau's (1989) argument has implications for my international students. As students form their ideas of the community college, pay tuition, and enroll at the institution, a type of contract is put in place. However, the exact terms of the contract are unclear. My research shows that there is limited information that international students are receiving about the community college, and thus they are forming their ideas based on information through such vehicles as popular media and hearsay from friends and families. If institutions do not acknowledge that they are entering an implicit contract, they may also not realize they are making promises to students. For example, the pictures that Christi saw on Facebook of happy students gathered at an event on campus were interpreted as a common event. Christi arrived on campus in the summer and was surprised by how empty the campus was and how infrequent common gatherings were. Yet, these types of contracts may be how an institution is representing and communicating about itself without purposefully promising anything to students.

Another consideration of expectations is from the perspective of the institution. While interested international students form an idea of what the community college will be like and form expectations of their experience—perhaps even construct a psychological contract with the institution—faculty and staff of the community college form ideas of how students should behave. Collier and Morgan (2008) examined the fit between what instructors expect of students and what students understand of these expectations at Portland State University. Through focus groups with first-generation students, traditional students, and faculty members, Collier and Morgan found that students not only needed academic skills to navigate faculty expectations, but also cultural capital to demonstrate academic capacity. In their study, faculty members

emphasized the need for students to do work outside of class and prioritize school. Students in Collier and Morgan's focus groups wanted faculty expectations to be more explicit, especially for assignments. First-generation students expressed confusion over things, such as office hours, and other assignment instructions. One woman in the focus group saw office hours on the syllabus, but did not know what they were for and why she would need to go to them. Collier and Morgan concluded that it would be useful to make some of the expectations more explicit through new student orientation.

Considering what faculty expect of students as part of psychological contracts, both parties may have unspoken expectations of one another. Yet if expectations are unspoken and go unfulfilled, both parties may be disappointed. When working with international students, it may be as important to match expectations between what international students want, what the school offers, and what faculty and staff anticipates from students.

Karp and Brook (2012) argued it is unfair to students to expect certain behaviors without being explicit as to what they are. Through interviews with 168 faculty, staff, and students at three community colleges within the Virginia Community College System, Karp and Brook found students are expected to be self-aware, manage a variety of responsibilities and time, engage in collegiate discourse, and be advocates for themselves, including asking when they need help. They too suggested that these skills be discussed during student orientation.

Both studies by Collier and Morgan (2008) and Karp and Brook (2012) proposed that at different points in life, people are expected to play a role in which certain behaviors are expected by others. For example, as an employee, you are expected to show up on time and perform certain duties. Individuals are expected to act in certain ways, yet if the individual does not realize that they are expected to act a certain way, it can affect how others perceive them in that

role. Taking this concept to the community college, Karp and Brook (2012) argued that students do not have many models to learn how to be a community college student. High school counselors, popular media sources such as the television show, *Community*, and news items can provide some clues, but are insufficient. The role students at the community college play is highly variable, because it can be tailored to the individual—how one studies, when feedback is given from faculty, and where time is allocated. The psychological contract is not only between a student and the institution, but also between faculty members and students.

Psychological contract can help explain the experiences of the international students in my study. The included literature suggests the importance of making expectations explicit. By making these expectation explicit may help students have experiences that match their expectations.

***Roommate dynamics.*** My students arrived in Dallas with big dreams of the community college, yet one area that they had unexpected unpleasant surprises was in relationship with others. Yet, according to literature this is to be expected. Relationship dynamics of the host and information source for international students is related to research about roommate compatibility. Keup (2007), through in-depth interviews with nine students transitioning between high school and college, found relationships are a key component of expectation disillusionment. In the first interviews, while students were still in high school, students discussed the important role roommates would play in their college experience. However in follow up interviews, after students started attending college, students found that although roommates were close in proximity, this did not guarantee friendship and instead sometimes meant relational challenges.

In the same way, international students faced difficult family relationship and host dynamics. Students viewed coming to the United States as a chance for freedom and

independence. However because they were living with their hosts, sometimes hosts acted as their guardians. This caused a few of those I interviewed angst and in the end resulted in a separation so they could pursue new housing arrangements. Again, if the community college can help international students be explicit about expectations, they may help international students manage relationship dynamics. For example, Sky did not realize that his uncle was newly married and upon arrival thought the dynamics were weird and ended up moving out. Now, if someone had encouraged Sky and his uncle to talk about expectations for housing and living dynamics, his uncle could confirm that he was newly married, but he and his new wife were willing to host Sky, or his uncle could encourage Sky to give him and his new bride one weekend a month where Sky would not come home. On the other side, Sky could articulate that he desired more freedom of when he came home and when he ate out. There could be some compromise made. However because nothing was articulated and no expectations made explicit between Sky and his uncle, Sky's solution was to move out. Moving out and living on his own contributed to Sky's limited finances.

## **Implications**

As the expectations of students can influence their experience, I argue that intentions of degree attainment can play a part in how a student performs or how active they are on campus. Voorhees and Zhou (2000) surveyed students in the Colorado community college system in the spring of 1996 to solicit their educational goals and intentions. They argued it would be beneficial to help students capture their initial intentions early on to help them achieve their goals. The same argument could be made about international student expectations. If international students were asked to articulate their expectations to international student advisers,

there could be greater opportunity for matching between expectations and actual experiences. In fact, researchers agree that a student orientation is a good place to help students set accurate expectations for the institution and also align student expectations with faculty expectations (Barreno & Traut, 2012; Collier & Morgan, 2008; Karp & Brook, 2012). My research suggests that students lack information about transfer, classroom norms, and college terminology. Based on what anchors and other individuals affiliated with community colleges tell prospective students, international students have insufficient information about the community college. To address this concern, community colleges could offer orientations dedicated to the needs of international students to address their unique knowledge gaps.

Although the literature on chain migration on Latino/a students may help explain some of the information flow to international students, from those interviewed, unlike Latino/a students, international students are not typically part of any ethnic enclave. This begs the question, if they are not part of an ethnic enclave, how are international students being socialized into the community college community? The enclaves that international students develop could serve similar purposes as the enclaves formed by minority students. For example, one student told me of rumors that floated from one international student to another about scholarship opportunities. This phenomenon could fall into the chain migration theory, particularly if those forwarding the information are affiliated within the same group of international students.

