Influencers Experienced in the College Search Process by International Chinese Undergraduate Students who use Educational Agents

Brocdyl Joseph Porta
University of Miami, brocdylporta@comcast.net

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa_dissertations

Recommended Citation
https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/oa_dissertations/1999

This Embargoed is brought to you for free and open access by the Electronic Theses and Dissertations at Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.
INFLUENCERS EXPERIENCED IN THE COLLEGE SEARCH PROCESS BY INTERNATIONAL CHINESE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS WHO USE EDUCATIONAL AGENTS

By

Brocdyl Joseph Porta

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of the University of Miami in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Coral Gables, Florida

December 2017
UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

INFLUENCERS EXPERIENCED IN THE COLLEGE SEARCH PROCESS BY
INTERNATIONAL CHINESE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS WHO USE
EDUCATIONAL AGENTS

Brocdyl Joseph Porta

Approved:

________________
Pedro Villarreal III, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of
Educational and Psychological Studies

________________
Dina Birman, Ph.D.
Professor of Educational and
Psychological Studies

________________
Edmund Abaka, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of History
and International Studies

________________
Guillermo J. Prado, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

________________
Brian M. Orefice, Ph.D.
Lecturer, Educational and Psychological Studies
This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews of five International Chinese Undergraduate (ICU) students attending a research university in South Florida to better understand how they experienced the college choice process. Unlike traditional U.S. native-born students, the literature indicates that some international students may have influencers linked to the financial costs associated with hiring educational agents in the college choice phases (Pimpa, 2003; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), parental and familial aspirations for student, and institutional ranking information connected to marketing materials. Using thematic analysis, the following two major themes associated to four subthemes emerged as general findings from these analyses: 1) Chinese students have great aspirations for studying in the United States; a) Experiencing family support with opportunities of attending college; and b) Experiencing expectations of college with limited resources, as well as 2) The process of deciding and applying to college for international Chinese students involves adjusting their expectations relative to resources they receive; a) Experiencing agent support with completing college applications, and b) Utilizing guidance from agents to overcome admission obstacles. The results of these analyses are followed by a series of implications and recommendations for higher education administrators who work with international student services.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter                                                                 Page

1 INTRODUCTION........................................................................................................ 1
   Statement of Problem......................................................................................... 2
   Purpose ............................................................................................................ 4
   Theoretical Basis of the Study ......................................................................... 5
   Significance of the Study ............................................................................... 7
   Research Questions ......................................................................................... 8
   Qualitative Methodology ............................................................................... 10
   Summary of Key Conclusions ......................................................................... 11
   Definitions of Key Terms .............................................................................. 12

2 LITERATURE REVIEW .......................................................................................... 14
   College Choice Model .................................................................................... 15
   Recruitment for International Students in Higher Education ...................... 19
   Recruitment Models using Educational Agents ............................................ 23
   Ethical Problems in International Recruitment ........................................... 27
   College Choice Influences on International Chinese Students ................... 29
   Barriers for International Chinese Students Access to Higher Education ...... 33
   Conclusion ...................................................................................................... 37

3 METHODS ........................................................................................................... 38
   Research Questions ....................................................................................... 47
   Research Site .................................................................................................. 48
   Research Participants .................................................................................... 49
   Data Collection Procedures ......................................................................... 51
   Interview Protocol and Probing Questions .................................................... 53
   Transcriptions ................................................................................................ 53
   Analysis: Coding and Themes ....................................................................... 58
   Data Analysis Procedures Summary ............................................................... 60

4 RESULTS ............................................................................................................ 63
   Summary of Participants .............................................................................. 65
   Thematic Analysis ......................................................................................... 69
   Theme 1 .......................................................................................................... 71
   Theme 1 Subthemes ...................................................................................... 72
   Theme 2 .......................................................................................................... 78
   Theme 2 Subthemes ...................................................................................... 79
   Summary of Results....................................................................................... 85

5 DISCUSSION ....................................................................................................... 88
   Discussion of Findings for Research Question 1 ............................................ 90
   Discussion of Findings for Research Question 2 ............................................ 94
   Implications for United States Colleges/Universities .................................... 100
Chapter I

Introduction

Colleges and universities are experiencing many challenges including a series of emerging concerns related to the following: intersection of immigration policy and higher education, implementation of new recruitment strategies, and use of new developing outcome metrics; however, few of these issues will be as influential in American higher education as those associated with those concerns related to internationalization. The education of the contemporary generation of students requires a global as well as domestic understanding of international politics, economics, technology, foreign culture, and more. The business, financial, and economic viability of nations and in many instances, even continents, is driven by the ever-increasing need for internationalization as evidence by the numerous treaties such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This international agreement is a three-country accord negotiated by the governments of Canada, Mexico, and the United States (www.americanactionforum.org/NAFTA. Retrieved 2016). Consequently, the realization is that “the internationalization of higher education is inevitable” (Levine, 2012, p. 175).

Currently, the United States is the world leader of international student enrollments, but this role is being challenged by other countries, particularly Australia, Britain, and New Zealand (Altbach, 2004). World governments have adapted to the evolving international marketplace by enacting immigration policies intended to increase their international student populations. The confluence of the growing interest toward internationalization and the increasing use of international student recruitment agencies as a prevailing practice among Australian, British, and Canadian universities has
generated interest in better understanding the college search process of many international populations within the United States.

Data on the increasing use of international student recruitment agencies suggest that approximately one quarter of American colleges and universities are engaged in the practice (West, 2014). This type of overseas advisement is the third-party recruitment agent, sometimes referred to as an independent educational agent or consultant. An educational agent is a person, company, or an organization that provides services to students seeking to study and earn a degree abroad in exchange for a fee (Redding, 2013). In the last decade the Republic of China has experienced a rapid growth in the number of educational agents serving students and their families (The Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2010). American institutions will need to act accordingly, by initiating and enhancing international student outreach, admission, and support activities; combined with, maintaining high standards that raise ethical and social responsibility among those involved in serving students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education (National Association for College Admission Counseling’s Statement of Principles of Good Practice).

**Statement of the Problem**

A sudden shift in international student demographics occurred when events of September 11, 2001, triggered a wave of antiterrorism legislation, which included the tightening of immigration policies concerning foreigners inclusive of international students (Johnson, 2003). According to a published report after the 9/11 attacks, 32 consecutive years of international student enrollment growth in American higher education came to an abrupt halt (Open Doors Report, 2012). While the concern for
Stricter immigration policies is valid in a post 9/11 world, the federal government may lose perspective on the importance and value of a diverse student body in this country, whether that diversity is drawn from within the United States or from an international population. Additionally, changing immigration policies can create additional barriers that increase the stress levels among aspiring international students who seek an education at colleges and universities in the United States. Program development in recruitment and admissions’ services help the transition for many international students. A positive search experience with institutions of higher education in the United States during the application process can benefit students leading to successful transitions, and institutions can also learn from effective practices that may be utilized in future recruitment initiatives.

Students benefit through the useful information and valuable suggestions received while colleges and universities become more competitive in foreign target markets by providing direct access to students with the same language and timely feedback from the institution. Nonetheless, quality control, misrepresentation, conflicts of interest, and student enrollment-based compensation were also reported as issues in international student recruitment practice (NACAC, 2010). Still, negative experiences in the college search process could harm students’ interest in completing the college application process, and the overall college choice process in general. These potential negative experiences could contaminate institutions’ reputations overseas (Hagedorn, 2010). Thus, the shifting demographics and the leading political idealism toward nationalism are curtailing efforts toward better international representation. These problems and issues could have potentially negative economic and political consequences for the United
States. Understanding how international students perceive the college choice and search process will lead to better understanding, thereby leading to more effective educational programs and practices for international student populations.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to examine the experience international Chinese undergraduate students have in their college search phase to help better understand the services they receive from educational agents when applying to American universities. Administrators in higher education may be able to play a part to ensure fair and ethical practice for international students, given the recent growth in recruitment trends of government involvement and the utilization of immigration policy combined with institutions practicing third party recruitment. For example, there are reported problems of data misrepresentation by agents external to the institution, conflicts of interest between them and the universities they are serving, and an inappropriate payment metrics using student enrollment-based compensation according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling (Hawkins, 2012). The NACAC’s Statement of Principles of Good Practice (SPGP) requires members agree that they will not employ agents who are compensated on a per-capita basis when recruiting students outside the United States, unless ensuring they and their agents conduct themselves with accountability, transparency, and integrity (NACAC, 2014). It is crucial that educational agents function in the best interest of the students and display ethical practices while recruiting, and the services rendered through assistance with applying to college could greatly benefit not only International Chinese students but also the growing number of global applicants to American colleges and universities (Levine, 2012).
Previous research on the use of third-party educational agents has been relatively limited indicating that additional research of international admissions should be conducted. In addition, contemporary research calls for a greater focus on ways to explore the development of collaborative means between institutions, students, and the independent educational consultants (Zhang, 2011). This research study can help administrators comprehend and advance present-day recruitment strategies and maintain a competitive position for American institutions; meanwhile correspondingly, the study can offer guidance to an ethical model recruiting international Chinese students in the United States. The study can provide rich information through the application of qualitative methods by exploring the most current influential factors for international Chinese undergraduate students, educational agents, found through an emerging theme analysis of their college choice search process leading to studying abroad in the United States.

