

Influential Factors in the College Decision-Making Process for Chinese Students Studying in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

For more than 1,043,839 international students, the United States is the destination of choice to pursue higher education. Although Chinese students account for almost one in three international students in the U.S., there are many unknowns about the influential factors behind their college decision. This qualitative study explores the self-described most important factors for Chinese students' decision to attend college in the U.S. and the sources they seek to make their decision. This study found (1) parents are the most influential factor in the decision to attend college in the U.S., (2) students place great importance on rankings, and (3) in hindsight, students wish they focused less on rankings and did not need help from agencies when applying to colleges.

Keywords: college decision-making process, Chinese students

For more than 1,043,839 international students, the United States is the destination of choice to pursue higher education (Institute of International Education, 2016). Successful recruitment of these students has major implications at the local and national level. Having Chinese students on U.S. college campuses not only provides monetary benefits to the university, but also provides fresh and new perspectives to the student population. From the local level of a college campus to a global scale, this increase in diversity creates a stronger partnership between China and the United States (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2015).

Previous studies have acknowledged the impact Confucian society has on students' decision-making (Deutsch, 2006; Moy, 1992; Shek, 2007; Tang, 2002). Aspects of Confucian society, such as older people having more authority than younger people and a strong need for harmony, make choosing a college an especially daunting task for many Chinese students because they must balance their own interests with the interests of their parents (Leong & Serafica, 1995; Pei-Wen & Yeh, 2005). Effective recruitment of Chinese students to U.S. universities requires a comprehensive understanding of the cultural, social and Confucian familial practices and values of students and their parents (Bodycott, 2009). The purpose of this qualitative study is to achieve an in-depth understanding of the influential factors leading to Chinese students' decision to attend college in the United States and the implications therein for U.S. universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Decision-making requires individuals to process relevant information to arrive at a conclusion (Harren, 1979). Some conclusions are more satisfactory than others depending on the decision makers' desired situation or social expectation (Harren, 1979). Arriving at a desirable outcome in the college decision-making process is especially challenging for international students who may not know the native language, culture, customs, and norms of their host country (Rowe-Whyte, O'Sullivan, & Hunt, 2003). Additionally, with the high expense of flying round-trip from China to the United States, a traditional college campus tour is likely not an option for many Chinese students wanting to study in the U.S. Not only do these factors complicate the decision-making phenomenon for Chinese international students but they also create challenges for the U.S. universities seeking to recruit them. Thus, it is imperative U.S. universities have an in-depth understanding of the factors which influence Chinese students' college decision.

Influential Factors in Decision Making

Decisions Influenced by Cultural Factors

Cremonini, Westerheijden, and Enders (2008) asserted culture should be considered when studying influential factors in the decision-making process. Increasingly in multi-cultural societies, culture is one of the understudied influential factors (Nora, 2004; Zimbhoff, 2005). One aspect of culture is the thinking parents transfer to their children (Hofstede, 1984). Previous studies suggest the parental influence on child's college decision is consistent with traditional Confucian roles (Pei-Wen & Yeh, 2005; Xu et al., 2005). The central focus of Confucianism is a strong social need for harmony (Hui, 2001). Confucian behaviors consist of respect and unwavering obedience to parents (Bodycott, 2009; Leong & Serafica, 1995). Bodycott (2009) further explained why Chinese students often highly value recommendations made by close friends and family. Bodycott (2009) suggested the strong emphasis Chinese society places on this belief may extend into the college decision-making process. If a parent recommends a university, their child will likely be influenced by their recommendation (Deutsch, 2006). Although students may disagree with their parents' decision-making factors related to study abroad, in many mainland families it may ultimately be the parents' decision that will be upheld.

Decisions Influenced by University Websites.

A recent Higher Education Marketing blog post emphasized the importance of a clear and accessible online presence. Websites are a fundamental part of brand communication (Schultz, Hatch, & Larsen, 2000). While this may seem intuitive, the difficulty lies in a number of popular internet sites being banned in China. With Google absent from the Chinese market, search engines such as Baidu, Qihoo 360, and Sogou must be utilized by U.S. universities. To accomplish this, universities must work with an approved Chinese agency to create a fully functional Chinese website. With 68.5% of the market share, Baidu is known as the "Google of China" (Allen-Ebrahimian, 2015). The most significant difference between Baidu and Google is Baidu prefers paid advertisements and content written in Chinese. U.S. universities should stay updated on further development and seek guidance from regional experts. Marcus and Gould (2000) suggest universities develop multiple versions of their website by utilizing cost-effective templates.