Geographic differences in information flow to prospective students have implications for the outreach performed by higher education institutions. In Dallas, my students had no prior experience living in the United States, did not use agents, nor did they go to educational fairs. As compared to Ottinger (2009) who found students in her Midwest study had prior experience with life in the United States, high school exchange students in the area of her study may then be a

good pool for potential recruitment for that local community college. So for recruitment and information clarification for international students in Dallas, it would make sense to focus on family members who could serve as anchors for international students. Working with family members who are likely sources of information about the community college for prospective students, provides a means for community colleges to disseminate more accurate information. Also, as international students are looking at schools' social media pages, institutions may want to consider how those pages are being used by the college and if they fit how students, both current and future, are using them.

Finally, as posited by expectation confirmation theory (Oliver, 1980), satisfaction with one's educational experiences is based on something tangible. However, as international students' experiences were intangible, institutions need to know what "good surprises" for international students to help form future prospective students' expectations. As each institution has unique offerings, asking students what ways their expectations have been exceeded may help institutions understand what it has to offer.

By giving international students more accurate information, the community college may be able to give these students a greater sense of agency to make more informed decisions about their futures in higher education in the United States. The interviewed students all discussed how finances influenced their decisions, which hinted at a different type of international student who may not have great economic means (Szelenyi & Chang, 2002). The community college provides access to higher education to a group that may not have access otherwise.

## Chapter 6

### Narrative of Information Mismatch

The purpose of my research was to find out how international students heard about the community college, how they formed their expectations, and what those expectations were. As my interviews were semi-structured, some of the exchanges became more story-telling (Riessman, 1993). Allowing students' stories to emerge, I asked questions in a conversation format. Students shared their unique stories in their own ways about how they arrived in the United States and enrolled at the community college. While I identified themes from these data, the stories students shared with me about how they learned about community college, made their decisions, and experienced the community college after arrival made me feel the collective narrative was incomplete. Thus, this chapter emerged from my desire to provide a thick description of the mismatch between the information students base their expectations upon and their actual experiences (Merriam, 2002). By presenting this narrative, my hope is to give the holistic nature of how my students heard about, formed ideas on, and experienced community colleges with all the complexities and richness of their story (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The research goal of narrative analysis is for greater understanding and bridging what happened with what that means (Kramp, 2003).

This chapter is a composite narrative from my interviews. While in the last chapter I discuss how international students hear about the community college through chain migration; how lack of information impacts what students think of college placement tests, prerequisites, transfer, and other academic terminology; and how students' expectations are challenged in both negative and positives ways, this chapter answers questions how different student's expectations

conflict with the students' experiences. How mismatched is the expectation and experience? What are the implications? This is Sam's story.

Sam's relatives invited her to come to the United States for her higher education. She had wanted to come to the United States or England for a long time, but she was in a serious romantic relationship and did not want her move to impact that relationship. Understandably, Sam was hesitant to leave her boyfriend. However her parents were insistent that if she did want to get married that she would need to get her degree first. They insisted on a college degree and Sam thought, *It's just two years, just two years.*

In telling her story, Sam's decision seemed to me to be more about taking the opportunity to come to the United States for additional education than picking a specific institution to attend. Her relatives got her information and records and even submitted her application to the local community college. She poured over the school's website and began dreaming of what classes would be like. She had watched some *Saved By the Bell* episodes and imagined that she, along with a group of friends, would hang out at the cafeteria, that her teachers would be invigorating, and that she would have plenty of opportunities to be involved on campus.

While she did not want to leave her romantic relationship, she was excited for this opportunity. This was her dream! Her relatives told her, "Everyone goes to college. It's all the same." As noted earlier, a relative took care of all the paper work for Sam to attend the community college near the relative's home. Although Sam was told that all colleges are the same, she found out later that her cousins went to expensive four-year colleges, not the community college where her relatives enrolled her. As she figured this out, she reminded herself of the promise she made to her parents, and she reconciled that this opportunity would work out for her. How difficult could it be? *It's just two years.*

Sam came to stay with her relatives, but found them to be overbearing. They often criticized her, which upset her. She had come to the United States so she could have greater independence, and she found her living circumstances to be confining. In the movies she had watched in her country, college in America was about being free and trying new things and yet she had a curfew and needed rides to go most places. So after a semester, she wanted out of the living arrangement, and the move made sense because her relatives had originally promised to help with school fees but financial constraints prevented them from supporting her college education. Sam's significant other stepped up with tuition, plus she used her own savings because her parents were not able to give her any money for college. Despite the challenges, she continued to believe that it was *just two years*.

When Sam began to struggle financially, she remembered thinking that she had never seen anyone on television struggling with money at school. She said she assumed money would be easy to come by in America. Yet, facing her numerous bills, money for Sam did not come easily.

Her relationship with her classmates was not what she imagined either. In a way that annoyed her, Sam's classmates often asked her, *How did you get here?* She would quip back, *I flew*. The question made her feel like she did not belong. Yet she remembered seeing online all the different nations where students originated at her school when she was searching about the community college. She had been excited she would be part of such a diverse student body. Her experience, however, did not reflect this celebration of diversity. Sometimes her American classmates were rude to her and asked her questions like, *Do you have electricity?* referring to where she came from. She struggled with making friends. Unlike schools back home, students at Sam's community college left campus after class. This left her without opportunities to develop

friendships with her classmates. In contrast to her prior experience in her home country, friendships were hard. She never had to consciously try to make friends, friendships happened naturally.

Back home before coming to the United States, Sam gathered information online to inform her about class size, location of the school, requirements for admission, and origins of other international students. However, she did not find information about what classes would be like, nor did she find information about different classes offered. Sam was surprised by the price of books (she thought the bookstore gave books away), cost of tuition, and most importantly, not knowing how to fit in, and she had not anticipated this.

