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## **Knowledge, Use, and Perceived Value of University Student Services: International and Domestic Student Perceptions**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Universities throughout the United States struggle with fiscal issues that can be improved by greater retention and graduation rates. One step often taken is to cut student service spending, which hurts students' ability to finish a degree. While some have advocated for greater spending in student services, we contend that current services may suffice. Since many students do not understand the services available, many do not take advantage of university offerings. This study looks at differences in perceptions between international and domestic students concerning awareness, use, and value of services available at a western U.S. land-grant university. We found many students, both international and domestic, are not aware of available programs, which correlates to less use and perceived value of these services and programs.

**Keywords:** domestic students, international students, student services, university finances

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Universities throughout the United States continually attempt to improve graduation rates. The United States' graduation rate is 57.6% over 6 years, with institutions spending over \$66,000 per pupil completion (Ortiz, 2017). This rate can be improved,

as evidenced by data from Australia where the completion rate is approximately 68% (Australian Government Department of Education, 2013). Comparisons of Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States are common in higher education as they are both comparable in many of the categories defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and they face similar challenges (OECD, 2018). Many institutions in the United States have existing programs that can improve graduation rates without incurring more costs to the university or student. These programs, often referred to as student services, seek to address academic, personal, and social needs (Ciobanu, 2013). For the purposes of this study, we have defined student services as the programs intended to enhance student growth and development, which are often viewed as optional or discretionary programs (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2012). Academic support program data indicate students who use these services performed better on average than those who did not (Ciobanu, 2013; Ehrenberg & Webber, 2010; Grillo & Leist, 2013; Watson et al., 2018). Some services, such as peer tutoring and career counseling programs, had a positive connection with greater rates of retention and graduation (DiRamio & Payne, 2007; Grillo & Leist, 2013). However, the services available to students are often underutilized, negating the positive effects these programs can have on students (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2014; Zhai, 2004). It is our argument that one major factor for this underutilization is students' lack of knowledge of available services. Students are not fully aware of what programs they can use, decreasing the chance that they will use the most beneficial, capacity-building services. Furthermore, international students encounter many additional obstacles when compared to domestic students, and use of student services can help to alleviate some of the pressure international students face (Perry et al., 2018). If universities make an effort to improve visibility of these programs, students will utilize more services, therefore improving graduation rates, and improving the university's return on investment.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether international and domestic students' lack of knowledge of available services was a hindrance to their use of services, while also investigating differences among these two groups of students studying at a western U.S. land-grant university. In addition, we wanted to investigate whether international and domestic students found the programs useful and how these ratings compared. By looking at these issues, we hoped to find evidence to support the idea that improving both groups of students' knowledge of services will lead to increased participation in these services.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Institutions in the United States are facing numerous financial pressures as the economy struggles to recover from the financial crisis of 2008. Although it has been more than a decade since the global credit and housing crisis, the event's effects on higher education remain. The recession led to a significant decline in state tax funds, which is still being felt in more than 40 states where higher education spending remains lower than pre-recession levels (Selingo, 2018; Seltzer, 2019). Overall state spending for postsecondary education is at least \$7 billion lower than in 2008 when

calculated for inflation (Mitchell et al., 2018). Moreover, when compared with other top performing, comparable OECD nations, such as Australia, 4-year institutions in the United States are experiencing lower graduation rates (Australian Government Department of Education, 2013; Institute of International Education, 2015; Ortiz, 2017). Although the reasons for lower rates can be attributed to a range of factors, Australia, the United Kingdom, and other nations have begun to view international student education as a valuable export. These nations' new perspective has led to a greater investment of resources for recruiting and retaining international students (Owens et al., 2011). In addition, the United Kingdom and Australia have both gained in percentage of total international student population since 2001, while the United States has lost 4% (Study International, 2018). This may be one reason that Australia has higher completion rates than the United States. In contrast, many U.S. institutions have cut certain student services and resources due to increased financial challenges. However, Ehrenberg and Webber (2010) found that this cost-cutting measure may negatively influence graduation rates as increased student services expenditures can lead to an increase in graduation rates. The literature clearly shows these services can be of great benefit to our students and ultimately to the financial health of universities. However, it is also apparent many students are not using the services already in place. In fact, usage rates ranged from 2% to 30% (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2014; Dietsche, 2012; Zhai, 2004). Therefore, it may not be a matter of needing more services, but of promoting visibility for the services institutions already have in place.