**Theoretical Basis of the Study**

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) present college choice as a developmental process that occurs within three phases. The predisposition phase is the initial stage in which students make the decision whether or not to continue their formal education beyond the secondary level (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Next, in the search stage, students collect information about particular institutions and their characteristics. Search activities include information-gathering and its processing. It is during this stage that the most interaction between students and colleges/universities occur. At the end of this phase, students will develop a choice set of colleges and universities to which they will apply. The choice phase is the third and the final phase of this model. Students proceed through the choice
phase by assessing their available options and ultimately deciding on their preferred college/university. The review of literature found no evidence for a college choice model that pertained specifically to international Chinese students in the search stage utilizing assistance from educational agents. Thus, this research applied the single most influential domestic conceptualization of a college choice model to the selected subset of prospective undergraduate international students.

While it is expected that international students will experience unique circumstances that will make the college choice process different from domestic students, this college choice model was substantively developed to approximate the behavioral responses and typical experiences of domestic students, and the model will likely generate better understanding of international students more generally, but, also of international Chinese populations more specifically. It should be clear that this investigation is not designed or intended to ascertain the differences between the several international populations or to ascertain the differences between domestic and international students. These other questions—while very interesting and substantively informative—are beyond the scope of this investigation. Rather, this research was designed to learn more about the single largest subpopulation of international students at the target institution selected for investigation. Three reasons form the rationale for why the selected institution was chosen as the research setting: 1) researcher’s access to the institution’s context and research setting, 2) unique setting with a significant subpopulation of students currently enrolled at the institution, and 3) the institutional setting’s similarity to the types of institutions where the vast majority of international Chinese undergraduate students attend throughout the United States.
Significance of the Study

The following research can lead to greater understanding, both descriptive and theoretical, of the experiences international Chinese students undergo during their college choice process. Generally, the information acquired could have potential benefits to society by increasing our understanding of the general psychosocial processes undergraduate Chinese students experience in the college search. The information could assist American colleges and universities better assist these students as they are transitioning into American institutions of higher education. The information may also assist us in learning what is more influential among this student population to better influence them during their college search process.

It can help to better understand how educational agents may interact to affect student college choice. Moreover, the research can enable U.S. institutions advance present-day recruitment strategies to better position these institutions in an internationally competitive marketplace; meanwhile correspondingly, the inferences of the study can offer guidance toward a more ethical model of recruiting international Chinese students to the United States. It can potentially help to produce greater understanding on how International Chinese students navigate the college choice process, especially as they begin to explore higher education options among an international set of institutions. A study of the themes encountered by international students through exploring their experiences may help in better understanding the international students’ search phase.

Their search process could be seen through a higher education administrator’s lens to examine a student's multiple barriers and common influences and independent educational consultant’s guidance. Knowledge gained from this study can initiate
conversation on how to ethically recruit while adapting to a new age of internationalization at American institutions of higher education. Awareness is important and beneficial for administrators in U.S. colleges and universities to understand the experience international applicants undergo with the massive increase of students coming from abroad. These new rules and regulations for aspiring international students greatly hindered the growth of international education exchange (Zhang, 2011). Institutions may utilize the information related to recruitment patterns of international students actively seeking admissions and enrollment information, and more importantly the hindrance of such information.

**Research Questions**

The growing international Chinese student body has played a significant role in the ten percent increase of international undergraduate and graduate students attending American universities, from the 2013-14 to the 2014-15 academic years, rising to 974,926 students, according to the Open Doors report, which is published annually by the Institute of International Education (IIE) in partnership with the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (Institute of International Education, 2016). Hossler and Gallagher (1987) determined that the best time for institutions to influence potential students is during the choice phase; however, institutions may be able to further provide information to students who have applied using educational agents. Based on the theory, they recommend that institutions take an active role in distributing information about academic programs, costs, financial aid, and other information relevant to students in the search phase (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). As a result, institutions
should use their recruiting resources to their fullest advantage using the College Choice Model to better understand college choice process of international students.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the influential factors in the College Choice Model’s predisposition and search phases for the specified population. The two research questions below are intended to provide a better understanding as well as information on how they may have been influenced by an educational agent when applying to an institution of higher education in the United States.

1. *What influencers do undergraduate international Chinese students experience in the predisposition stage of their college search?*

2. *What influencers do undergraduate international Chinese students experience in the college search stage while working with educational agents?*

The first research question is important because it is designed to provide information regarding the influential characteristics relevant to international undergraduate Chinese students during the first stage of the College Choice Model. It also provides a general context for understanding the search process more generally by linking the model to application for the population of students rarely investigated. Additionally, the second research question is important because it provides information about the college search stage of the college choice model, which perhaps, may be the most important phase of the process. Learning more about this stage of the college process for this population can generate greater understanding useful for both practical and policy considerations.
Qualitative Methodology

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is defined as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). This qualitative study specifically used an approach (Seidman, 2006) where in-depth, individual interviews are used as a primary source of data collection. A qualitative methodology was considered appropriate given the research questions asked that focused on better understanding the individual perspectives related to the experiences in the college choice process of international Chinese undergraduate students. The thematic analysis also incorporates a review of influencers from the predisposition stage including personal and background characteristics that lead to college choice (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The Office of International Admissions at the University of Miami agreed to support the study and sent out an email to all registered international undergraduate Chinese students for the fall 2016 semester. Five international Chinese undergraduate students assisted by educational agents during their college application process were selected from the applicant pool and agreed to the interview. The process of selecting interviewees was conducted with the assistance of the institution’s International Admissions Office. Subjects included in the interview process were International Undergraduate Students from the Republic of China, enrolled during the time of interview, at the University of Miami. Inducements were not used to increase participation in the study and there were no known benefits that would accrue directly to individual subjects.
Summary of Key Conclusions

Internationalization in higher education in the United States will, generally, require an awareness of the usage of recruitment agents, family, and friends as well as an understanding of the issues in quality control, misrepresentation, conflicts of interest, and institutional student enrollment-based compensation in contemporary recruitment practices used with international Chinese students during their college choice progression (NACAC, 2010). International student recruitment with the assistance from independent educational consultants, non-contract agents without formal ties to the universities, are prevalent in Asian countries and may have an influence on whether and where a student will choose an institution, preparing the student for appropriate language tests, preparing application materials, and assisting in the preparation and scheduling of the visa interview (Hagedorn, 2010).

As federal policy shifts under new political leadership, higher education is staged to be an area for contentious debate with potential significant policy changes, particularly, the changes associated with national security along with the impediment of more stringent student visa requirements to study in the United States (Noel-Levitz, 2008). Furthermore, American colleges and universities are the most expensive in the world and are becoming difficult to market in some countries. As international leaders in higher education, researchers should examine current trends in recruitment practices from educational agents, and ensure ethical, globally sensitive, and comprehensive services are available to the significant international pool of applicants to remain relevant in the evolving competitive international market. The section below contains a list of key terms with their associated definitions used throughout this manuscript. To note, the language
referring to college search and college choice are listed for clarity although, occasionally, they are used interchangeably throughout the dissertation.

**Definitions of Key Terms**

**International Student Recruitment Agent** - An individual international student recruiter, who may work independently or as an employee of an agency. Agents are not salaried employees of the institutions for which they recruit.

**College Choice Model** - This project seeks to analyze how students experienced whether to attend college, and how students come to matriculate at a particular college. Below are the three phases used in the framework from the model.

**The Predisposition Stage** - This is the first stage of the College Choice Model, when the student decides to pursue college instead of another postsecondary path.

**The Search Stage** - The process of gathering information about colleges and universities as well as developing a list of colleges or universities to seriously consider.

**The Choice Stage** - Refers to the weighing of the final set to settle on a final decision of which institution to attend. In this study, I use search and choice synonymously.

**Institution** - A four-year postsecondary college or university.

**Private Institution** - A four-year college or university that does not receive substantial state government subsidies for operational costs.

**Prospective Student** - A student currently searching for information for a desired college or university.
Public Institution - A four-year college or university that receives state government subsidies for operational costs.
Chapter II

Literature Review

In the 2009-10 academic years, China’s student population in the United States surpassed that of India, making China the leader in sending the most students to the United States. Almost 20 percent of international students in the United States are from the Republic of China (Institute of International Education, 2014). Internationalization will incorporate the cultural values and motives of students from another country as through learning, socialization, or identification. Additionally, many U.S. colleges have experienced a rapid increase in Chinese undergraduate enrollment in recent years (Fischer, 2009). The University of Miami had more than 1,800 international students registered for the 2014-2015 school year, and the foreign influence on campus is larger than ever with the number of undergraduate applicants from abroad increasing each year (International Admission Requirements - University of Miami, 2015). This chapter examines various factors involved in the college choice process experienced by international Chinese undergraduate students applying to universities in the United States.

International recruitment in the Information Age shows online applications are widely used by many universities to provide an easier and cost-effective application process to potential applicants (Redding, 2013). The majority of enrollment tools show recruiters using electronic media, such as videos, DVDs, and university websites. However, students in some countries or regions have limited access to online information due to lack of available technology or the high expense associated to acquiring the technology. Institutions considering the method of using third-party recruitment must also recognize and address the risks inherent in it. These risks apply to both students and
institutions alike. For students who interact with agencies, these include financial risk, misinformation risk, and the risk of being referred to an institution based not upon what is educationally and socially best for them but, rather, financially advantageous for the agency. The National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) is an organization of more than 15,000 professionals from around the world dedicated to serving students as they make choices about pursuing postsecondary education. NACAC does not endorse the practice of commission-based international student recruitment; however, in 2013, the association modified its Statement of Principles of Good Practice to permit members to utilize it, providing they ensure accountability, transparency, and integrity when doing so (West, 2014).

Five key ideas are fundamental to this analysis, and each represents an important consideration such as: (a) Recruitment of international students in higher education, (b) Recruitment models using educational agents, (c) Ethical problems in international recruitment with subsequent subtopics, (d) Influences on international Chinese students, and (e) Barriers for international Chinese students’ access to higher education. The research highlights problems international students experience such as searching college information, English language barriers, financial problems, and lack of understanding of the broader recruitment initiatives within higher education institutions in the United States.