Before coming to the United States, when she researched online to learn about higher education, it seemed like students hung out in groups all the time outside of classes. The college environment looked highly social and collegial, and this environment was attractive to her. Whereas on campus she did see groups of friends hanging out, she was not part of them. She observed them but was not invited to be part of them, which was frustrating.

Then, during her second semester at the community college, Sam's significant other was done trying and their relationship ended. What she had feared before coming to the United States for school had become reality. Sam felt isolated from her family, her past, and was financially struggling after this breakup. *Just two years?*

With no financial resources, Sam took two off-campus jobs. Whereas these two clerical jobs were illegal due to her visa status, she felt she had to work to afford rent, gas, and tuition. She worked the third shift and sometimes could not stop at home before coming to campus for her morning class. She kept packages of instant noodles in the car that she would snack on her

during drive back to school in the morning. Though tired beyond belief, she kept thinking, *Just two years.*

When interviewing Sam, she sighed when reflecting on her situation and asked how those at the community college could expect her, someone from a third world country, to pay three times as much as someone paying in-state/in-county tuition. Her relatives helped her apply to the community college and had promised to help pay for her tuition, but they abandoned her due to their own financial struggles. When this financial burden became hers, it was a surprise. When explaining this financial and deeply personal experience to me, Sam's emotions took over, and she began to cry. She was emotional because she was worried that her dream of completing her studies in the United States would end because she did not have the financial means to pay for her studies. She looked for other ways to keep up with her bills to attend school and maintain a social life. *You can't just sit and read all day*, Sam told me. The money she earned seemed to disappear as quickly as she got it, due to living and college expenses.

While Sam struggled, she knew she would not give up on her dream of obtaining her degree at an American college. She watched as other friends ran out of money and headed home. She also watched friends who seem to strike gold, finishing their associate's degrees and blazing toward their bachelor's degrees. Sam talked about a friend who found sponsorship and who was racing toward her bachelor's degree. Her friend

went to this church, and then she just participated there, and went to the pastor, and asked for a scholarship. It's a very big church, like they can take out \$30,000 from their account and they don't notice it. It's a big church with rich people. So they were like, oh this child from Africa needs a scholarship and the church committee was like, okay. And they paid for university. Just like that. She was lucky.

Sam, however, was not as lucky and started to miss tuition payments. To make ends meet, she sometimes performed sexual favors for a friend who helped her out financially. She was not

proud of what she had to do, but she desperately wanted to finish her degree and saw this as a way to achieve her goal.

A professional at the international student office noticed that Sam was struggling. After a conversation and hearing about her situation, this person helped her find scholarship money. Her tuition was taken care of for a semester to help her toward completing her degree. Her future seemed brighter until her car broke down and she needed to fix it to continue to go to her job and pay rent. Without another option, she used her scholarship money to fix the car and the money she had saved from her jobs to pay for part of her tuition. Together, these payments left her broke.

Desperate for money, an acquaintance back home approached Sam to be part of a business that sounded promising. Her acquaintance just needed the start-up money for the business to take off. Based on this convincing communication, Sam sent money back home, but that plan disappeared, along with her money. Sam looked for help to find a job and was able to secure an internship during school break that would pay for her tuition the next semester. From one semester to the next, Sam experienced struggles with finances to attend college, with each semester more difficult than the previous one.

Looking back, Sam's two year experience at the community college was not what she expected. She had not worked in her home country, and no one in the movies she had seen worked, so she was surprised when she had to start working in order to earn sufficient funds to attend college. Complicating matters, federal regulations in the United States prevented Sam from working off campus legally. Although her family was not wealthy, Sam had her choice of food back home. She even had a driver. She could not have imagined surviving off instant noodles and other junk food. She had only seen new cars on television, but the car she was

driving was an older model. Her car was made before she was born. No, this was not the Hollywood America she had imagined being part of.

In the end, Sam concluded with that *two years* in America to attend college took her innocence from her. What she expected was an opportunity for education in the United States to allow her to participate in the American dream; however, rather than opportunity, Sam experienced extreme poverty and exploitation. She was able to pursue her degree, but it came at a high price. What she expected was friendship, but she experienced loneliness. She expected a good housing situation but she ended up scraping by on her own. Many things that Sam expected did not match her experience.

Compared to other students I studied, this composite story about Sam is unique in the varied trials she faced. However, all parts of her story were heard during my interviews. The mismatch of Sam's expectation and experience was a major and important finding. Although Sam's story is atypical compared to others, this narrative provides context to how students learn about the community college, what they think it will be like, and what they actually experience. The implication then is, what if international students are given accurate information about the community college. Would Sam have turned to help earlier? Would she have different experiences if she knew of the different resources on campus? Would she have found friendships and experienced the kind of college education that American television and movies portrayed?

Sam came with a promise of what the community college would be like and faced a different reality. Yet, she told me, she was impressed by people who wanted to help her. She enjoyed getting to know the few people who are now her friends. Sam actually loved the campus, and she was happy about being able to attend college. She did not know and could not have known that her host would not be able to help her financially, but she survived beyond their

ability to support her. Ultimately she will graduate after next semester, and she hopes to find work back home, as “nothing is left for her here” in the United States. She looked forward to returning to her country with a college degree having overcome unimaginable experiences, based on the information she gathered from her anchor and college websites.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Conclusion**

This research contributes to a gap of knowledge about how international students form their expectations about the community college. In an increasingly connected world, more students are seeking opportunities to study in the United States. With the influence of globalization and commercialization, international students are enrolling at community colleges. Other research (Bohman, 2010; Ottinger, 2009) focused on international students' decisions to attend college, while my research asks what students choosing to attend a community college did not know and how the information they did have shaped their experience college-going experience. One area this research uncovered was what was discussed in the word-of-mouth conversations students had when they heard about the community college. Previous research (Bodycott, 2009; Bohman, 2010; Doku, 2007; Hamrick, 2007; Jones, 2006; Ottinger, 2009) attributed word-of-mouth from family and friends as international students' main information, but without any additional detail of these exchanges. Many of my students had very little information about the community college experience, and my study showed international students needed further explanation of the information they received to fully understand what community college would be like.