### **Benefits of Student Services**

Dhillon et al. (2008) asserted university support systems are an educational necessity both students and faculty can benefit from utilizing. Student services provide many benefits to students that cannot be overlooked. One participant from DiRamio and Payne's (2007) study stated a positive connection between participation in student programs, such as tutoring and career development programs, and stress levels. In addition, students who are the most academically and economically disadvantaged have been the students who benefit most from student services (Ehrenberg & Webber, 2010). With the nation's emphasis on ensuring college degrees as available and affordable to people from all backgrounds, these findings become even more important when looking at student services.

One group of students that may benefit the most from student services is international students. In one Australian university, international students were given a mandate to utilize at least one program as part of a research study (Fenton-Smith & Michael, 2013). Interestingly, this led to improved language skills among international students, with little additional cost to the university as handouts explaining the mandate were provided to professors to give to international students on the first day of class (Fenton-Smith & Michael, 2013). This approach led to positive experiences for international students, and the majority of them attended a program that improved their academic skills. In addition, international students who engaged in different programs like campus-organized discussion groups reported greater levels of learning and personal development (Glass, 2012). Finally, student

services can significantly benefit international students by allowing them a less public arena to ask questions and resolve issues since they are often reluctant to speak up in class to avoid sounding less intelligent than their domestic peers (Sherry et al., 2010).

Another student service, tutoring, has been known to provide benefits to international students as well as impact the university as a whole. Tutoring has been associated with student success as defined by grade point average (GPA), successful completion of courses, and persistence to the next semester (Grillo & Leist, 2013; Kostecki & Bers, 2008). High school GPA and students' standardized test scores have not had a statistically significant connection to the likelihood of graduation, but students who spend more time in tutoring in college have earned higher GPAs (Grillo & Leist, 2013). These higher GPAs are also positively correlated with higher graduation rates (Grillo & Leist, 2013). Therefore, our admissions process may give us an idea of how students did in high school, but once enrolled, they may need the help of student services to reach their full potential and graduate successfully.

### **Underutilization**

While many students need additional help, studies have shown services are underutilized, meaning student services need to foster student involvement since programs that are not used do not provide any benefit (Ciobanu, 2013). There are many different programs that have been underutilized in the past such as counseling, math and literacy skills programs, tutoring, health care, and language programs (Ellis-Bosold & Thornton-Orr, 2013; Hwang et al., 2014; Sherry et al., 2010). However, there is insufficient research about why students choose not to use services they have already paid for. Zhai (2004) found a very small percentage of students used a student organization or career services programs. Instead of utilizing university services students may be reaching out to fellow students for help. This may benefit students to some degree, but may not address all of their needs, especially those concerning academics. Zhai (2004) provided suggestions for improvement such as academic and cultural orientation programs, but we are still left with the question of international students' knowledge and utilization of services that could improve their English language skills and social connections.

Russell et al. (2008) provided a clue as to the reason that students do not adequately utilize health services offered by the university. In their study of Australian international students, 31.2% who chose not to utilize the service did so because they did not know a service was available to them (Russell et al., 2008). In addition, 51.5% of respondents stated they simply did not know where to go. They understood there was a service available, but did not proactively attempt to find the physical location (Russell et al., 2008). Providing more detailed information about location, hours, and services provided will help students understand how to access those services. Moreover, it highlights the fact that this is not an issue specific to the United States, but may be present throughout the world. In contrast, Dhillon and colleagues (2008) found many international students were using some services such as the student union and coffee shop, but did not access the most needed services like language support and career counseling. Universities can take pride in what they offer

to students, but if these offerings are not known or used by students, how much benefit do they actually provide?