Decisions Influenced by U.S. News & World Report Rankings.

Another tangible influential factor in the college decision-making process for students can be found online or in print in *U.S. News & World Report*. Every fall since 1983, *U.S. News & World Report* publishes the rankings of most colleges and universities in the United States (Monks & Ehrenberg, 1999). College rankings have a strong influence on admissions ratings for higher education institutions. After controlling for a variety of other factors, Griffith and Rask (2007) found students were more likely to attend universities with a higher ranking in *U.S. News & World Report*.

Parents and Students Place Importance on Different Factors

Although both parents and students see the value of attending college in the U.S., they place different importance on the various influential factors in their decision-making. Students highly value tangible features such as a wide variety of programs, language and academic support services, and the buildings and grounds on campus (Bodycott, 2012). Additional studies found that students do not rate the following factors as important in their college decision, (1) knowledge and awareness of the institution, its reputation, and general knowledge of the destination country, (2) cost of tuition, (3) proximity to China, (4) immigration prospects after graduation, and (5) employment prospects (Bass, 2005; Fam, 2000; Hiu, 2001; Hung, Shive, Wang, & Diu, 2005; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Zhao & Guo, 2002). These factors are the most important from their parents' perspective, not the students'. However, for traditional Mainland Chinese students, confronting or disagreeing with parents is seen as a sign of disrespect (Chope & Consoli, 2006). University time spent catering to student needs may be counterproductive if ultimately it is the parents' decision (Bodycott, 2009).

The current study seeks to advance previous research and increase understanding of the college decision-making process for Chinese students studying in the U.S by answering three research questions (RQ).

RQ1: What factors are most important for students from China to catalyze their decision to attend college in the United States?

RQ2: To what sources do students from China studying in the U.S. attend in order to make their college decision?

RQ3: How do students from China studying in the U.S. reflect on their decision-making process?

METHOD

The current study describes the college decision-making experience as twelve individuals experienced it. To accomplish this, I talked to the participants and recognized that they are experts of their own lived experiences. The findings of the current study have the potential to affect drastic change in the ways U.S. universities market to and recruit students from China. Through the richness that only qualitative research provides, I shed light on the individual college decision-making experiences of students from China studying in the United States.

Data Collection

To qualify for this study, all participants had to be graduate students from China currently studying in the United States. I continued interviewing participants until I achieved a sufficient

level of saturation based on participants' similar shared experiences. I worked to understand the participants' experiences by engaging in one-on-one, in-depth, semi-structured interviews that took place over the phone due to the geographic distance between the participants and me. These individuals have recently experienced the college decision-making phenomenon and are able to reflect on their whole undergraduate experience and share the catalyzing factors and important sources they attended to during this process.

Table 1. Participants.

#	Gender	University	Major
1	F	Agnes Scott College Georgia Tech	Chemical Engineering
2	F	Boston University	Communication
3	F	Georgia Tech	Chemical Engineering
4	F	Georgia Tech	Electrical Engineering
5	M	Georgia Tech	Mechanical Engineering
6	F	Johns Hopkins	Biology
7	F	Michigan State Georgia Tech	Chemical Engineering
8	M	Michigan State University of Georgia	Communication
9	M	UCLA	Economics
10	M	University of Michigan	Computer Science
11	F	University of Wisconsin-Madison	Industrial Engineering
12	F	Wuhan University University of Kentucky	Arts Administration/ Music Performance

RESULTS

This section addresses my three research questions: (1) What factors are most important for students from China to catalyze their decision to attend college in the United States? (2) To what sources do students from China studying in the U.S. attend in order to make their college decision? (3) How do students from China studying in the U.S. reflect on their decision-making process? Here, I provide insight into how the participants make sense of these experiences. The purpose of sharing these experiences is to advance knowledge on the college decision-making process of Chinese students at U.S. universities.

Parents Decide Their Children Will Study in the U.S.

Regarding my first research question, parents are the most important factor when deciding to attend college in the United States. For the participants, it was primarily parents who initiated the conversation to study abroad and ultimately made the decision for their child to study in the U.S. One participant said he always knew he would go to college in the U.S.