At the beginning of this project I thought the medium for the message would impact students most. Through the interviews I learned that it was the source, not the medium, which mattered most; the messenger was the message. As students are reading things online and talking with their anchors, the information my students found directly from the community college had greater impact. The gathered information shaped what they thought the community college would be like.

Summarizing major results, my research showed international students obtained information from a person with whom they established a strong connection, usually a family member. However, for the most accurate information, students turn to those at the community college, or whatever source that was closest to the community college. For example, some of my students stopped information gathering after finding their anchor. This person became their closest information to the community college. Even though international students are looking at a variety of sources for information about the community college, they still lacked information about placement tests, prerequisites, and transfer. My students were also confused about certain academic terminology. International students were surprised and disappointed at how difficult it was to make friends, and they were surprised and pleased by the care community college staff and faculty showed them and by the flexibility and choice of classes. My research confirmed international students' expectations do not match their experience at the community college, and as this mismatch can contribute to student dissatisfaction with the community college-going experience this is important to understand ways to help students have more closely matching expectations and experiences.

### **Research Questions and Answers**

The research questions of this study were:

1. During the exploration stage of international students' college choice process, why do they turn to the sources of information on community colleges that they do? What are the sources telling them?
2. How does the way in which international students hear about community colleges impact their expectations of their experience?
3. What are the expectations international students have of their American community college experience prior to arrival?

To address Research Question One, from my interviews with students and ethnographic content analysis of the websites they mentioned, I found students turn to sources closest to the community college for information about college, because they trusted these sources most. Family members discussed with international students the price of the community college as compared to other institutions, and the location of the school in relation to their home, where most of the interviewed international students lived. Students turned to an anchor, a person who helped them come to the community college from their home country. These anchors briefly described how the community college functioned within the higher education system. For example, Christina's cousin told her she could take her core classes at the community college, and she explained that these courses are the same classes offered at four-year institutions. Other times, anchors would provide housing, such as Luke's sister who helped him apply for colleges in the United States and volunteered to let him stay with the family.

The information anchors provided my students was limited. Knowing that the community college is cheaper, closer, and can potentially aid them in getting to a four-year degree does not equate to my students being successful in their goals. This information students got from their anchors is a good start for learning about the community college but is insufficient in helping students form accurate expectations for their college-going experience. As expectations set the foundation and potential for student involvement and sometimes success, this means we need to carefully consider the implications for the type of information international students have access to and are basing their expectations upon.

The pictures on the schools' websites and social media outlets showed students where they would study, but many of these pictures mislead the students into thinking they would make friends easily and engage in a vast array of social activities. Tanya marveled at how beautiful the

campus looked, and Jackie expressed excitement when looking through pictures of students interacting on campus. My students expected to make friends as easily as they had at home, but they were uncertain about what classroom dynamics would be like. Having watched only Hollywood movies, Hass, Tanya, Luke, and Moyo did not know that students could call their teachers by name and could pick their own seats in the classroom. They were not sure of how the student-teacher interaction would look like. My students thought their classmates would be more rambunctious than their classmates back home, but uncertain of other differences. Would classes be interactive? Would it be lecture based? How do team projects work?

Although community college personnel may argue that the purpose of their social media pages was not to inform prospective students of what their experience will be like, the reality is this is how my students were using the page. Without pictures and videos of the classroom and other interactions on campus, students base their expectations of what these interactions will be like off of what they can find and imagine. This means the image of the school projected by the community college can aid students in forming more accurate expectations.

Answering Research Question Two, the impact of information is related to *where* my students heard about it and opposed to *what* they heard. The messenger is the message, instead of the medium. It did not matter to students if they received a mailing, read something online, or spoke with a person from the school, but it did matter how close the source of information was to the community college. Students trusted the information they were receiving from sources closest to the school. Tanya mentioned that she did not trust her aunt or the counselor at the EducationUSA center because they were not focused on her and her institution. The counselor at the EducationUSA center just knew about higher education in general in the United States. For trustworthy information, Tanya turned to her community college through its website, and the

website was seen as credible because it is created by and an extension of the college. Students who based the decision to attend the community college on information from a family member had fewer expectations of the school than those who researched the institution through looking at the institutional website and social media pages.

Many of the international students I interviewed had dreamed of going to school in the United States since they were children. Addressing Research Question Three, when the expectations of my international students were not met while being a community college student, my students did not dwell on these experiences. When Veronica found out that her classes she took last semester did not count, she was frustrated and upset because she expected someone from the college to guide her to take the right classes. Yet, Veronica had no agency in this situation. She did not feel like she could complain to anyone. Thus, Veronica accepted this reality, held a grudge against her community college for not helping, and continued toward her goal of completing her degree at the community college to transfer to a four-year institution. There are other times when students' expectations are not met and they take action. Yona wanted to major in a specific topic, and when her information from the community college website was wrong, she found another community college to enroll in. Other students, who expected their host and living situation to be different, took action by moving out.

Challenges to expectations that my students faced included making friends and changing relationship dynamics with the families they lived with. They expected to make friends easily, and they expected their living situations with family members to work out to their benefit, but sometimes their expectations were not met. Students accommodated these circumstances, but felt disappointed by their experience. My students sometimes took the disappointment in silence, which has implications about what they will tell friends back home that may be considering

studying at the same community college. My students were silent on the campuses, but as major information source for others, there are questions of what they are telling others about the community college-going experience.

Another area that had information mismatch was between students' expectations and experiences were in the area of class. Classes are a major part of attending a community college. My students expected classes to look and operate like the classes in their home countries, and they were surprised when they had flexibility to set their own class schedules and at the variety of classes offered, including interesting electives. At first a number of my students did not know what to do with this choice and agency. Most of my students really liked having the choice. Imagine if students came with the knowledge that they would have this choice and became proactive about finding out about which instructors and classes are excellent and invigorating. By having a more accurate picture of how the community college operates may mean that students are able to buy in to their educational experience, leading to greater satisfaction.

Some students also did not know what to major in or what next steps would be for the future. My students had the hope of somehow studying in the United States, and after they found their anchor, they tossed all their dreams in this one boat. Some of my students expected that once they were on this boat, it would be smooth sailing. However, this was not the case. Expectations change as students have different experiences. This means community colleges can help shape expectations once students are on campus and then continue to help students construct experiences to meet their expectations.