Finally, many students understand they may need to improve their skills, but only a small portion actually use what is being offered to them (Dietsche, 2012). However, students who reported greater stress were more likely to seek out the help of others (Dietsche, 2012). This may indicate students do not seek help until it is nearly too late. Dietsche (2012) also found students who were given a direct referral by faculty were more likely to use the services suggested to them. Again, this points to the issue of the lack of knowledge of services and how it may contribute to poor usage statistics among students studying in the United States. One role of student services is to prepare students for involved, proactive participation in society, but if these services are not utilized, this aim cannot be met (Ciobanu, 2013).

### **Problem**

While most institutions offer programs to students in times of need, only a small portion of students actually seek help from the services available to them, with estimates ranging from 2%–4% (Dietsche, 2012). In order for these programs to properly serve their purpose, student services need to foster student involvement since unused programs are not beneficial to the students who need them most (Ciobanu, 2013). In fact, Dietsche (2012) found students reported a high need to improve literacy and math skills, but many did not use the accompanying services that would allow them to improve their skills in these areas. Therefore, the problem may not stem from a lack of services, but in the underutilization of these services that could benefit students as well as the institutions' budgets. We propose that improving students' awareness of services will lead to their increased participation in these services.

### **Research Questions**

To guide the current study, the following research question were developed:

1. How does international student awareness of available programs and services compare to that of domestic students?
2. Does a difference exist between international students' use of services compared with that of domestic students?
3. How do international and domestic students differ in their views of the usefulness of services available to them?

### **Significance**

Due to economic issues that have arisen since 2008, many institutions are seeking to find cost-effective, productive plans that will improve their budgets, while also improving graduation and retention rates. While tuition can be increased to fund certain programs, this is often met with resistance from students and parents alike. However, by improving students' use of existing programs, universities can help their students and their bottom line. One program that many colleges and universities

employ is that of peer tutoring, which has been shown to have a positive relationship with retention and graduation rates (Grillo & Leist, 2013). However, many students are not aware of peer tutoring or other available tutoring services and how to access them even though information concerning programs is widely dispersed (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). However, this widely disseminated information is not always understood, especially by international students. Aforementioned studies have shown that students underutilize services that could help them and the university by improving graduation rates. Many potential reasons for this have been identified, but there is a common thread running throughout the literature: lack of awareness of what is available. Therefore, we contend a lack of awareness is driving low participation numbers and investigating the usefulness could lead to improved visibility of services for students, and therefore, potentially, to greater academic success.

## **METHOD**

A quantitative methodology was utilized to answer the research questions posed above. This study involved the use of a survey constructed by the researchers. Overall, the survey data were analyzed both descriptively and inferentially.

### **Participants**

The survey instrument was administered to 63 international students and 49 domestic students, with three respondents electing not to indicate a nation of origin. Female students comprised 58.3% of respondents ( $n = 67$ ) and 33% ( $n = 38$ ) were undergraduate students. Single students (those who were not married) made up 48.7% of the study ( $n = 56$ ), and the average time spent at the university was almost 2 years. An overwhelming majority of students were between the ages of 18 and 44 (86.1%,  $n = 99$ ), while three respondents were 45 or older and nine elected not to share their age.

### **Survey**

The survey, consisting of 19 questions, was given to international and domestic students at a Rocky Mountain research university of approximately 13,000 students. The survey assessed students' level of agreement concerning student services offered on campus such as health, tutoring, and writing center services. These questions were evaluated on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Additionally, six demographic questions were asked, including gender, age, marital status, nation of origin, months at the university, and level of study (graduate vs. undergraduate). The survey determined how much students knew about programs available to them at the university. These programs were already paid for through student fees and the survey attempted to determine if students were using the programs they have already paid for. Additionally, we measured how useful students found the services they had used.