Ever since I was little, my parents have always wanted me to study in the U.S. I think just because it was U.S. education has a lot of colleges that are really famous, well known around the world. Everybody knows that U.S. provides the best education. Also I think it was mostly my parents who noticed the trend of going to the U.S. colleges in China. That's sort of something that everybody was doing in Shanghai especially. Lot of people wanted to send their kids to the U.S. and then use it as a way to hopefully move to the U.S. someday. I think that was the mentality behind it. Then because I grew up under this thought I always knew that I was going to study in the U.S.

When asked how he decided to study in the United States, one participant said, “actually that's my dad's decision.” Like many of the participants' parents, his dad “felt like the education (in the U.S.) is more advanced than what we have back in China. He also wants me to experience a different culture.” Another participant said his parents also believed higher education in the United States is “superior” to Chinese colleges. He grew up hearing his parents say, “the United States has some best colleges in the world.” He recalls feeling “overwhelmed by how some of the universities are so prestigious.” Another participant described the short and long term benefits of receiving an education in the United States that her parents used as reasoning for their decision. When asked how she decided to study in the U.S., she said, “at first, there were several long term reasons that my parents thought education in the U.S. was better. And short term, I was just trying to avoid the college entry exam, which is super competitive in China.” Another participant explained the difference between the quality of high school education in China versus the United States and how that impacted his parents' decision to encourage him to study abroad.

My parents just decided to send me to a foreign country for college. Because in China the system is kind of, you know, you have to put a lot of work in high school and then in university and most of the time, university is not very—it has kind of a lower education than in the U.S. But here in the U.S. I think that education in college is more advanced, and you can actually learn more of the skills and activities other than academic, so my father thinks that is a very good experience for me so he decided that I would go.

The parents of participants in this study made their child's decision to study in the United States. This decision seemed rooted in the belief that higher education in the U.S. is more challenging and thus superior to universities in China. Additionally, Chinese parents seemed to believe their children would benefit from experiencing a culture different from their own.

Students Place Great Importance on Rankings

Although parents are students' most influential factor when determining whether or not to study in the U.S., parents contribute little in regard to deciding which particular university to attend nor do parents have knowledge about the college application process or the sources to utilize when making this important decision. In the participants' experience, the task of applying to colleges and determining which factors are most significant was solely their responsibility. According to the participants, the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings were unanimously ranked the most influential factor when deciding which college to attend. Universities ranked among the top 50 in *U.S. News & World Report* are seen as prestigious schools that, according to one participant almost guarantee numerous job offers, because they

are “good, top-notch colleges, well-known, reputable. Once I get a degree, it should be a brand that I can communicate to the employer. So when you say you went there, they want to hire you immediately.”

One participant proposed that “most Chinese students really care about the U.S. ranking.” Another participant explained just how important rankings were to her and her parents: “The huge trend among Chinese students is looking at the rankings. My parents were like ‘We’re not going to pay for school unless you get into a top 50 according to *U.S. News & World Report*.’” Another participant said he only “focused on the top 30 schools.” For some, the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings are the only source to which they attend. One participant said “since most Chinese students only check the *U.S. News & World Report*, we don’t know a lot of about the college.”

Another participant’s college decision-making process began by looking at the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. From the list of ranked schools, she determined which universities had the lowest tuition. Her reasoning:

If I think of getting a job after I graduate, I feel like I should make more money than what I paid for college. If I go to Columbia University, I don't think I can earn that much money. So, I don't think it's a good choice for me to go to that school.

Another participant explained her decision-making process started by looking at the rankings, and then only after receiving an offer from these schools, “then she will consider whether it’s easy for me to look for a job in the city once I graduate.” So while getting job offers upon graduation is important to the participants, it is a factor contingent on getting into a top ranked university.

Students Place Great Importance on Location

In addition to rankings, the participants placed great importance on the location of the university. Although the significance of location is only considered after a university is deemed a top ranked school by *U.S. News & World Report*, location is an influential factor that encompasses both climate and geographic region. One participant described the process this way:

I think once we get the offer from these schools, we will consider the tuition fee, the environment, the climate of the region. Is it a big city or just a small town? The weather? Is it easy for us to look for a job in the city once we graduate?