**College Choice Model**

Hossler and Gallagher (1987) provides a general framework that conceptualizes the process of college choice by incorporating the effects of institutional characteristics, program characteristics, marketing and recruitment characteristics, family characteristics,
individual student characteristics, and the connection between these factors. In this way, Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model allows for simultaneous examination of multiple influencers, as well as their experiences, which affects the college decision-making process. For this reason, the Hossler and Gallagher (1987) model was selected as the appropriate conceptual framework to guide this study. It is important to note that although Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) model has been employed as the conceptual framework for this study, it was not in the scope of this study to cover all three stages of this model. The model is comprised of three phases: Predisposition Stage, Search Stage, and the Choice Stage. In the first stage, students determine whether they want to pursue postsecondary schooling beyond secondary education. A student’s background characteristics, parents’ expectations, peers, financial resources, and other factors combine with institutional characteristics to formulate in the student a desire/aspiration to pursue further education.

In the Search Stage, once a student has formed a desire to pursue additional schooling, he or she gathers information about various institutions and forms a “choice set” of institutions that match his or her criteria and values. The search process is influenced by a student’s preliminary values, his or her search activities, and the admissions activities of an institution of higher education typically within the search stage of the process. After identifying a set of several institutions that are of interest, the student continues to explore and research the institutions further and decides which of the choices of institution the student will submit an admissions application. This stage may also include identifying college information related to the general student population, degree programs and majors, history with the institutions, reputation, total cost of
attendance, location of the institution, among other factors of interest. The costs of exams
and application costs are also considerations at this stage of the process. In the Choice
Stage, the student is influenced not only by their choice set, but also by the yield
activities of potential institutions.

The present study merely focused on those predisposition and search factors that
influence international students’ decision. Hossler and Gallagher’s College Choice Model
(1987) proved applicable to defining the purpose and explaining the college search and
choice process of international students. This model helps to frame previous research
findings and deepen understanding about the influencers driving students to undertake
agency-based recruitment as part of their overall international student experience in
choosing higher education in the United States. Academics have composed models to
explain the college choice process for students (e.g., Kotler, 1976; Litten, 1982; Hossler
& Gallagher, 1987). As Litten (1982) observed, college choice is a complex process
involving many factors and variables. Most combined models divide the student decision-
making process into three phases. For example, Kotler (1976) noted that the college
selection process consisted of seven stages, whereas Hossler and Gallagher (1987)
proposed that students engage in a three-stage model as they begin the college search
process.

The significant factors students identify and explore in the process of choosing
colleges among international students is likely not the same as those factors for domestic
students in the United States. For example, institutional tuition and fee structures and
federal and state financial aid systems employed vary significantly within each country’s
national contexts. Even within the U.S. context, in some states there are more scholarship
programs available for domestic applicants to encourage attracting more high-achieving students or in assisting more needy students. Additionally, employment opportunities during and after graduation are not the same in the two national contexts, and the recognition of institutional reputation/rankings might be weighed differently internationally than domestically. This could affect job opportunities for students in their own countries including within the Republic of China. Therefore, it is assumed using the model, that the significance of the various factors is not the same among domestic and international students. While the table below provides information on three different models, the College Choice Model was selected to guide this investigation for several reasons. First, it is more broadly structured encompassing elements of the previous two models that were considered. Second, the College Choice Model is the framework most often applied in the literature in both research and practice, having been cited far more frequently by researchers who investigate college access and admissions issues as well as by higher education practitioners concerned with the early college choice processes. Third, it tends to be more accessible enabling analysis from a broad range of educational researchers.

Hossler’s model conceptually also focuses on the economic assumptions that prospective college students think and act rationally constructing a careful cost-benefit analyses when choosing a college, and examines college choice factors such as student background characteristics, aspirations, educational achievement, and financial variables (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). According to the model students move toward an increased understanding of their educational options and are influenced by individual and organizational factors as they progress through to enrollment. The study of college choice
encompasses a lengthy history; Table 1 provides a brief overview with keywords relevant to the three theoretical models commonly used in the college choice literature.

**Table 1**

*College Choice Models*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decision to Attend</td>
<td>College Aspiration</td>
<td>Predisposition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Seeking and Receiving</td>
<td>Beginning the Search Process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific College Inquiries</td>
<td>Gathering Information</td>
<td>Search</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applications</td>
<td>Sending Applications</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admissions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Choice</td>
<td>Enrolling</td>
<td>Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The following table was adapted from Hossler, D., & Gallagher K. (1987). Studying student college choice: A three-phase model and the implications for policymakers. *College and University, 2*, 207-221.

**Recruitment for International Students in Higher Education**

The United States is currently facing intense international student enrollment challenges, in terms of evaluating current recruitment tools, planning innovative strategies, and maintaining proper ethical practices while remaining the leader of international recruitment. The competitive international market led by Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada have taken steps to make their educational programs more attractive to international students. These countries also have examined and improved services in college application, transition of life, accommodation of learning, and even post-graduation student immigration status. The United States should improve
their international recruitment strategies to remain competitive against emerging international education leaders; the countries in which the United States is competing against in higher education are enrolling more students from the global pool (Altbach, 1989).

Recommendations for improvement include initiatives to raise the profile of international students, improved financial assistance and scholarships, and creating opportunities for international students to improve their college application skills. The director of public policy and research for the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC) notes that the search for full-pay international students has been likened to a modern-day gold rush (Hawkins, 2012). Higher education has become a frontier-style environment where colleges and universities, like prospectors in the 1800s, realize that there is gold out there and conducts intensive recruitment efforts abroad (Lewin, 2012, p. 23).

The 2008 global recession altered institutions of higher education, foreign students have become a commodity for some schools looking to boost their revenues to meet institutional needs during state budget cuts, reductions in donations, or drops in enrollment. Market and competitive forces have weakened the ability of organizations such as the College Board and the NACAC to broker cooperative policies and practices that could help students and institutions (Hossler, 2004). Understanding the groundwork of the immense challenges facing international students, during both admissions and the transitional acculturation process, may further explain the misrepresentation of data or lack of knowledge international students describe having (Sherry, 2010).
The majority of the research reviewed echoed that many colleges now actively recruit international students for both economic benefit and campus diversity; yet, the admissions system has not yet evolved to address the range of logistical and ethical challenges caused by this influx of foreign applications (Peterson, 1999). However, this added scrutiny also offers an opportunity for reflection about how the standards of practice and institutional missions apply to the state of college admission, particularly in the interest using recruiting agents for international students. Facing increasing competition, many colleges and universities are seeking more economical and novel approaches to accrue a larger pool of prospective students for their recruitment initiatives. The National Association for College Admission Counseling debate over the use of international recruiting agents and coverage of “The China Conundrum” regarding the rise in fraudulent documents from Chinese applicants prove daunting challenges to the trustworthiness of college admission (Fischer, 2011).

Ethical challenges for global practitioners have indeed been fodder in the popular press and industry publications recently. Media coverage has revealed compromised work practices among some IECs working abroad. This was seen most recently in the case of an IEC who reportedly deceived a family in Hong Kong out of $2.2 million USD by promising Ivy League admission to the applicants (Abrams, 2012). While the role of these parents and their motivation is not yet clear, this case highlights how easily foreign families can be misled by the work of charlatans who offer impossible admission guarantees. In this case, the IEC involved made blatantly false claims in the documents that are now documented in the courts (Abrams, 2012). While this is an extreme example, it is easy to imagine the small-scale fabrications and exaggerations that can deceive other
international families who simply do not know the communicative or ethical norms (Redding, 2013). The captions from the periodicals reviewed cast doubt over the integrity of the field, but principally criticize the vast concerns that unethical recruitment practices may create for higher education institutions in the United States. Presently, educational fairs provide students with personalized information via direct conversations with recruiters, but they can be very expensive for universities and are inconvenient for students living far away from the host city (Zhang, 2011).

**Federal Influence on International Student Recruitment**

The international student market is changing due to many external factors outside of the control of the colleges and universities. More specifically, international student recruitment is affected by current events and the political environment. For example, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, concerns over national security led to visa restraints and apprehension of international student recruitment efforts, especially those from Muslim-majority countries. Greater inspection was given to the international student application procedures used in F-1 Visa (Academic Student) applications and student-processing fees were increased. Former President Bush submitted the Patriot Act “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism Act of 2001” to Congress on September 24, 2001 that was subsequently signed into law on October 26, 2001.

Perhaps, the policy that has had the greatest impact on university students is the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) that was proposed by the Department of Homeland Security and implemented by the Department of Justice and the
Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) on January 30, 2003. According to Johnson (2003), SEVIS requires that students and their host universities report: (a) when the student arrives on campus, (b) failure of a student to enroll, (c) full-time enrollment, (d) when a student drops below a full course load without prior authorization from INS, (e) any failure to maintain status or complete the program, (f) change in name or address within 10 days, (g) start date of each term, (h) a student’s transfer to another program, (i) program extensions, (j) off campus employment, and (k) any other major changes to the student’s program of studies (p. 7).

Visa applications also affected post 9/11 immigration policies with the changes in processing of visa applications. Due to increased pressure on INS agents to be scrupulous in their examination of applications, the process has become lengthy with many denials and greater scrutiny. One of the relevant central issues of concern have been the long delays in reviewing visa applications resulting in some international students and visiting missing their program start dates (Johnson, 2003).