The survey instrument was developed by two members of the graduate school of education along with one faculty member. The survey was given to three members of the international office who provided input and suggestions for the survey's final

version. The survey was also pilot tested with several students to ensure readability and ease of use for future participants. The survey instrument was divided into three sections covering students' knowledge of services, use of student services, and usefulness of the services they had used. The survey took less than 10 minutes for most students to complete. Sample items from the survey include: "I understand what services are available to me," "I have used the university's writing center," and "I find the organizations or clubs useful to me." For all survey items and their data, please refer to Table 1 below. Lastly, the survey was tested for internal reliability using Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = .954$ ), indicating that the instrument had high internal consistency.

**Table 1: Student Services**

Topic	Domestic		International		Overall	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Aware of organizations	3.67	1.25	2.92	1.48	3.23	1.42
Understand services	3.86	1.15	2.92	1.51	3.31	1.43
Concerned about help from advisor	2.18	1.25	2.03	1.52	2.10	1.39
Concerned about help from professor	1.87	0.88	1.95	1.44	1.92	1.21
Whom to rely on	2.14	1.38	3.08	1.63	2.67	1.57
Engage in activities outside of school	2.55	1.24	3.43	1.48	3.04	1.42
Participate in study groups	2.33	1.13	2.22	1.41	2.26	1.27
Used the writing center	2.40	1.44	2.10	1.60	2.26	1.53
Used tutoring	1.78	1.31	1.89	1.46	1.84	1.37
Active in groups	2.45	1.44	2.31	1.49	2.40	1.46
Engaged in cross-campus activities	2.20	1.49	2.05	1.31	2.11	1.37
Usefulness of services	2.81	1.35	2.86	1.57	2.84	1.45

*Note.* 1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 5 = *Strongly Agree*.

### **Procedures**

International students were contacted via email through the International Students and Scholars Office. An email was sent to international students detailing informed consent as well as procedures for completing the online survey. The email included information regarding Institutional Review Board approval and a hyperlink to access the survey instrument. In addition, our email addresses and phone numbers were provided in the event participants needed clarification or had any concerns about

the survey. The email was sent to international students with the help of International Students and Scholars Office. Instead of utilizing the email method for domestic students, we contacted students through three different courses on campus. We asked three instructors to administer the survey to their current students. These students were provided oral instructions concerning risks, benefits, and informed consent. If students consented to the survey, they were directed to the website to complete the survey. In the event students did not want to participate, they could work on other items they deemed important while their peers completed the survey.

### **Data Analysis**

Descriptive analyses were performed to provide an overall picture of the survey items as well as demographic characteristics such as age and months spent at the university. Once descriptive analysis was complete, independent  $t$  tests were run to identify differences between international and domestic students in the areas of knowledge of services, use of student services, and usefulness of services they had used. These  $t$  tests were run in accordance with the three research questions identified previously.

Demographic and group comparison information was collected in order to account for differences between international and domestic students as well as gender, age, and time enrolled at the university. International and domestic students have many things in common, but their cultural and academic needs may differ significantly based on their skills and experience. Therefore, both international and domestic student were surveyed in order to determine if any differences were noteworthy in regard to available student services. In addition, all questions concerning knowledge of services were averaged together and group means determined. This computed variable was then evaluated using another independent  $t$  test. Questions concerning use of student services were similarly aggregated and another independent  $t$  test was performed to review potential differences between the two groups. Descriptive information for domestic and international students is included in Table 1 above.

## **RESULTS**

To evaluate the research questions, a series of independent  $t$  tests was performed to determine significant differences between international and domestic students.

### **Program Awareness**

In order to investigate the first research question concerning service awareness, we calculated the differences between international and domestic students using an independent  $t$  test and found a significant difference between international and domestic students,  $t(110) = -1.880, p < .05$ . International students had considerably less awareness of available services than domestic students ( $M = 2.81, SD = 1.23$ ). Detailed information is available in Table 2.

**Table 2: Service Awareness**

Variable	Domestic		International		Overall	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Awareness of services	3.21	0.93	2.81	1.23	2.99	1.11
Service use	2.21	1.06	2.09	1.21	2.15	1.13
Service usefulness	2.82	1.34	2.86	1.57	2.84	1.45

*Note.* 1 = *Strongly Disagree*; 5 = *Strongly Agree*.