An Economics major at UCLA said he looked at the rankings, “but didn’t have enough information on the employment factor, job scenario, or jobs in this area.” Although he loved his college experience, in hindsight, he recognizes the importance location has on the college decision. With his major in particular, he wishes he considered universities on the east coast.

Because well, UCLA is located in a weird part of the country. LA is obviously the second largest city in the US, but I studied in business economics. So in terms of business jobs, there were actually not a lot of big names or consulting firms located in LA... Everything is actually on the east coast. So the east coast would have a whole lot more finance jobs. It would be so much easier to get a job there.

Upon receiving admission to a university, one participant said she “took into consideration the geographical locations. Since I lived in a southern place in China, I do prefer to live in a warmer place.” Another participant also mentioned the warm weather because “it’s pretty much

like my hometown in China. So, I think [Georgia Tech] is a better choice for me.” Although the participants attended schools across the United States, including northern regions, the only participants that mentioned weather as an important factor attended universities in warmer climates. One participant said, “places like Atlanta or the south have nice weather.” Another said his “overall experience at UCLA has been great. I mean it's a great city, the weather and everything was great... But now that I'm in New York, I definitely miss LA so badly.” Another concurred, “I prefer the school located at some place that is warm. I don't like to be living in a very cold place.”

Location also comprises of job opportunities upon graduation. One participant said she thought about job opportunities in the summer.

My university is close to certain companies. If you want to get into that company, there's a high chance that the company prefers to recruit from the local university, so they might have lots of alumni working at that company.

Another participant had a similar experience saying:

My favorite thing [about Boston University] is actually the location. Just because of the location, I get to do a lot of internships during the semester instead of like a lot of my friends at other schools they only get to do internships in the summer. So, I actually get a lot of chances to discover my real interests and career direction.

Students Wish They Focused Less on Rankings

For my third and final research question, participants reflect on their decision-making process and offer suggestions to prospective students. One regret the participants have about their college decision-making process is paying too much attention to the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. One participant describes the beginning of his process by saying “Well, first of course when I pick out schools I look at the—I was very naive at the time—I was like I'm gonna look at the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings.”

Several participants criticized the methodology behind the rankings and yet still heavily weighed the rankings in their own college decision. One said, “We all know the ranking is not fully objective. But that was a standard for me at that time.” Another participant agreed rankings are not always an accurate representation of a university.

I would not pay too much attention to the rankings because each university has its good things and bad things. But I think it's your life in that university. It's not fair to say if the ranking is bad, then all the people in that school are bad.

Another participant told a story about her alma mater's change in ranking during her time as a student and how a local university is misrepresented in the rankings.

I would look less at the U.S. News & World Report rankings. I think because students emphasize that a lot just because they don't understand the U.S. education system. And here it's very straightforward. And the rankings are very misleading. For example, [Boston University] was around #50 at that time and now it's like #79. But does it matter to me? No, it doesn't matter to me anymore. It won't do anything. I know of some schools like Northeastern that actually trick the rankings and trick the whole grading scale system and then got into the rankings just because they want to recruit more international students. And does that mean they have better education quality? I don't think so.

Another participant's decision was predominately based on *U.S. News & World Report* rankings. However, he encourages prospective students to think more critically about what they want from their college experience.

Looking back right now, I feel the most important thing is not the rankings, because if they just look at rankings they pick whatever U.S. News & World Report tell them to pick. They might get into a school that they might not really like. So, they gotta ask themselves what kind of life do you wanna spend in college? Do you wanna squeeze yourself to the extent that you're gonna study every day every night, every second? If you wanna do that you go ahead and pick the highest rankings, but if you're not that kind of person, I wanna be doing multiple activities, I just recommend them pick a school that is less hectic.

Students Wish They Knew They Did Not Need an Agency

Today, many higher education institutions are under pressure to recruit international students (Becker & Kolster, 2012). Students in several countries, including China, the UK, and Australia, use recruitment agencies to help them find the right university for them (Choudaha & Chang, 2012). A recruitment agency is a third-party who is paid to help students find, apply, and prepare for college (Serra Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). In China, these agencies provide services to students who seek to study abroad in exchange for a fee (Serra Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011). The standard fee for most agencies to manage a student's college application is \$260 (Chiu, 2016). Services include "assistance with student application forms, visa interviews, travel arrangements, insurance, entrance examinations, and other pre-college requirements" (Serra Hagedorn & Zhang, 2011, p. 189). Although agencies are a common practice in China, no research has been conducted regarding the costs and benefits of using an agency.