**Recruitment Models using Educational Agents**

Universities in the United States are responsible for maintaining an ethical recruitment model despite adjusting to the large increase of educational agents coming into the inquiry and enrollment stages of international admissions. The University of Miami is a prime example of a university that has experienced a significant rise in their international student population. The University has nearly 2000 international undergraduate/graduate students registered for the 2014-2015 school year, and the largest demographic of those students originate from the Republic of China (International Admission Requirements - University of Miami, 2015) accounting for roughly 51 percent of total international students on campus. The literature review presents thematic consistency in examining SEM (strategic enrollment management) and existing
recruitment models currently using educational consultants with international Chinese student applicants. While many universities seek to boost their international enrollments, adequate attention is not always paid to the needs of these applicants during the admission process. Some institutions utilize international student recruitment agencies, the subject of this guide, as one method of outreach and recruitment.

Agencies can be defined as companies or Independent Educational Consultants (IEC) in the business of recruiting international students. Agencies are compensated by the institutions they recruit for, usually contingent upon the referral of enrollees to the institutions. Different terms are used to describe institution-to-agency remuneration, such as ‘per-capita commissions’ and ‘referral fees’ (West, 2014). Estimates suggest that more than 20,000 agencies operate worldwide, differing in terms of location, size, and student recruitment specializations. The utilization of agency services by educational institutions also varies across the globe. For example, while most Australian, British, and Canadian universities work with international student recruitment agencies, this enrollment strategy is far less common in the United States. Data suggest that approximately one-quarter of American institutions, or specific campus programs, contract with agencies to conduct international student recruitment (West, 2014).

It is important to distinguish recruitment agency activity from the services rendered by independent agents or IECs. An IEC may be defined as someone who provides fee-based advisement to students about choosing and applying to programs, schools, colleges, and universities, and who is paid solely by the individuals or families they counsel. In other words, their work is financially independent of the educational institutions they advise students about, not recruit for. IECs may work alone in private
practice, or as employees of an independent educational consultancy. Many IECs specialize in assisting international students. IECs may be considered a kind of agent in terms of the services they provide their client families; however, because they are compensated only by students and parents, they are strictly “buyers’ agents,” not recruitment agents.

U.S.-based Independent Education Consultants (IEC) are part of an aspiring occupation (Redding, 2013), and unlike well-established professions like nursing and other healthcare practitioners, there is no licensure requirement for educational agents/consultants. Consequently, there is no way to ensure that someone calling themselves an IEC is practicing within domain standards (Gardner & Shulman, 2005). Unfortunately, clients rarely understand the difference between those who are members of larger for-profit agencies and those who are not, further undermining mechanisms of field control. Therefore, while the professional organizations do represent a notable attempt to standardize the practice of IECs and provide important opportunities for a community of practitioners to share knowledge, they are powerless to standardize practice and enforce ethical standards for all members of this field.

Further research reveals Chinese undergraduate students choose to work with an independent agent because they possessed little knowledge regarding the college application process (Hagedorn, 2010) at American or international institutions. Participants reported a lack of knowledge in visa application and in the admissions processes of foreign colleges and universities. Students also reported that they felt they were more likely to be accepted if they had used an agent (Hagedorn, 2010). In addition, students also reported that lack of time was another important factor encouraging them to
use an agent. They had to prepare for tests for entering a U.S. college while preparing application materials; or they still attend a regular Chinese high school and had to finish all the required coursework and examinations. Moreover, students expected the agents to contact all necessary personnel in institutions, departments, or admission offices on their behalf and to provide advice on choosing a destination country and college based on their personal interests, academic background, financial capacity, and other personal factors. Students expressed a need for advice on future major career choices and that they would like to receive information regarding visa application (Hagedorn, 2010).

Student services help the transition for many international students; for example, the University of Miami International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS) offers: pre-arrival information, immigration advising for students and scholars in F-1 and J-1 status, employment information and authorization, online tax return preparation system, liaison with sponsoring embassies, government agencies, short-term, small emergency loans, assistance with personal and adjustment problems, and assistance in coping with crises and advocacy. International student recruitment activities have been the subject of considerable controversy, particularly in the United States. The controversy has two chief origins: 1) the many risks to different stakeholders inherent in commission-based international student recruitment. These risks have involved fraud, legal action, and financial damage suffered by students, among other adverse outcomes; and 2) unresolved questions about the propriety of institutions issuing per-capita commissions payments for international student enrollments. One concern about these payments is that, currently, few international students or their parents realize they occur, nor are they aware that the transactional relationships between institutions and agencies often dictate the campuses,
or individual programs, to which they are directed and leads to the next topic (West, 2014).

**Ethical Problems in International Recruitment**

IECs have expanded to the global marketplace to meet the growing demand for support in the admission process, but this has given rise to new potential ethical pitfalls and complicated previously existing challenges in the field as well (Redding, 2013).

There are important questions about how to oversee this growing branch of independent consulting, especially when regulating domestic-based practice has been troubled with challenges. Similar issues plague unregulated professions in this global arena. IECs who are members of professional organizations can serve as an important line of defense for colleges and universities facing an influx of fraudulent applications. However, if parents and students do not know the value of submitting an authentic application and do not understand the implications of submitting falsified information, there will always be unaffiliated IECs ready to take money from them while making unrealistic promises (Redding, 2013).

Additionally, domestic IECs have also faced criticism. They have been described as a rapidly growing, largely unregulated field seeking to serve families bewildered by the admissions gauntlet at selective colleges (Steinberg, 2009). Those who work in this industry are not required to have specialized training, licensure, or experience in the admission world. In an earlier study, William Fitzsimmons, dean of undergraduate admissions at Harvard, explained that IECs are part of a ‘Wild West’ where professional organizations struggle to create the modern-day equivalent of law and order in a field where anyone can claim to have the expertise to support students and there is limited
regulatory power to enforce standards of practice (Redding, 2013). Three U.S.-based professional organizations—National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC), Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA), and Higher Education Consultants Association (HECA)—all strive to uphold certain professional standards among members who work privately with college applicants.

Each organization has standards of entry and requires members to agree to an organization-specific statement of principles of good practice (NACAC, 2014). There are potential sanctions for inappropriate behavior for those who ‘opt-in’ and join these overseeing bodies. However, those who do not meet standards of entry or who choose to work outside of these organizations are free to operate without any regulations in place. In essence, the regulatory power of these groups is truncated by the fact that no one is required to join their ranks (Redding, 2013). Besides the IECs, overseas commercial agencies also provide services to students aspiring to study at colleges and universities in other countries. Independent educational agents are, generally, hired and compensated by the student and their family; thus, they have no formal relationships with colleges or universities.

Meanwhile, commercial recruiters are usually contracted by the college or university, and represent the school in its international student recruitment efforts. The agents may also provide fee-based service to the student and their family as well. According to Redding (2013), “colloquially referred to as double-dipping—represent another vexing ethical issue in the realm of international student recruitment” (p. 215), applies to when both the institutional recruiters and independent agents are charging the applicant. Although there has been an increase in international applicants, educational
agents have been working in the United States for more than three decades (Redding, 2013). The first professional organization to oversee these practitioners, the Independent Educational Consultants Association (IECA), was formed in 1976. Given the rapid expansion of the field, a second organization, Higher Education Consultants Association (HECA) was founded in 1997. In recent years, both professional groups have heralded the coming of a new age in which IECs have gained respect for the important role that they can play in the admission process. In 2012, NACAC's David Hawkins released an article supporting these affirmations, stating that independent consultants are an important part the educational environment of college admission counseling (Hawkins, 2012). Moreover, Scott Hamilton, president of HECA, explained that the increased level of competition among talented applicants, combined with the complexity of the process in general, has led to this increased demand for outside assistance (Adams, 2010). The data from the research supported this assertion in relation to the record high 8.1% increase of international students in the United States nearing the million (Institute of International Education, 2014).

**College Choice Influences on International Chinese Students**

The literature review found various influences that impacted the sequential phases examined in the college choice process for international Chinese students applying to colleges and universities in the United States. Moreover, common themes include parenteral guidance, financial aid/cost, and, as most research indicates, services from independent educational consultants. Education is the means to wisdom and competence according to traditional core beliefs found in Asian cultures incorporating Confucian values (Chen, 2001). The largest number of international students comes to the United
States from the Republic of China as illustrated in Table 2, with more than double the amount of the second-place runner-up India.

**Table 2**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>China</td>
<td>274,439</td>
<td>1,357,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>India</td>
<td>102,673</td>
<td>1,279,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>68,047</td>
<td>50,169,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>53,919</td>
<td>29,940,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>28,304</td>
<td>35,160,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>21,266</td>
<td>23,370,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>19,334</td>
<td>127,400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>16,579</td>
<td>89,760,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>14,779</td>
<td>122,500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>13,286</td>
<td>202,400,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In Asian societies, because the family unit is inseparable from the individual, some parents view their children as extensions of themselves and, consequently, parents are very much involved in the search and choice stages (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In this interdependent and collectivistic context in which a child’s accomplishments reflect more about the worth of the family than the individual, parents take responsibility for their children’s actions (Kim & Hong, 2007). Among Asians, females were twice as
likely to submit to paternal influence in where they attend college and the type of graduate school preferred (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002). Asian students and their parents frequently cited institutional prestige as the most important factor in college selection, while Caucasian students and their parents were much more concerned with their son/daughter’s happiness with the college than its academic reputation. Asian students were also much more likely than white students to feel that their parents have significant influence in their choice of college, and indicated they had little influence in the selection process (Rajapaksa, & Dundes, 2002). In addition, Hagedorn found students may not intend to use an agent, but their parents urged them to use one or, in some cases the parents themselves hired an agent without informing the student, in the pre-dispositional stage (Hagedorn, 2010). One student complained that he did not know his parents had asked an agent to apply to universities on his behalf until he arrived at the university in the United States where he personally had applied to attend.