### **Program Use**

In addition to program awareness, we investigated whether or not students had used different services like the writing center or university-sponsored tutoring. In each category, international students identified they used the available services less than domestic students. However, there was no statistical significance. Therefore, we decided to look into the correlations between overall student service knowledge with usage of study groups, tutoring, clubs and organizations, and cross-campus activities. In three cases, we found moderately positive correlations between the two. There was a positive correlation between students' service knowledge and tutoring,  $r(62) = .470$ ,  $p < .01$ . There was also a positive correlation between student service and participation in clubs and organizations,  $r(62) = .587$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and cross-campus activities,  $r(62) = .626$ ,  $p < .01$ , all showed a statistically significant positive correlation. However, there was not significant correlation between knowledge of services and being involved in small study groups.

### **Usefulness of Services**

Lastly, we determined if students found the services available to them useful. Fifteen students indicated that the question did not apply to them as they had not utilized the services available. Of the remaining 100 students, 42% either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Moreover, only 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. However, the independent *t* test did not show any statistical differences between the two groups.

## **DISCUSSION**

The present study investigated both international and domestic students' views of the different student services available to them from the university. There were 115 total students who participated (63 international, 49 domestic, three unidentified). The research goals were to determine differences between international and domestic students, while also offering evidence that a student's lack of knowledge of services may be connected to the likelihood they will utilize services.

## **Program Awareness**

This study asked international and domestic students to indicate their level of knowledge of available services that the university provides to assist students. Overall, about half of all students indicated that they had awareness of the services that were offered to them. However, international students were less likely to have knowledge of the available services. This may be a significant issue for universities as international students may need extensive academic help with nearly 50% reporting that they regularly needed significant assistance (Yi, 2007). However, domestic students have indicated that they have a similar view of academic support, highlighting that both groups desire more information than they currently possess (Curtin et al., 2013).

## **Program Use**

While we did not find any statistical difference between international and domestic students' use of programs, there are two possible conclusions that arise from the data. First, international students use student services about as much as domestic students, but since their awareness is lacking in available services, a higher proportion of international students may choose to use the services available to them should they be made aware of them. By increasing knowledge of services, international students may have greater rates of use than domestic students. Second, based on the correlations between use and knowledge, it may benefit universities to improve their advertising of services to promote more use of campus services by students.

## **Usefulness of Services**

There were a handful of international and domestic students who did not rate their experience with student services as they had not chosen to participate in any. However, only about 40% of the students who had utilized the program rated them as useful, which is concerning. While there were no differences between international and domestic students, seeing that students do not find programs useful should be investigated more. There are numerous reasons a student may not find a program useful. These include time offered, lack of virtual option, and location (Dietsche, 2012; Ellis-Bosold & Thornton-Orr, 2013; Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). Therefore, the usefulness of a program may not be judged on the services it provides, but may be based on logistical issues preventing students from being able to actively participate.

## **Limitations**

The current study was performed at a public research university in the western United States. Therefore, findings may not be generalizable to other universities and institutions. However, based on previous literature and the current study, universities may still benefit from the findings. Furthermore, the study only meant to investigate differences between international and domestic students as well as correlations between knowledge of services and their use. This would indicate that the two are

linked and those who are more knowledgeable may be more likely to use services. Yet, there may be underlying reasons for the correlation, which need to be investigated further. Finally, our study was small in size, indicating the need to follow-up with a greater number of institutions and students in order to determine if the same ideas hold true for different populations.

### **Future Research**

More research needs to be done in the areas investigated in this study since correlation does not provide us with a cause for these findings. Therefore, future research should attempt to determine if students who know about services gained that knowledge because they are more proactive. This proactive approach may also lead students to use student services. However, there may be other mechanisms at work and further investigation may shed light on this in the future. Another area that would benefit from greater inquiry is to understand why international and domestic students did not find programs to be particularly useful. Future studies could also focus on what aspects of services make them undesirable and how this could be overcome. Finally, future research should investigate which programs have the greatest effect on student achievement and graduation rates (e.g., Russell et al., 2008; Zhai, 2004).