Increasingly, the decision to study abroad is one of the most significant and expensive decisions students assume (Mazzarol, 1998). Alongside a desire to have focused less on rankings and more on campus life, a few participants described their experiences using agencies. For some, the agencies played a vital role in the college decision-making process, especially regarding filling out applications. One participant stated, "at the time, [I] couldn't apply without an agency." The role of an agency is to help international students apply to universities, sign up for the SAT/ACT, upload transcripts, and keep track of their application status. Another participant further explained how much students like her rely on agencies, because "most of the parents don't know English, most of our teachers don't know English, so most people would use the agency to help."

Agencies are perceived as necessary to the process of applying to U.S. universities, because according to one participant "we're not really familiar with the education flow." At the time of applying to college, most participants felt agencies were the only resource available to them. However, upon reflecting on this opinion, they feel the agencies are over-priced and provide minimal support. One participant said "they're not really that useful and when I look back I think all they've got is that they know people in the admission offices, but that still doesn't help that much."

Another participant who was really interested in receiving an acceptance into an Ivy League described the fear that agencies would only help him apply to "safety schools" or schools that had a low quality of education and a high admission rate.

One big fear that agents were just going to throw us into whatever colleges were easiest to get into. I think what they were really looking for is the admission rate.

So, they knew if you apply to this school, you are definitely going to be accepted. So, I think probably just going to the safe choice, but not a really great university.

Although this large fear loomed over him, he felt he had no choice but to use an agency.

I had no interaction with the U.S. whatsoever. I had no idea how everything works. So, I used agency to help me with the administrative stuff, like how do I submit stuff, what's the stuff that I need. But, I mostly did all my essays on my own. They just reviewed it.

Another said her school did not help students apply to colleges, so she had to use an agency. When asked what the agency did for her, she responds: "They help you do your personal statement, and what kind of files the university needs to apply. I think the agency cost us \$4,064 and I applied to eight schools." It is because of the power imbalance between agencies and students as well as the expensive fees dictated by the agencies that the participants desire a change in this portion of their college decision-making process. Today, agencies seem like a necessary evil for students who want to attend college in the U.S.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

By answering three research questions, this study aimed to fill gaps in international student decision-making research. Four important findings emerged from my data: (1) Chinese parents catalyze their child's decision to attend college in the United States. (2) The most influential sources in the decision to attend a particular university are the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings and the university's location. (3) In hindsight, students wish they focused less on rankings. (4) Students wish they did not spend the money on assistance from agencies. My results shed light on the strong influence parents and *U.S. News & World Report* rankings have on Chinese students' college decision, and the factors students wish they would have attended to more and less. Based on these results, the current section provides recommendations for university employees and recruitment agencies. By sharing the following recommendations, the current study hopes to further educate invested parties about their international student recruitment processes.

Recommendations for Educational Institutions and Agencies

Upon reflection, the participants recognized that the way in which their college decision was made had its flaws. There is an opportunity for university admissions representatives and agencies to address these deficient tendencies and further inform prospective students in a proactive manner. International student recruitment is an inherently complex, competitive, and costly endeavor. With hundreds of thousands of Chinese students studying in the U.S., recruitment is essential to both the financial health of universities and the existence of recruitment agencies in China. Moving forward, universities and agencies with a well-informed recruitment strategy and Chinese students who employ multiple sources in their college decision-making process will maximize the benefits for all parties.

In order for university admissions representatives and other invested parties, like agencies, to implement best practices in recruiting international students, they must first understand how students go about the college decision-making process. McMahon (1992) defined three stages in which the college decision-making process occurs. First, students must decide to study in a foreign country. Second, students must look at the factors that make the host country more

desirable than their home country. And third, the student chooses a particular university. A large takeaway from the current study is the participants present a unique circumstance by having their parents dictate the first two steps of the decision-making process. Although prior studies have shown parents of students from Indonesia and Taiwan are strong influencers, it is unknown whether they make their child's decision for them (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). Meanwhile, the current study suggests Chinese parents play an integral role in this process by making their child's decision to study abroad for them.

