

# Motivation Factors of International Students Studying Under the Trump Administration

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## Introduction

There have been a decreasing number of international students studying in the US since President Trump took office (Rodriguez, Chavez, and Klauber 2019). The Trump administration has created an unwelcoming environment (Rose-Redwood, 2017) due to the following immigration policies: Travel Bans, Hire American policies (Potti-Sherman 2018), and harsher restrictions on the unlawful presence (Galati 2018). Much of the research has been done on the motivations of international students to study abroad (Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, and Lynch 2007; Zhou 2015), such as the pursuit of academia, economic benefits, social factors, etc. (de Wit 2002; Khadria 2011; Li and Bray 2007).

However, there are some gaps in the research literature. Push-pull factors between the host and home countries have been the primary motivations for international students studying abroad, but those factors do not consider these current “troubling and uncertain times” (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood 2017, 1). Furthermore, although push-pull factors have some overlaps with expectancy-value theory, which is comprised of intrinsic interest (enjoyment), utility value (fulfillment of personal goals), attainment value (fulfillment of self-identity), and cost (drawbacks of engaging in a task), it does not address how each component of expectancy-value theory can impact a students’ decision to study in the US, particularly, the cost factors and the influence on a students’ decisions and motives. The research question is: What are some factors that might affect international student motivation to study and persist in the U.S. higher education under the Trump administration? What are the costs from the expectancy-value theoretical perspective for international students to study in the US higher education under the Trump administration?

## Theoretical Framework

Expectancy-value theory (Wigfield and Eccles 2002) is used as a theoretical framework for understanding international students’ motivations in studying abroad to fill the gap of push-pull factors of international students studying overseas. Expectancy refers to one’s belief that individual will be successful at a given task, while value refers to the reason one engages in a given task (Barron and Hulleman 2014; Usher 2015). There are four major components of values: “attainment value or importance, intrinsic value, utility value, and cost” (Wigfield and Eccles 2002, 94).

Attainment value refers to the importance of achievement in a task as it relates to identity (Wigfield and Eccles 2002). Students feel they can attain their goals through the sense of self-identity, or the perceptions of whom they believe themselves to be. International students choose to study abroad because of the fierce competition in their home countries (Altbach 2004). International students could know people from different countries, develop self-management skills, and develop social and cultural capital through studying in a foreign country to achieve their self-identity (Huang and Turner, 2018). It is important for international students to attain a foreign degree and improve their foreign

language skills to “develop a range of skills, knowledge, behaviors and attributes that enable them to success in life not just employment” (3).

Intrinsic value is one’s inherent interest in perceiving the task at hand as interesting and enjoyable (Putwain, and et al. 2019). Students’ competence-related beliefs relate more positively with intrinsic value than with utilitarian value (Wigfield and Ecces 2002). International students have the desire to learn English as a second language in host countries and to improve their understanding of their host countries and cultures during the pursuit of qualifications and professional development (Li and Bray 2007).

Utility refers to how one perceives the usefulness of a given task to the completion of a future goal. The push-pull factors concept (Altbach 2004; Mazzarol and Soutar 2002) has been widely used to motivate international students to study abroad. According to Altbach (2004), a primary reason for international students to study in the United States was that American employers were willing to hire qualified graduates due to the large and diverse economy. Many international students perceive higher education as a ladder to access to upper-middle social class (Li and Bray 2007) and tend to stay in the host country due to the high standard of living and better career prospects.

Cost refers to the negative aspects of what the individual must give up for engaging in a given task. This includes stress, fear of failure, the amount of effort is needed to succeed, and lost opportunities (Wigfield and Ecces 2002). In order to study abroad, international students have to deal with issues, including but not limited to, language barriers, racial discrimination, and isolation from the local community, and unequal treatment (Nghia 2019). The language barrier could impact an international students’ assignment quality, give them difficulty in understanding lectures, and prevent them from making friends within the local community (Rodriguez, Chavez, and Klauber 2019).

## Research Methods and Takeaways

There has been less empirical research done on the cost (from expectancy-value theory) of being an international student under the Trump administration (Pottie-Sherman 2018; Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood 2017). International students have to live in an unstable world, as no visa is certain. This can be seen playing out in the significant declines in the F-1 and the H-1B student visas. International students must face fewer available applications, higher refusal rates, and increasing difficulty in finding work in the United States after graduation (Schulmann and Le 2018). The fear of failing or having to quit from their academia is a concern for international students due to the current immigration policy.

Fifteen in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine the motivation and experiences of international students studying in a public research university due to a large number of international students and convenience samples. The interviews were conducted in a flowing and informal conversation and lasted around 60 minutes, allowing for a natural conversation between the researcher and participants.

This study provides insights into the potential factors that might shape international students’ motivation and experiences in studying in the US. Findings from this study can be used to refine the expectancy-value theory from a cultural lens. The study showed that institutions with insights into how to better support and react to international students’ needs and costs under the current presidential administration.

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