While some relationships did not meet my student's expectations, they were surprised by other relationships they were not expecting. My students felt cared for by faculty and staff members at the community college. Jon told me that he really felt like they wanted him to

succeed. Imagine if a student came with the expectation that they could get to know staff and faculty members at the community college. Then when a professor announces office hours, this prospective student may be more likely to go visit the professor. That is, if this student also had access and knowledge of what office hours are. By being explicit of the good surprises, may actually mean that students become aware and partake in experiences.

Many students had very limited ideas when I asked them about what they thought the community college would be like, yet they had expectations of what they would experience. Bibek thought the college would be good and fun, based on what he heard from his cousin. Good and fun are not very specific ideas that Bibek then based his expectations upon. Christina had done more research than other participants in my study, including using the community college's website, and she discussed her options with an international advisor. She thought the community college would be high quality, she knew what classes she had to take to transfer to a four-year institution, and she heard faculty members would be concerned about her. She liked that her class sizes would be small and the tuition she paid for her core classes would be comparable in quality to the classes taught at the four-year institution. The more information students were able to gather about the community college, the more specific their expectations were for their college-going experience.

### **New Conceptual Model**

In light of these findings and discussion, I propose a new conceptual model to understand the forces driving international students to pursue their education in American community colleges (see Figure 3). As originally proposed in the opening chapter of this dissertation, the model's main tenets remain the same; however, I added a new cycle at the end, on the bottom

right of the model. This cycle is of prospective international students hearing about the community college, forming expectations, coming and experiencing the community college, being satisfied or dissatisfied, and then becoming the anchor information source. How international students experience the community college may influence how they tell others about it and thereby impact how future prospective students form their expectations.

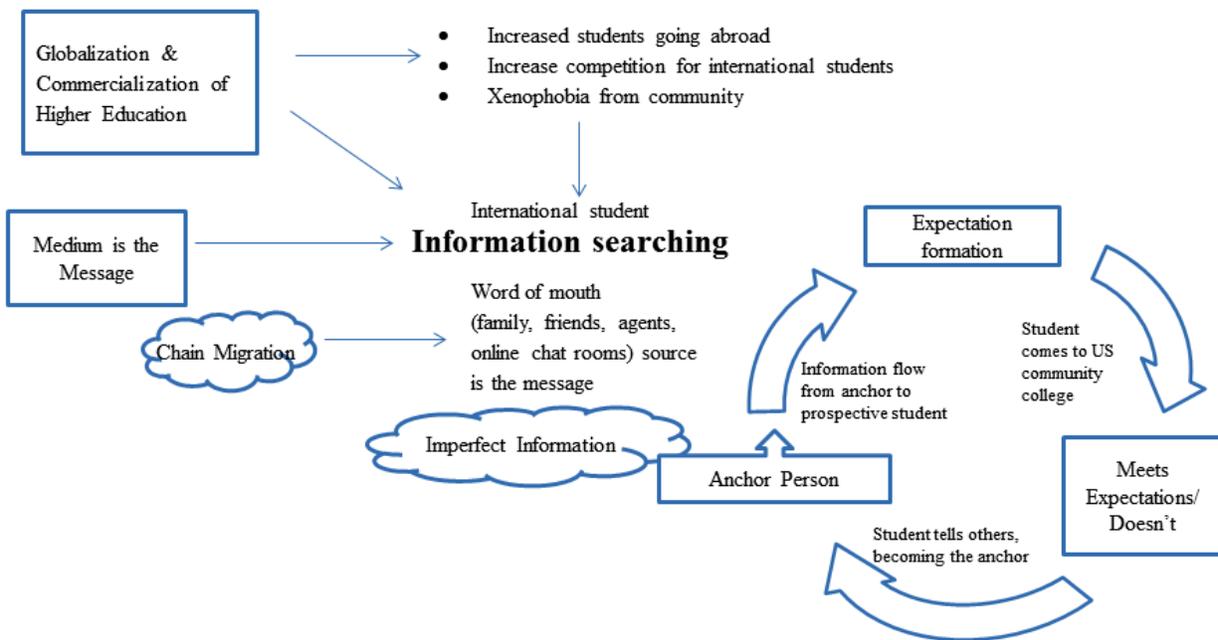


Figure 3. New model of community college expectation formation of international students.

The model still begins with globalization and commercialization, on the top left, as these two forces drive students to seek education from schools in the United States. In the middle of the model, when international students are information seeking, they turn primarily to their friends and family. With so many options of schools available, these family and friends become the anchor to international students' hope of school attendance in the United States. Here, the messenger becomes the message. These anchors then help students get to specific community colleges, but the information students are gaining about the community college is not complete. Prospective international students look online, watch television shows, and talk to their anchors,

which helps them to form expectations for the community college. Upon arrival, international students realized that they did not and do not have complete information about classroom norms and American customs for higher education. They were surprised by the kindness showed to them by professors and staff members and the intolerance showed by some students, the resources available to them from the community college, and the flexibility they have to choose classes. This complex mix of experiences that impact my student's changing expectations influences what they tell their friends back home when asked about their community college experience. The cycle of information spreading then begins again as new prospective students form their expectations for the community college. As the new anchor, who has attended the community college, some information is more accurate as they have experienced the community college firsthand. Yet as other experiences are unique to this specific anchor, prospective students are building expectations upon still incomplete and imperfect information. With each iteration of the cycle, the information about the community college is altered by individual experiences with the community college-going experience.

The satisfaction and dissatisfaction that international students experience at the community college becomes part of the material prospective students build their expectations upon. Take, for example, Sam's story from the previous chapter. What she will tell friends back home about the community college experience may be very different than what her friend who found a scholarship through the local church will tell her friends. Thus the anchor and the information from the anchor plays an important role in future expectation formation.

## **Recommendations**

From the findings of my research, the following are recommendations for community colleges interested in international student enrollments and agents recruiting students.

**Community colleges.** For those working at the community college, a few points of consideration include having information available online about the institution and an orientation for key family members and other people who act as prospective international student's anchors.