According to Hagedorn (2010), the level of preparation and assistance provided by agents showed that over 72% indicated that the agent helped them select the best-fit country and/or college. Approximately 66% of students indicated that agents assisted them in preparing their application materials (Hagedorn, 2010). Still, students represented and assisted by agents were subsequently better prepared than those who were independent, with 62% of students admitting that their agents initiated communication with the institution(s), department(s), guidance counselor(s), professor(s), and/or college recruiter(s), and peer(s) (Hagedorn, 2010). During the past decade, China has experienced a rapid growth in the number of educational agents, such that approximately 400 agents are registered there (The Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of
China, 2010). Many agents provide “one-stop” style services, including choosing an institution, preparing for language tests, preparing application materials, and assisting in the preparation and scheduling of the visa interview (Zhang, 2011).

Organizations and Educational Agents for International Chinese Students

Since students and parents are not always able to determine whether they have received exceptional or substandard service, agent’s self-regulation within professional associations or among peers is critical. While the United States does not have a government-sanctioned list of recruitment agencies, some countries do, experts say (U.S. News & World Report, 2015). Recommendations are to use agencies that are vetted by the government or some organization that is trustworthy, in China, they have government-regulated agencies there. This study also suggests that students should only use agents accredited by the China Ministry of Education, as reported by the participants, and should be aware of what an agent can do and cannot do, regardless of advertisements.

BOSSA, The Beijing Overseas Study Service Association, was founded in 2004 in affiliation with Chinese governmental authorities. Now BOSSA has grown to 150+ agency members in Beijing and throughout greater China. China Overseas Study Service Alliance (COSSA) and BOSSA are China's distinctive associations for the professional practice of Chinese student recruitment.

They are membership-based organizations made up of study abroad agencies, education agents and institutions. BOSSA's purpose is to train, guide, and evaluate education agencies according to both governmental policies and internationalized industry standards. BOSSA and COSSA agency members account for a majority of all outbound Chinese student exchanges in the world. The BOSSA International Members
Association assists foreign institutions and education service providers with their marketing, student recruitment, and business needs in China. The CEAC (China Education Agent Course) professional training diploma program and the BOSSA Authentication Center, which verifies student documents with the Ministry of Education.

This study explored the relationship between students and educational agencies and provided an opportunity to examine the opening research of college application experiences with an agent’s assistance, specific to the international students from China.

The Beijing Institute of Service Industry Association was established in 2004, is registered in the Beijing Municipal Civil Affairs Department of non-profit nature of the independent corporate organizations, and is by far the country's largest local service industry organizations, the Ministry of Education, the Beijing Municipal Education Commission guide. The purpose of the association is to honor the integrity of services, the development of industry standards, standardize industry behavior, integration of industry resources, and safeguarding the interests of members of the service market.

**Barriers for International Chinese Students Access to Higher Education**

*Student F-1 Visas*

International students come here to learn, to experience a different culture, and to get to know other international students. In essence, going to school with an international student is an invaluable experience of cultural understanding and respect. Applying for an international student F-1 Visa (Academic Student) was a rampant barrier for Chinese students that decided to study in the United States. Although Chinese students with completed materials are likely to be awarded a student visa, participants from China
expressed their concerns and regard to applying for a visa as a huge challenge and feel it is just so unpredictable.

**College Readiness**

Preparation of application materials was also reported by individual applicants as a difficult and complicated part in the process including the common practice of writing a personal statement. Likewise, Chinese students felt they had little to write about themselves due to lack of opportunities to explore their personal interests or to participate in extracurricular activities when studying in middle school and high school in China (Hagedorn, 2010). Research shows preparing personal statements could be extremely overwhelming especially when one applied for multiple universities individually. Students who did not use agents reported that they were frustrated with the process of writing and rewriting. Moreover, all students interviewed, including ones assisted by agents, expressed their concerns regarding choosing a university and/or a major. They were cautious about their decision and hoped to receive professional advice from a knowledgeable source since they were less familiar with American higher education institutions or institutions in other foreign countries.

**Ethical Dilemmas**

Quality control, misrepresentation, conflicts of interest, and student enrollment-based compensation were also reported as problems in agent recruitment practice (NACAC, 2010). There is strong evidence that third-party agents create fraudulent documents including transcripts, letters of recommendation, and application essays to facilitate their clients' admissions to U.S. institutions (Zhang, 2011). The use of third-party recruiters shifts the economic cost from institutions to families as these agents...
charge significant fees to international students and their families for their advice and support in navigating this complicated system (Redding, 2013). For example, agents can provide English language training or TOEFL test preparation to students, in some cases for additional fees of $1,000 or $2,000 (Zhang, 2011). Institutions are required to make significant financial investments in campus infrastructure to maintain or expand international student recruitment, as retaining students who may be unqualified can pose challenges (Redden, 2010). Third-party agents often do not find the “best fit” institution for their clients, increasing the risk of cultural and academic adjustment issues for international students which might help mitigate issues of adjustment (Redden, 2010).

Acculturation and Post 9/11 Policies in Higher Education

Evaluations of the U.S. Patriot Act of 2001 have assisted by determining which policies are necessary to eliminate terrorism in the United States, and which policies simply inhibit the influx of international students without accomplishing this goal. Further research also analyzed the amount of culture and diversity (with respect to scholars, scientists, and researchers) the United States may lose in the future due to the broad policies contained in the Patriot Act. Potential economic loss to American universities and to the U.S. economy, and the potential break down of diplomatic ties, if international students opt to study in countries other than the United States (Johnson, 2003). After June of 2002, all American embassies and consulates must have a written approval from Washington before issuing any visa. This unprecedented scrutiny of visas by the State Department has complicated the lives of thousands of foreign students (Johnson, 2003). Moreover, a study in the University of Toledo demonstrated many respondents did not feel that people understood their culture (Sherry, 2010).
Globalization and Internationalization

Globalization and the evolution of internationalization have caused dramatic changes in the character and functions of higher education in most countries around the world. However, the impacts of globalization on universities are not uniform even though similar business-like practices have been adopted to cope with competition in the global marketplace. When it came to identifying specific areas where the university could improve its response to the cultural needs of international students, some respondents provided very direct criticisms. For instance, one female student from the Philippines commented “Muslim students comprise a big population of international students and their religious concerns are very poorly addressed,” and similarly, a male from Saudi Arabia said that “Cultural and religious holidays almost go unnoticed like during Ramadan” (Sherry, 2010, p. 39). By experiencing new cultures, students develop a higher understanding and tolerance for cultural differences. Unfortunately, the new immigration policies geared toward foreign students will adversely affect the importance of cultural diversity in our society; academic officials stated that some students simply gave up and chose to attend universities in other countries (Sherry, 2010).

Need for Assistance

Another study found that 60% of Chinese students who were asked reported that they had used agents when they applied to U.S. colleges. The students were asked to provide the top three reasons that led them to use an agent (Zhang, 2011). The most popular reason, cited by 72 percent of agent-assisted students, was little knowledge regarding the college application process. Lack of knowledge in visa application and limited knowledge about the American higher education institutions were reported
respectively as the second and the third important reason. Nearly 40 percent of agent-assisted respondents indicated that they felt they were more likely to be accepted by the university if they applied with assistance of an agent (Zhang, 2011). A study conducted in 2009 with the National Research Center for College and University Admissions (NRCCUA), reported that 26 percent of ‘high-achieving students’ in the United States work with educational agents, this is three times higher than earlier estimates (Jasiewicz, 2010).

**Conclusion**

The literature presented a limited representation of the students from the Republic of China who choose to attend college in the United States, and the most prominent influencers in their college choice process. A review of the literature found that third-party recruitment of international students among U.S. colleges and universities is understudied, and this study begins to address that gap. Relatively, the United States lags behind other countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia in their adoption and regulation of agency-based recruitment in higher education (Altbach, 2004). In an effort to further examine international student experiences, it is important to emphasize that college choice influencers and processes have been used to drive agency-based recruitment, thus, contributing to its growth within the United States.
Chapter III

Methods

This study uses a qualitative research design approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006) where in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews were used as the primary source of data collection. According to Braun and Clarke, the data can be collected through observation, conversation, and, in this case, interviews. The analytic approach used was thematic analysis. A qualitative methodology was considered appropriate given the research questions posed and the research focus on exploring themes found in the search phase of the college choice process of international Chinese undergraduate students. This study involves data collection in the form of interviewing international students, and examining the recruitment and college choice model through a thematic analysis.

Qualitative researchers seek organic data quality, which consists of lengthy, meticulous narrative reports, as opposed to numeric statistical results (Creswell, 2013). When collecting data for a qualitative study, there are a few strategies that may be implemented to enhance the quality of the data retrieved. The first of these strategies would be to impart in-depth, open-ended questions in order to elicit thorough data from participants, with adequate context to be interpretable (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). Constant comparison is the heart of the process with comparing interview to interview and themes emerges prompting the comparison of data, and the results of this comparison are written from evaluation of transcriptions and initial coding to then identify categories (themes or variables) and their properties (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I transcribed the participant interviews that led to the coding process implemented as enumerated below (Saldaña, 2009). Precoding is highlighting, bolding, underlining, etc. the keywords or
phrases in the text that stand out upon an initial read. The following represents general steps in the process:

1. Decide which approach is most relevant. I used Saldaña’s recommendation of a three-column approach: (i) Raw Data, (ii) Preliminary Codes, (iii) Final Code in preliminary jottings
2. Start coding
3. Create a start list of codes
4. Generate categories (pattern codes)
5. Test these categories against new data (start with contrasting data early on)
6. Write about categories/pattern codes in a memo to explain their significance

In the ensuing sections, I describe the specific steps and procedures in more detail to bring greater depth to each of the steps in the coding process.