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

Previous studies have highlighted potential interventions and strategies that could improve the use of services. For instance, services should be tailored to students' 21st century needs or they may be less likely to reach out for help (Ciobanu, 2013). For example, the role of social media and technology have become quite commonplace among students, and face-to-face meetings may be less desired by many students (Cabellon & Junco, 2015). Therefore, student services need to investigate ways to meet students rather than expecting them to adhere to approaches used in the past. Although there are many great programs available to students, in their current form, many are not as impactful or cost effective as administrators would like (Blum & Jarrat, 2014). In addition, programs could employ online access to certain services in order to help distance students and those who may not be able to attend the program in person (Dietsche, 2012). Furthermore, due to cultural differences, meeting in person may be difficult for some international students, further supporting the need for a virtual option (Sherry et al., 2010). Students who have traveled from another nation are already dealing with numerous obstacles and opening up more options can help alleviate some of the stress that these students face, improving their overall educational experience (Misra & Castillo, 2004). Very few of these suggestions address the issue of underutilization, but they may help to solve the issue of a student's lack of knowledge. By providing more services and tailoring them to students' needs, universities can improve what they offer, but still fail to increase participation as many students may remain unaware of programs and services available to them. Therefore, it is important to understand how much of a role awareness of services play in students' utilization of services.

The results of this study support previous research, but also provide one potential reason for students' underutilization of student services—lack of usefulness. Also, many students may not have the necessary information they need to take advantage of the services offered. In addition, there is a definitive link between awareness of services offered and the use of those services. However, more information is needed to determine the cause of this link. Universities can attempt to improve their efforts in reaching out to students, which would increase the use of student services, which has many positive benefits for students and the university alike (Ehrenberg & Webber, 2010). Rather than spending more on student services as has been suggested in the past, universities can find more cost-effective ways to promote their services (Ehrenberg & Webber, 2010). One suggestion is to mirror the approach of an Australian study by giving handouts to faculty to disseminate on the first day of classes (Fenton-Smith & Michael, 2013). This will allow universities to promote awareness without incurring exorbitant costs. We suggest these handouts provide students with detailed information about services including times of operation, location on campus, whether a virtual option is available, and how often students can make use of each service. By doing this, students can have a better understanding of what is available to them without taking time away from orientation programs that are already in place.

Second, faculty advisors and classroom professors should be aware of programs that may help their students the most. While we cannot expect faculty to know every service and organization on campus, most faculty should know about the programs that are most beneficial to students. These may include tutoring, writing assistance, language support, and medical and mental health services. If advisors and faculty members know what services are available, they can provide students with the necessary and specific information to help them. Persistence is influenced by a student's sense of belonging at the university, which can be cultivated and strengthened through services offered by the university (Heisserer & Parette, 2002).

Finally, those who administer student services should consult recent research to determine how programs can be more useful. Student service coordinators should consider changing or expanding operating hours to reach more students by matching their schedules more closely. In addition, program administrators should consult students who use their services to determine what is most helpful and what modifications would improve the usefulness of tutoring, writing assistance, etc. While many strategies may have been useful in the past, program leaders need to consider the rise of technological tools and internet-based learning when assessing services offered to students. Just as faculty and students must grow with technology and the internet, tutoring and other assistance needs to embrace change and address new challenges and obstacles. By addressing new technologies and tailoring programs to students' needs, student services may be able to attract more students and help more people reach their academic goals.

These suggestions can be carried out with very little cost or change to the systems currently in place. By implementing these cost-saving measures, universities can improve retention and graduation rates, thereby improving the overall financial well-being of the institution. As it stands, numerous students could benefit from the help of student services, but many are unaware of what is available to them. By increasing

student awareness and evolving with novel technologies, universities can improve their return on investment and benefit from programs already in place. Finally, international students may reap the greatest benefit from these changes, which allows domestic students to learn from international students' diverse views, background, culture, food, music, and traditions.

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