*Available online information.* Knowing that students trust the information coming from community colleges, it is important for schools to contemplate what is available online about the institution. For students who may not be familiar with searching around online, a short video or guide can aid prospective students in navigating a school's website for information. As students look for information, community colleges can help by having official documents bear the seal of the school along with the date so students can know the origin of pages and documents they read and when it was produced.

Those working at the schools can help students by making sure links to their website are the first to come up in search engines, making it easier for students to go directly to the school. Using alumni networks and encouraging interested students to visit a specific website can also drive students directly to the community college. As the school's website is the main place for information, an interactive guide may help students with varying levels of computer ability. Navigating a school website may be intuitive to those familiar with college webpages, but for some students it is their first school website to visit. This guide webpage can house numerous links that help prospective students connect to existing webpages, like the United States government page for student visas, the college's website for test requirements, and the college's Facebook account to help connect students. It may be beneficial for those working with

international students to brainstorm types of information a student may want/need and construct a page based on these areas. Other features may include a welcome letter, checklist, timeline, and reasons why certain forms are needed.

If students are going directly to the community college's website for information, the institution has the responsibility to accurately represent the opportunities, facilities, and quality. Thereby students can use the more complete and perfect information to form expectations of what their experience can be like and have those expectations met.

***More information requested.*** From the research, we know that not all information is being received by international students. More information about the location, life at the community college, steps after enrollment, and how community colleges fit into the higher education system in the United States would be helpful for students. For students not being hosted by someone, knowing more about the location can aid in the decision making process. It would be helpful to give a context to life outside of school. Overall, students with more accurate information seem to have experiences that match their expectations.

Students interviewed did not understand placement tests, remedial classes, and the transfer processes. Confusion or lack of awareness of placement tests can increase time to completion. Sometimes, students did not know they were taking tests until arrival on campus or right before taking the test which can impact their test performance. These points of confusion could be clarified online through videos, webpages, and encouraging students to speak with school advisors. A definition list of terms such as credit hour, Blackboard, and remedial classes may be a first step to help clarify confusion. A brief diagram on the website could help students understand how the community college fits into the American higher education system.

Adding videos of “everyday life” to the website may help construct a counter narrative to the media messages that students use to construct their expectations of the community college. Tanya suggested a video of showing students in class, walking around on campus, and life outside of the community college. It seems the more images a student is able to obtain, the better they could imagine what it will be like. Instead of basing their ideas of what the community college will be like only on television shows and movies, videos produced by the school will give students an additional perspective. Interviewed students discussed using social media pages to find out more information about the school. Knowing this, community colleges may want to think about ways to use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and MySpace for recruitment purposes, including posting “everyday” videos and having testimonials from international students about their experience at the community college.

Finally, community colleges can emphasize the good surprises that students experience. As each school is unique in its good surprises, talking with current students may aid in generating a list. My students loved being able to pick their own classes, enjoyed the perks of the campus including the library, DVD rentals, and gym use, and embraced the kindness of those around them. Promoting the good surprises may help prospective students see the additional benefits of enrolling at the community college.

Acknowledging that resources are limited at the community college, many of these items that cause confusion for international students already have existing webpages and videos. For example, Sky mentioned that at orientation he watched a video that showed him the different steps of paying tuition, registering for classes, and getting around campus. He suggested that this video be put online and streamed on all televisions on campus during the first week of classes. I encourage community college personnel to create a landing page to link to these other webpages

to help guide international students. International students can be recruited to help make videos and other content for the website.

***Support for international students.*** Both the community colleges in this research had numerous programs in place for international students, including an international student clubs, student advisers specifically for international students, and an international student lounge. The international club helped students connect with new friends from around the world. Students had access to advisors specifically for international students who helped students pick out appropriate classes. Amy experienced financial burden during one semester at the community college. She found herself with nowhere to turn. A professor that liked her work invited her to come to talk. This professor helped her through her financial constraint and encouraged Amy to apply to a four-year institution. This professor's persistence paid off as Amy won a full scholarship to a nearby four-year institution and will continue her degree. Institutions wanting to increase international students on their campuses need to be mindful of the potential challenges these students face and provide support for them as these institutions did. Faculty members and staff outside of the international student office are also important in helping international students.

***Orientation for key family members.*** Orientation, in addition to acculturating to North American culture, could cover things from what it means to be a community college student, host/roommate dynamics, and what faculty expectations are of students. Using psychological contract to understand how international students are forming their expectations of the community college, institutions can respond by helping students tease out what specifically they are expecting and help them to have more accurate expectations, making the contracts obvious and more evident.

As family relatives are used as information sources, it may be helpful for institutions to create orientations for local family members who are informing prospective international students about the community college. Anticipating that family members can have misinformation about the community college and college-going experience, specific information can be created to inform these family members of the benefits of the community college. Family members and potential anchors can be directed to sources from the community college to point interested students. Information at these orientations can include potential benefits of the community college, the college transfer process, how community colleges fit into the American higher education system, steps for students to take after being admitted, and encouraging the person international students look to for help to connect international students directly to the institution. Institutions wanting to help students have accurate expectations should consider the information flow from local family members because the majority of the students interviewed first received information from someone who had not taken classes from the community college. Instead of sending agents abroad, community colleges may tap into the networks already in place.

Just like roommate expectations, it is good to set boundaries and explicitly express expectations in international student housing situations. Relationships outside of one's experience at the community college can impact how one experiences the community college. Having the host and prospective international students think about expectations of that relationship can help make psychological contracts explicit and each party consciously partaking.

**Agents.** Whereas no students used agents to find the community college in my research, it is clear that agents are being used at four-year institutions and increasingly at community colleges (Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011, 2013; Irwin, Jennings, & Shenoy, 2012; Robison, 2007; Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011). It is important for agents to direct prospective students to the

community college. From my research, students trust the school for information. Community colleges have more accurate and timely information than other sources adding to the importance that agents connect students to the school for information.

Another point for consideration is that students arriving in different parts of the United States seem to have different information flows and sources. Students have different sets of expectations for community colleges based on the way they are coming to the college. As an agent, it may be helpful to identify different information flows to give students more accurate and relevant information about the community college.