*Thematic Analysis*

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, it goes further, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). Qualitative approaches can be incredibly diverse and complex; and some researchers consider thematic analysis to be used as a foundational method for qualitative analysis (Holloway & Todres, 2003). Because of the focus of the study thematic analysis is used as a method autonomously (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as it has been used prior in literature within the field of higher education. I contend, therefore, that thematic analysis fit this study well with the method outlined by the authors of the method (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
In general, thematic analysis involves the searching across a data set of codes, in this case interviews to find repeated patterns of meaning; however, the exact form and product of thematic analysis varies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, coding is not just labeling, it is linking, and qualitative codes are essence-capturing and essential elements of the research story that, when clustered together according to similarity and regularity (a pattern), they actively facilitate the development of categories and thus analysis of their connections (Saldaña, 2009). Coding filters differ by the investigator and are determined by the researcher’s lens, and to codify is to arrange things in a systematic order, to make something part of a system or classification, to categorize, from codes to categories, categories can be broken down into subcategories, which are supported by codes (Saldaña, 2009).

**Categories**

A category is an assortment of comparable data sorted together in a location, and this prearrangement allows researchers to identify and describe the characteristics of the category (Morse, 2008); however, a category may appear at one part of a process, or appear in different forms in different stages, while a theme travels through the data. For example, the following two categories were determined in the coding and theme analysis: familial and related influences in the predisposition stage without agents, and academic and personal concerns related to professional advising with educational agents in the search stage. This study used research questions to discover experiences of the college search phase, and thinking interpretively I used categories that contributed to the development of the major themes through analytic strategies and content evaluation. Additional research also explains how some qualitative researchers aimed to discover the
point in data collection and analysis when new data does not alter themes in the
codebook; and further contended that their method of choice such as discourse analysis or
narrative inquiry using a small number of interviews (Guest & Johnson, 2006). What was
important to me was consistency in the coding and theme analysis. There are various
agreements for representing prevalence in thematic, and other qualitative analysis, which
does not provide a quantified measure for instance: the majority of participants (Braun &
Clarke, 2006). Such descriptors work verbally to suggest a theme really existed in the
data, and to convince the audience the researcher is reporting truthfully about the data.

Theoretical and Conceptual Model

According to the College Choice Model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), students
move toward an increased understanding of their educational options and are influenced
by individual and organizational factors as they progress through to enrollment. The
model is comprised of three phases: Predisposition Stage, Search Stage, and the Choice
Stage. As previously trained in human subjects’ research by the National Institutes of
Health, I approached the coding through the lens of an observational noninterventionist,
and practice the same form of transcript abstraction that I have performed in past studies
that required and adhered to strict non-bias data collection and analysis of the search
stage. Furthermore, the next chapter moves from codes and categories to theories;
theories are similar to key assertions that move from the particular to the general using
suggestion, asserting that what happened in this particular context could occur in other
similar contexts, or by predicting patterns that could occur in other contexts (Saldaña,
2009).
Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research

The purpose of trustworthiness in qualitative research is to support the argument that the inquiry’s results are worth acknowledging as important and vital in contemporary research. Trustworthiness has established itself to be a critical perception as it permits investigators to explain the advantages of qualitative terms outside of the parameters which are generally used in quantitative research. This concept is different from the typical experimental precedent of attempting to show validity, soundness, and significance (Shenton, 2004). Consequently, the ideas of generalizability, internal validity, reliability, and objectivity are reconsidered in qualitative terms. These substitute terms include transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. In basic terms, trustworthiness refers to as the way in which qualitative research workers make sure that transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability are evident in their study (Guba, 1981). Even though many critics are unwilling to accept the trustworthiness of research, frameworks for ensuring rigor have been around for several years. Guba’s constructs, in particular, have won considerable favor (Shenton, 2004).

Trustworthiness in qualitative research is frequently questioned by positivists, possibly because their ideas of validity and reliability cannot be addressed in the same way in naturalistic work. Nevertheless, several writers on research methods, notably Shenton, have demonstrated how qualitative researchers can incorporate measures that deal with these issues. However, many naturalistic investigators have favored to use different terminology to distance themselves from the positivist standard (Shenton, 2004). One such author has been Guba, who proposes four criteria that he believes should be considered by qualitative researchers in pursuit of a trustworthy study. By addressing
similar issues, Guba’s constructs correspond to the criteria employed by the positivist investigator (Guba, 1981):

a) Credibility (in preference to internal validity);

b) Transferability (in preference to external validity/generalizability);

c) Dependability (in preference to reliability);

d) Confirmability (in preference to objectivity).

According to Guba, trustworthiness has aspects which are relevant to both quantitative and qualitative studies. Truth value questions if the investigator has established confidence in the truth of the results for the topics or informants and the context in which the research was undertaken. It determines how confident the investigator is with the truth of the findings based on the research design, informants, and context. Truth value is commonly acquired from the discovery of human experiences as they are lived and perceived by informants. Shenton utilizes Guba’s framework in qualitative research examining quality criterion and the possible provision made by researcher. Credibility means the concept of internal consistency, where the core issue is how we make sure objectivity in the research process and the way we communicate to other people that we have done so (Shenton, 2004). Applicability is defined as the degree to which the findings can apply to other contexts and settings or with other groups; it is the capacity to generalize from the findings to greater populations (Shenton, 2004). Guba introduced the next perspective on applicability in qualitative research by referring to fittingness, or transferability.

Transferability means the level to which the audience can generalize the results of a research to her or his own context. It is done when the investigator gives adequate
information about the self, the researcher as instrument, as well as the research context, processes, members, and researcher-participant connections to make it possible for the reader to decide how the findings may transfer (Guba, 1981). Transferability in qualitative research is more the responsibility of the individual seeking to transfer the findings to a different situation or population than that of the investigator of the initial study. Consistency of the data means whether the conclusions would be consistent if the inquiry were repeated with the same subject matter or in a similar context. Consistency is defined in terms of dependability in qualitative research. Dependability relates to the primary challenge that the way in which a research is carried out needs to be consistent across time, researchers, and analysis techniques (Shenton, 2004). The procedure by which results are produced must be explicit and repeatable whenever possible. I planned to achieve this by means of methodically monitoring the emerging research design and through keeping an audit track, which can essentially be: an in-depth sequence of events of research activities and processes, influences on the data collection and analysis, emerging themes, classifications, and analytic memos (Saldaña, 2009).

Next, neutrality can be defined as the degree to which the results are a function solely of the informants and conditions of the research and not of other biases, motivations, and views (Shenton, 2004). Guba suggested that confirmability be the criterion of neutrality. Confirmability in qualitative research is founded on the acknowledgment that research is never objective. It deals with the main issue that findings should signify, as far as possible, the specific situation being investigated as opposed to the beliefs, pet theories, or biases of the researcher (Guba, 1981). In an effort to remove bias, there is a noninterventionist approach to the function and adaptation in
how qualitative researchers consider data quality. It is according to the perspective that the integrity of results is based on the data and that the investigator must properly tie together the data, analytic processes, and findings in a manner that the reader is in a position to confirm the adequacy of the findings. Yet again, although as recently as the mid-1990s educational research authors wrote that the field of qualitative inquiry was still emerging and being defined, Guba’s constructs have been accepted by many (Shenton, 2004). Shenton considered the criteria in detail and suggests provisions that the qualitative researcher may employ to meet them. The strategies advocated are based on the experience gained by Shenton when undertaking a qualitative Ph.D. study devoted to the information-seeking behavior of participants; the basic tenets of this work is illustrated in Table 3.
Table 3

Provisions that may be made by a Qualitative Researcher Wishing to address Guba’s Four Criteria for Trustworthiness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quality criterion possible provision made by researcher:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Credibility</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Iterative questioning in data collection dialogues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use of “reflective commentary”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Description of background, qualifications, and experience of the researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Thick description of phenomenon under scrutiny</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Examination of previous research to frame findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transferability</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provision of background data to establish context of study and detailed description of phenomenon in question to allow comparisons to be made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dependability</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Employment of “overlapping methods”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In-depth methodological description to allow study to be repeated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confirmability</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Admission of researcher’s beliefs and assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Recognition of shortcomings in study’s methods and their potential effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In-depth methodological description to allow integrity of research results to be scrutinized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Questions

The purpose of the research is to explore the experience international Chinese undergraduate students have in the college search process. Consequently, I asked the following research questions:

1. *What influencers do undergraduate international Chinese students experience in the predisposition stage of their college search?*

2. *What influencers do undergraduate international Chinese students experience in the college search stage while working with educational agents?*

A second purpose of this research is to better understand the influential factors in the College Choice Model’s predisposition and search phases for the specified population. For example, what is the role of educational agents, who assist students applying in the United States? This goal is designed to better understand the associated benefits and problems the students experience within the college search process. An improved understanding of the application process and the influence these factors have in directing the process of admission for Chinese students is important. For instance, in the academic year 2009–10, China’s student population in the United States surpassed that of India, making China the country sending the most students to the United States. That is, roughly twenty percent of the America’s international students come from China (Institute of International Education, 2010). Additionally, many U.S. colleges have experienced a rapid increase in Chinese undergraduate enrollment in recent years (Zhang, 2011). According to data collected by Open Doors (Institute of International Education, 2014), the ten states with the highest concentration of international students were (in descending order): California, New York, Texas, Massachusetts, Illinois, Pennsylvania,
Florida, Ohio, Michigan, and Indiana. The top three United States host institutions were New York University, University of Southern California, and University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Institute of International Education, 2014).