A deeper understanding of global mobility trends and their relationship to the applicant pipeline will help institutions channel their efforts. Institutions need to invest in understanding the decision-making process of their prospective students and monitor the effectiveness of their recruitment channels. (Choudaha & Chang, 2012, p. 18)

Once practitioners understand the stages of the college decision-making process, they must implement a recruitment strategy. A popular and convenient channel for universities to recruit international students is through the internet by way of university websites and social media. On the website, prospective students should be able to find specific and concise information about the university and how to apply. If a university website is not easily accessible or its content is difficult to comprehend, then students may not bother to decipher whether or not it is the right fit for them. Another online platform admissions representatives can employ to engage with prospective students is social media. Social media is a cost effective resource with four unique advantages often utilized by universities around the globe today (Choudaha & Chang, 2012). The relevance, speed, cost, and personalization of social media platforms allow for a space where admissions representatives and prospective students can connect (Choudaha & Chang, 2012).

Although university websites are a one-stop-shop for finding information about a university and social media allows admissions representatives to interact with prospective students, a different approach may need to be taken in order to recruit international students (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011). "Effective recruitment is key to international competition. Although promotional videos, university Web sites and interactive online approaches can reach a large pool of students in a cost-effective way, many international students in target markets favor a physical presence" (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011, p. 7). This strategy, albeit effective, is an expensive one.

Students can learn more about a university by meeting with an admissions representative or a current student at that school. By hearing from someone within the campus culture, prospective students may gain valuable insights into the important, intangible factors that make a university great. However, this is highly unlikely for international students, because campus visits and face-to-face interactions with university representatives and students require booking an expensive flight, lodging, and other travel logistics. Zhang and Hagedorn (2011) recommend universities use local agents. Although it is untested, connecting Chinese recruitment agencies with U.S. universities can be an advantage for everyone involved. First, U.S. university admissions representatives should ask "How can the use of a third-party agent be supervised so that students' interests, as well as the accountability of the institution, can be guaranteed at all stages of the recruitment process?" (Zhang & Hagedorn, 2011, p. 16). For agencies to move forward with little to no ethical issues, they must make several changes. These changes include full disclosure of knowledge regarding universities and their fees. By choosing to disclose accurate information to students, the power imbalance between them will diminish and trust

will increase. If local agents are implemented properly, they have the potential to dramatically increase international student enrollment at U.S. universities by providing the prospective students with their desired physical presence recruitment approach. This, alongside more concise content and easy to follow university website layouts and targeted social media campaigns are among the best practices for admissions representatives today.

U.S. universities interested in recruiting Chinese students need to harness an understanding of different cultural practices when designing their marketing plans. Similarly, agencies must take into consideration what parents want from their child's university. The findings of the current study suggest practitioners take parents into special consideration, as they are the ones who catalyze their child's decision to study abroad.

Theoretical Implications

The findings of the current study advance knowledge of organizational communication theory, particularly sensemaking. This study explores the college decision-making process of twelve individuals and articulates how they each make sense of their choice of school based on motivating factors and the sources that were most influential in this process. Additionally, this study asked participants to reflect on their decision-making process. This introspective sensemaking process allowed participants to provide insights to what they wish they would have done differently. By comprehending their own college decision-making process explicitly in words, the participants' experiences serve as the "springboard into action" for future students to make a more informed college decision (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 40).

The findings of this study indicate Confucian societal roles play a major role in the decision-making process for Chinese students. Prior studies suggest decision-making between Chinese parents and children has become more of an open discussion rather than a dictation from parents (Chan & McNeal, 2003; Xia, et al., 2004; Yau & Smetana, 2003). However, all of the participants' parents decided their child would study in the U.S. The participants did not decide this for themselves, nor did they have a say in whether or not they would attend a university in China or the U.S. The influence of culture in Chinese students' decision-making is different from many students in Western countries, who are more individualistic than collectivistic (Gudykunst et al., 1996). In the current study, there is no doubt parents played a key role in the participants' decision to attend college in the U.S. However, it remains to be seen how Confucian societal roles affect the sensemaking process of sifting through various resources to arrive at the decision of which particular U.S. university to attend. Weick et al. (2005) believed small actions have large consequences and the current study supports this. The seemingly small action of the participants' parents making the decision for their child to study in the U.S. has large consequences for future students, university admissions representatives, and recruitment agencies. By making sense of their own experiences and sharing them in this study, the participants have the potential to cause change in future college decision-making processes and how practitioners recruit and aid prospective students.

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