## **Limitations**

The aim of my research was to provide a rich description of expectations and experiences of the interviewed group of students to discover ways international students were finding their way to the community college in Dallas. One of the challenges in talking about expectations is it is based on self-reports and deals with something in the past. However, because of the implications of my research for student satisfaction, what students remember at the present moment of the interview may be what they base their perceived met or unmet expectations.

Another possible limitation is with my ethnographic content analysis. Although I examined as many documents and social media pages as possible, the examination was incomplete. The analysis was based on a limited period of time (Jankowski & Makela, 2010). Some social media pages fell into two sets of categories and the way I chose to categorize certain pictures or postings may not be exactly how another researcher would. In hindsight, a second review of all posts of Facebook and tweets on Twitter may have yielded more accurate results; however, the purpose of the ethnographic content analysis was to gain a general understanding of

the online landscape of what international students were looking at to formulate their expectations. The themes that emerged from the ethnographic content analysis were for the point of triangulation and further exploration with students during interviews.

Finally, only one student had visited the EducationUSA Center, so her perspective is only one perspective about access to information and the center. Her views were singular, and I was not able to triangulate what she was saying with other students. I did try to validate the data collected by analyzing the EducationUSA Center's website and Facebook account.

### **Future Research**

Potential future research includes what international students information paths look like in other places in the United States. As my research shows, it seems that international students going to different institutional types and geographic locations seek out information from different sources. My research is based at two urban community colleges in a diverse city. International students attending a rural community college may have very different information flows. Specifically for the Dallas community, more research on migration patterns may aid in understanding why there are more students enrolled from certain parts of the world at these community colleges. This may result in a new understanding of how chain migration theory works for international students.

Other community colleges are actively recruiting students and are not seeing many new international student enrollments. I chose to do my research at places where there are a lot of international students, yet why international students are *not* going to schools may help us understand the larger context of community colleges and international student enrollment. Other

areas to explore include emerging places for international student enrollment and recruitment for community colleges, such as students from Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

During the pilot study, students mentioned using online bulletin boards and current student posts to inform them about the community college. These information sources were not mentioned in the full study. All the students interviewed for the pilot study were from East Asia, while in the full study only one student was from this geographic location. An exploration of which prospective international students are using online forums as information about the community college can aid in having more accurate information in these venues and provide understanding of different information sources international student use to learn about the community college.

A large scale survey exploring how the background of students (e.g. parental education, family income, home country, etc.) impacts information sources, and reasons for studying at the community college can give greater context to the growing numbers of international students at community colleges.

International student experience at the community college is another area which could use more research. Using chain migration theory, it may be useful to explore how international students are forming their own ethnic enclaves and being socialized to the community college. The reasons students are forming enclaves may also be informed by more research on campus climate.

There are remaining questions about the type of international students who are attending community colleges. A large sample quantitative study can aid in understanding the financial background and academic aspirations of these students. More research can be done about the impact of starting at the community college on international students' academic achievement.

Finally as international students continue to grow in population in the United States, more research is needed on their information exploration and expectation formation as they attend historically Black colleges and universities, regional schools, and religious schools. It may be worthwhile to explore what types of international students are attending these institutional types, as international students as a group is incredibly diverse.

### **Closing Thoughts**

If we claim to care about students, including international students at the community college, then I encourage more accurate information be accessible to prospective students that they may form realistic expectations more likely to match their experience. The point of my research is to understand where international students are turning to for information about the community college and on what they are basing their expectations upon. I wanted to explore the mismatch between international student expectations and experience so that there can be increased satisfaction in future international students. Mismatch of information for students about the community college include information on classes (e.g. credit hour, choosing classes, classroom norms), school procedures (e.g. placement tests, remedial and developmental classes, transfer), and relationship dynamics (e.g. host family, making friends). Sometimes students come with little information or only images gained from movies and television shows. There is great potential for community colleges and international students to create opportunities for education or having space for greater response to globalization. However, these efforts are thwarted when inaccurate and imperfect information about the community college contributes to international students forming unrealistic expectations. By exploring ways to make relevant information known to international students, these students can form more accurate expectations.

As students prepare for the “blind date” with the community college, they read about their school online and look at the pictures posted. The information mismatch sits between what students expect and their actual experience. The goal with information match is to help international students’ expectations be closer to their experience at the community college. The hope is to inform students that they can anticipate the good things from the community college and adjust their dreams so they may be fulfilled.

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## Appendix A

### Sample Interview Protocol and IRB Materials

#### Sample Interview Protocol

1. Pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_
2. Student's home country \_\_\_\_\_
3. Contact information \_\_\_\_\_
4. Date/Time of interview \_\_\_\_\_
5. Signed copy of informed consent on file: Yes/No
6. Read the IRB protocol and get verbal consent at opening of interview: Yes/No
7. Consent to audio record the interview: Yes/No
8. Opening of interview: Thank you for being part of this study. My name is Gloria and this research project is looking at how international students hear about community colleges. I'm interested in how you formed your ideas about the community college. I'll ask you questions about the different ways you learned about this community college. At any time you may skip any of the questions I ask and if you decided later that you did not like how you answered any of the questions, you may contact me to have me remove anything you say. Do you have any questions before we start?

#### Interview Question Protocol

##### Introduction

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
  - a. Where are you from?
  - b. How long have you been at X community college?
  - c. What's your story of how you ended up here?

### Sources of information

2. Okay, we'll come back to these topics, but first let's do an activity. Can you list out ALL the different ways you heard about this college? Why don't you say them, and I will write it down. Okay?
  - a. What did this first one tell you about the college? Anything else?
  - b. Out of all these, which one did you listen to most?
  - c. Out of all these, which one was first?
3. Did you go to any websites to learn more about X community college?
  - a. How did you hear about these websites?
4. Did you think finding information about community college was easy to find? What would have helped you?
5. If there was a student from [student's hometown] looking at studying in the U.S., what would you tell them about X community college?