**Research Site**

The University of Miami, founded in 1925, is a large private research university, classified as “very high research activity” by the Carnegie Foundation for Teaching, situated in a suburban area of Coral Gables within the major metropolitan city of Miami (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2015). It has a total undergraduate enrollment of 11,273, its setting is suburban, and the campus size is 239 acres. It utilizes a semester-based academic calendar. University of Miami's ranking in the 2016 edition of Best Colleges, National Universities category was 44th and current tuition and fees are $47,004 (U.S. News & World Report, 2016). On campus, more than 2,400 students are involved in more than 30 fraternities and sororities. Students can also choose from more than 250 clubs and organizations to join. Freshmen are not required to live on campus, but many opt to live in the school’s five residential colleges. The university race and ethnicity demographics are: 49.6% White, 26.3% Hispanic/Latino, 9.1% Black/African-American, 6.4% Asian, 0.1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 3.6% Multi-race (not Hispanic/Latino), 0.0% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 4.9% Unknown; and 13.6% of the student body is composed of international students (International Admissions Office - University of Miami. Retrieved 2016).

The University of Miami had more than 1,800 international students registered for the 2014-2015 school year, and the foreign influence on campus is larger than ever with the number of undergraduate applicants from abroad increasing each year, and given
researcher access to the institutional resources associated with the Office of International Admissions and the significant number of international students represented within the undergraduate student population at the University of Miami, it is important to study this student population to better understand how institutions might better assist this student subpopulation (University of Miami, 2015). The University of Miami offers a variety of student services including non-remedial tutoring, women's center, placement service, day care, health service, and health insurance. University of Miami also offers campus safety and security services like 24-hour foot and vehicle patrols, late night transport/escort service, 24-hour emergency telephones, lighted pathways/sidewalks, student patrols, and controlled dormitory access (International Admissions Office - University of Miami. Retrieved 2016).

**Research Participants**

Beginning procedures of coding in thematic analysis involve implementing steps after interviewees are selected from the pool of potential candidates (subjects who accepted invitations to participate). I acquired the assistance from the admissions International Office and university staff in the recruitment of research participants. In collaboration, the Office of International Admissions and staff, or the research team, sent out an invitation email to all registered international undergraduate Chinese students for the fall 2016 semester, and the selection will be of the first subjects to respond that fit the definition of the subjects for the study. The international admissions office described different types of educational agents, sometimes referred as a representative or consultant. In this study, an education agent is defined but not limited to a person, company, or an organization that provides services to students seeking to study and earn
a degree abroad. Further, research is needed to explore the roles that agents play in assisting students. Participants in the study met the criteria of having been assisted by an educational agent; however, there are different categories of option plans using service packages with students who: a) use of the entire service package where agents helped them with their entire college application process, from selecting an institution to preparing Visa interview questions; b) use partial services where they used an agent’s services for only the most challenging parts in the application process; and c) use independent preparation but also using agents as a safeguard. The details of the package plan selected by the students was not provided by the university. The students or their parents wanted to make sure that at the end of process, the students at least could receive one admission letter (Hagedorn, 2010).

Sampling

This exploratory study initially involved a broader spectrum of sampling; however, the focus was refined after careful consideration of variables were introduced that influenced the participant pool. The study was narrowed down by the theoretical College Choice Model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987), and the criteria developed for the participants further constricted the selection process to a smaller sample size of eligible participants. For example, I was only interested in the experiences of international students considering studying in the United States. Then, I narrowed the focus further to include only undergraduate students excluding graduate and professional students. Finally, I decided to examine only those of Chinese nationality or origins. This process of narrowing and focusing to a very specific subpopulation or student demographic ensures the analyses will tell a story of the subpopulation reducing the need for a large sample of
study participants. Five international Chinese undergraduate students, assisted by educational agents during their college application process, were selected from the applicant pool for interview with the assistance from the university’s International Admissions Office and staff. Participants were International Undergraduate Students from the Republic of China enrolled in fall 2016 courses at the University of Miami. The methodology involved is qualitative employing open-ended exploration of people’s words, thoughts, actions, and intentions (Judd et al., 1991). Therefore, the respondents provided consent and were fully-briefed of the aims of the research and its significance in helping to improve the understanding of international Chinese undergraduate students in the college search process. Moreover, Thematic Analysis is likely to entail a much smaller sample size because of the fine-grained analysis that is often involved, and it is simply not necessary to generate a large corpus of data for such research (Guest & Johnson, 2006).

**Data Collection Procedures**

The data collection and recruitment methods consisted of the following steps:

- Five students were recruited by email with assistance from the Office of International Admissions and university staff.

- Participants were International Undergraduate Students from the Republic of China enrolled in courses during the fall 2016 semester at the University of Miami.
• The Office of International Admission provided researchers the contact information of the selected participants meeting criteria to be interviewed. The research team contacted and scheduled the interviews.

• Please refer to recruitment email in Appendix C for information regarding the recruitment procedures used. No financial or other inducements were used to generate participation in the investigation.

Five semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the college search process undertaken by international Chinese undergraduate students while using an educational agent. The number of interviews depends on the analytic level to which the researcher aspires as well as these purposes (Guest & Johnson, 2006). To protect the confidentiality of participants, all interviewees’ names were assigned generic identification number during the analysis stage. During the dissertation write-up phase, these numbers were changed to pseudonyms to make chapters four and five more accessible.

This qualitative research investigation places emphasis on the researcher being unassuming and allowing a natural flow of progression without introducing bias to the data collection of the phenomenon studied (Creswell, 2013). Prominence in qualitative research data is on studies being performed in depth, over an analysis using coding to capture theme emerging conclusions (Boyatzis, 1998). Subsequent to the ethical debate surrounding the use of agents historically and despite recent shifts in the perceptions of educational practitioners, the research interview adhered to current research conventions regarding confidentiality which is intended to help participants feel comfortable relating
their experiences and perceptions. Students were recruited through a collaboration of the University of Miami’s Office of International Admissions, staff, and research team. Each interview lasted approximately an hour in length. The interviews were guided, largely, by a series of both open-ended and probing questions. Interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim by the researcher.

**Interview Protocol and Probing Questions**

Qualitative research using interviews involve a series of questions, and there is a need to be clear about the relationship between the research questions and the interview questions; moreover, the initial focus included the research questions that drive the study and the interview usually utilizes open-ended questions in order to collect data (Boyatzis, 1998). Subsequently, thematic analysis involves the searching across the data, in this case a number of interviews, to find repeated patterns of meaning while still using the research questions to drive the study. The exact products of thematic analysis can vary; however, it is important that the protocol questions outlined below are used to start the interview to confirm eligibility for the purpose of using the interviews for the thematic analysis later (Boyatzis, 1998). See Appendix A for a detailed interview protocol of interview questions used in the semi-structured interviews.

**Transcriptions**

Time spent in transcribing and familiarizing oneself with the data is necessary, as it informs analysis in the early stages of analysis, and develops a far more thorough understanding of the data through having transcribed it. Researchers must find ways to effectively transcribe verbally captured data from interviews in order to maintain a high level of data quality for analysis. The data was transcribed into written form using
Dragon NaturallySpeaking Basics, which is an easy-to-use speech recognition software (www.nuance.com/Dragon) (Retrieved 2016). Coding procedures in qualitative research consists of searching for the observed issue again in the same or similar words in later interviews or within the same interview. This process is called coding and the short descriptor phrase is a code (Creswell, 2013). A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data, and the process is imperative to properly capture themes or patterns (Saldaña, 2009). As a researcher, I wanted to be intentionally thorough, so (Recoding and Re-Categorizing) coding was performed more than once, and as such qualitative inquiry demands meticulous attention to language and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and meanings of human experience (Saldaña, 2009).

*Analytic Memo/Reflective Commentary*

It is important to apply the most effective methods of analysis in qualitative research practice such as reflective commentary; a procedure that ensures greater trustworthiness in the qualitative research implemented. According to Saldaña’s manual analytic memos employed by researchers in qualitative studies (Shenton, 2004), and reflective commentaries may create the platform for the following kinds of understanding:

1. Self-knowledge: Is what a writer understands about themselves as researchers, illustrated in this chapter under researcher as an instrument.

2. Content knowledge: Is what writers understand about the subjects and texts they are writing about, in this case as a higher education administrator and my experience working
with international students.

3. Task knowledge: Is what writers understand about the purpose, form, and likely audience for this particular writing genre, etc., again as an administrator in higher education working for an HSI (Hispanic-serving institution) with a diverse student population at Florida International University.

4. Process knowledge: Is what writers understand about how writing gets made in the methods section here, and the qualitative task involved with analysis.

5. Judgment: Is what writers understand about effective writing again linked to the integrity of the analysis in the study.

**Coding**

Firstly, the common definition of a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data; just as a title represents and captures a book or film or poem’s primary content and essence, so does a code represent and capture a datum’s primary content and essence (Saldaña, 2009).

According to Guest and Johnson, it is worth bearing in mind that not all cases can be presented in the final presentation of the work. The data can consist of interview transcripts such as in this study or other formats including participant observation field notes, journals, documents, literature, artifacts, photographs, video, websites, e-mail correspondence, and the like (Glaser, 1992).