### Expectations

6. If you can reflect back to that time when you decided to come to X community college, what were your first thoughts about what it would be like?
  - a. What did you think your interactions with your roommate would look like?
  - b. With your professors/ college personnel?
  - c. What did you think your classes were going to be like?
7. What were you concerned about before arriving, if anything?
8. Has anything surprised you being here?
9. Has anything been disappointing being here?

### College Choice

10. What other institutions did you consider attending besides X community college?
11. Why did you end up choosing X community college?

### Transfer Information

12. Can you show me how I can transfer to another institution? What are the steps?
13. If I was an international student, what are the steps I have to take to apply and then start taking classes here?

Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your journey of learning about this community college and now being a student here?

## Approval from UIUC IRB for Research

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS  
AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Bureau of Educational Research  
College of Education  
38 Education Building  
1310 South Sixth St.  
Champaign, IL 61820



May 16, 2012

Gloria Shenoy  
Education Policy, Organization and Leadership Department  
College of Education  
1310 S. Sixth Street  
MC-708

Dear Gloria,

On behalf of the College of Education Human Subject Committee, I have reviewed and approved the modifications to your research project entitled "Information Mismatch: What international students thought their community college experience would be like". I find that this project continues to meet the exemption criteria for federal regulation 46.101(b)2 for research involving normal interview procedures where the identifying information is protected. It also meets the exempting criteria for federal regulation 46.101(b)1 for educational research within an educational setting.

No changes may be made to your procedures without prior Committee review and approval. Your project number is 5025 and projects are typically approved for three years with annual reports required. You are also required to promptly notify the Committee of any problems that arise during the course of the research.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Anne'.

Anne S. Robertson  
College of Education Human Subjects Review Committee

Cc: Dr. Debra Bragg

*telephone 217-333-3023 • fax 217-244-0538*

## **Appendix B**

### **E-mail Message for Solicitation of Participation**

Dear [Dean of Students],

I am writing to invite your institution to participate in a research study on how international students hear about community colleges and what they thought their experience at the community college would be like. My name is Gloria Shenoy and I am a Doctoral Student at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (UIUC) in the Higher Education program under the direction of Dr. Debra Bragg. This research project will be my dissertation which fulfills part of the requirements for graduation.

As mentioned before, the project is focused on first year, international students, studying on an F-1 or J-1 visa at a community college. The purpose of this study is to discover what international students thought their community college experience would be like, what led them to these expectations, and the information sources of these ideas. Using bounded rational behavior to explain why individuals will not have perfect and full information to make decisions, I will explore what is being told to international students about community college from friends/family, posts on the Internet, and other sources and how it, what international students are hearing, impacts their ideas of the community college.

In addition to interviewing students from your school, I am inviting one other community college to participate. I will conduct a pilot study in February/March. By having more than one institution part of this study, I hope to highlight best ways for accurate information to be distributed to international students and ways to help manage expectations.

This qualitative study consists of personal interviews of international students that will be audio recorded with the permission of the student. Interviews should last 30-60 minutes. I will be interviewing 10 students on your campus and inviting a portion of these students for additional interviews (up to three interviews total in the fall 2012 semester and possible one follow up interview during the spring 2013 semester). The assistance (sending out recruitment email and hanging up a recruitment poster) of the International Advisor/Student Advisor at your institution will be required to locate students. The research project would occur from August 2012 to April 2013.

In this study, every effort will be made not to reveal personally identifiable information about any of the students in any data collection or publications. To accomplish this, actions and anything said will be referenced only by pseudonym, or combined anonymously with the actions and words of other participants. The recordings of the interviews will be downloaded to a password protected file and computer. Any transcription of the recorded data will also be in password protected files and password protected computer. A pseudo name and email list will be generated for those students conducting more than one interview in order to contact participants about upcoming interviews. I will keep this list completely separate from the other data in a secure and locked place that only I will have access to.

I plan on using the findings of this research in my dissertation. In addition, the data collected may be used in conference presentations, academic journal publications and trade magazine articles. If desired, I can make a final presentation to those interested at your college.

Thank you for taking time to read through this request. I hope that your institution will participate in the study but remind you that any participation would be completely voluntary. If you are interested in being part of this study, please respond to this email with a “yes” within two

weeks. Please feel free to contact me at 414.465.8456 or gjea2@illinois.edu if you have any questions or concerns.

Thanks, Gloria F. Shenoy, Doctoral Candidate, College of Education at UIUC

## Appendix C

### Invitation to Participate in Individual Interview

Dear International Students:

Gloria Shenoy is a doctoral education student from University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. For her research project she is looking at how international students hear about community colleges. She is asking you for your help with this project. Would you be interested in volunteering to talk about how you heard about [college name] and what you thought your experience here was going to be like? These interviews are completely voluntary and will last 30 to 60 minutes. If appropriate some individuals will be asked for additional interviews (up to 4). An informed consent form for more information about the interview and your rights as a participant is available here: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ACvgeRVjG9tL\\_EMKfQoV5yjUZAkRL\\_JGFXBQEhDVOeg/edit](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ACvgeRVjG9tL_EMKfQoV5yjUZAkRL_JGFXBQEhDVOeg/edit)

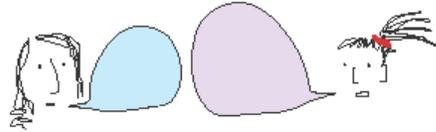
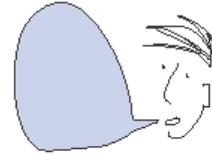
If you are interested in being interviewed please let Gloria know by [date]. Please let Gloria know if you have questions or are interested in being part of this study at [gjea2@illinois.edu](mailto:gjea2@illinois.edu) or 414.465.8456. Thank you.

## Appendix D

### Posters for Solicitation of Participation

# Research Participants Needed

Are you a first year,  
international student,  
who is 18+ years old?



If you are interested or know of someone that  
might be good for this research please contact

**Gloria at [GJEA2@illinois.edu](mailto:GJEA2@illinois.edu)**



You can be a part of a  
research project looking at  
how international students  
formed their ideas of what  
community college would be  
like in the U.S. You would  
be interviewed for 30-60  
minutes. If appropriate and if  
you would like, you may in-  
terviewed again  
(up to four  
times).