Coding examples includes decoding which is reflecting on the data to figure out its essence, and encoding which entails identifying and labeling with a code. Next challenge is what should be coded. Some researchers advocate everything and anything
as a data source, as in this study, and others advocate only the essential; however, according to Saldaña, experienced researchers should code the essential because they are then able to feel which data are important and relevant for coding purposes (Saldaña, 2009). The mechanics of coding involve the way we format our coding and our documents is a choice and therefore influences the data analysis. As the researcher, we are selecting where an essential break occurs, which might be different for someone else and the number of suggested codes and themes varies among researchers (Saldaña, 2009).

Initial coding is used in this study by the forming of primary categories of information about the phenomenon being studied from the data gathered; this is the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data (Glaser, 1992). Accordingly, coding is not a precise science; it is primarily an interpretive act. Also, it is necessary to be aware that a code can sometimes summarize or condense data, not simply reduce it, and consider your approach to qualitative inquiry (e.g., case study, ethnographic, phenomenological) and ontological, epistemological, and methodological issues that affect your coding decisions (Creswell, 2013). The introductory examples above were kept purposely simple and direct. Qualitative codes are used for netting core concepts and vital features of the narrative story that is clustered together according to a set of patterns or themes, they anecdotally assist the development of categories and their connections as a product of an analysis (Saldaña, 2009).

The portion of data to be coded during first cycle coding processes can range in magnitude from a single word to a full sentence to an entire page of text to a stream of moving images. In the second cycle coding processes, the portions coded can be the exact same units, longer passages of text, and even a reconfiguration of the codes themselves
developed thus far. Pattern characteristics include: similarity (occurrences happening the same way), difference (they happen in surely altered ways), frequency (they happen repeatedly or rarely), sequence (they happen in a specific order), and correspondence (they happen in relation to other happenings or occasions), and causation (cause and effect principles) (Saldaña, 2009). Classification reasoning plus your tacit and intuitive senses to determine which data look or feel alike when grouping them together (Guba, 1981). Additionally, a code and theme are different, a theme is an outcome of coding, categorization, and analytic reflection, not something that is, in itself, coded (Saldaña, 2009).

There are two forms of coding approaches: 1) Manual and 2) Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) coding. I considered QDA Miner, which is a widely-used software for qualitative research, http://provalisresearch.com/products/qualitative-data-analysis-software/freeware/#sthash.YsQnQduy.dpuf; however, I did not utilize it for data analysis. Manual is recommended for novice researchers and simple research projects; meanwhile, coding electronically is recommended once experienced at coding and for complex research projects involving larger samples of research participants (Saldaña, 2009). The data exploration scheme of coding is the practice of assigning a label to a section of data, such as an interview transcript, using a word or short phrase taken from that section of the data (Glaser, 1992).

The selection of utilizing a manual guide in Saldaña’s coding manual, was to best reflect on and focus on emergent patterns, categories, themes, and concepts in recognizing that individual codes eventually become part of a broader scheme of
classification (Saldaña, 2009). Reflection on how the codes tentatively get placed into categories and/or subcategories, suggest a theme, or evoke a higher-level concept, created a sense of order in the post-coding and pre-writing analysis (Saldaña, 2009). The post-coding and pre-writing analysis evokes the following phases: focusing on strategies (code weaving), rising above the data (from codes to themes), ordering and reordering (tabletop categories), and assistance from others (shop talking) (Saldaña, 2009).

**Analysis: Coding and Themes**

*Rationale for Thematic Analysis*

Themes or patterns within data can be identified in different ways in thematic analysis; however, I chose to use the theoretical, deductive top-down way (Boyatzis, 1998). Other approaches may have the themes identified strongly linked to the data themselves, as such, this form of thematic analysis bears some similarity to content analysis. In the inductive approach, if the data have been collected specifically for the research, via interview or focus group, the themes identified may bear little relationship to the specific question that were asked of the participants. They would also not be driven by the researcher’s theoretical interest in the area or topic. Deductive analysis is therefore a process of coding the data within the pre-existing theory frame, or the researcher’s analytic preconceptions, in this case the College Choice Model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In this sense, this form of thematic analysis is deductively driven.

Nonetheless, researchers cannot free themselves of their theoretical and epistemological commitments, and data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In contrast, a theoretical thematic analysis would tend to be driven by the research questions, and is thus more explicitly analyst-driven rather than
data-driven. This form of thematic analysis tends to provide a more detailed analysis of the students’ experiences using the researching questions as a guide.

**Researcher as Instrument**

I am a middle-aged Hispanic male, and an administrator of student services working for Florida International University, who spoke to young, approximately 18-20 years-old, Asian students. I have worked with several international students in both undergraduate and graduate programs within a diverse student composition where 7% of FIU students are international students, and of these the most prevalent countries of origin were: China (20%), India (13%), Jamaica (10%), Venezuela (6%), Colombia (5%), and Trinidad and Tobago (4%), (International Admissions Office – Florida International University. Retrieved 2016). Subsequently, my interest piqued when I was involved with their admissions process. In operating with the international students’ application phase, I was motivated to learn more about the experiences these students had to better understand their college choice stages (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

I believe it is imperative to address the influx of international students seeking their education in U.S. colleges and universities (Institute of International Education, 2014). I used a semi-structured interview approach to answer the research questions for this study. To facilitate the interviewing procedure, and to ensure the collection of rich data, the interviews were also transcribed, categorized, and then used to identify and analyze the respondents’ perceptions and points of view. A thematic analysis using a semi-structured interview approach allows the use of pre-determined questions developed from a College Choice Model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Boyatzis, 1998). The
procedure allows for the use of probes and follow-up questions depending upon how the participants answer the questions and the information they choose to share.

**Data Analysis Procedures Summary**

Employing the College Choice Model as a framework in this study, thematic analysis was tasked to generate greater understanding of the search process international Chinese undergraduates experience when working with educational agents (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). Once interviews were completed, I transcribed all interviews using Dragon NaturallySpeaking Basics is easy-to-use speech recognition software. I emerged myself into the data and read and reread all transcripts so that I may become familiar as possible with the content. During this phase, any initial thoughts and ideas were noted. I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) recommendations to transcribe the interviews myself to familiarize myself with the data in the first phase of analysis. Initial codes were generated with the use of a qualitative data reference guide in Saldaña’s coding manual (2009).

All data extracts were coded by lumping data, as opposed to using a line-by-line approach and allowed for coding for the research questions being addressed in the study. Precoding is highlighting, bolding, underlining, or identifying keywords or phrases in the text that stand out upon an initial read, and Saldaña recommends a three-column approach: (1) Raw Data, (2) Preliminary Codes, and (3) Final Code in preliminary jottings, while keeping analytic memos also utilized in this study as provision by researcher for Guba’s credibility criterion (Saldaña, 2009). Following recommendations from my coding manual, I began writing reflective memos on the data extracts following the initial coding and that gave way to additional codes that I had not originally identified.
in the initially. The manual also promotes that writing memos help facilitate coding by allowing the researcher to put all their thoughts about the process, themes, potential sub-themes, and participants in writing to lead to a greater understanding and interpretation of data (Saldana, 2009).

The original coding list was significantly reduced into categories after the rigorous riddling, marking of text, cutting, and sorting through identifying quotes/expressions from the transcripts (Guba, 1981). Phase three involved identifying data extracts relevant to each potential theme. As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), the data was coded for as many themes and patterns as possible, ensuring that data surrounding the code is also collected. I, then, drafted and used concept maps manually to begin examination of the relationship between codes, prominent themes, and sub-themes associated with the codes and data extracts. Following the examination of the concept maps and memos I wrote during the first coding phase, I further condensed the categories and codes in each, resulting in a set of candidate themes. I reviewed the candidate themes in phase four of the analysis by rereading all interview transcripts to ensure that the candidate themes fit with my data. Then, I manually condensed candidate themes by reviewing relevant data extracts’ and themes’ connection to each other through a conceptual map. This resulted in two main themes and four sub-themes. Phase five was focused on defining and naming themes. I reviewed data extracts to begin organizing them into a clear narrative of each theme and sub-theme.

Finally, I conducted an analysis of the qualitative data in this study and coded to help to identify emergent themes of student’s experiences that influenced their choices of international education in the United States. After I organized the data extracts and
narratives of each theme, I shaped a report of my thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method utilizing initial coding and the process of discovering patterns applying the constant-comparative method, and once all relevant concepts are identified, the detection of the relationships between concepts resulted in a conceptual framework representing the relationship between the themes and the research purpose (Guest & Johnson, 2006).
Chapter IV

Results

This qualitative research study utilized thematic analysis to describe the experiences of undergraduate International Chinese students pursuing higher education in the United States (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I employed Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) College Choice Model to assess the experiences students encountered attending a research university in South Florida while navigating through the college choice process and using an educational agent. In qualitative studies, the number of interviews can depend on the analytic level to which the researcher aspires as well as their purposes (Guest & Johnson, 2006). This study used five semi-structured interviews to better understand the influencers of international Chinese undergraduate students experienced during the college choice process, including their final decision to study abroad in the United States. I collected data through semi-structured interviews and then began transcription.

Once transcription was complete, I checked the transcripts against the audio-recorded interviews for accuracy per the criteria for thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Then, I began coding the data, making sure to complete a comprehensive coding process by continuing to immerse myself in the data. Following the initial coding process, the code list was revised and consolidated. Concept maps were then created, followed by the review and further consolidation of candidate themes. I reviewed and analyzed participant statements to develop categories that would later link to the themes. Using the categories and research questions, I identified themes consistent with participants’ responses to their college choice experiences and the type of
educational agent assistance they received. This exploration used research questions to
discover experiences of the college search phase. Students were recruited through a
collaboration of the University of Miami’s Office of International Admissions, staff, and
research team. As a result, data collection was completed, and all interviews were
transcribed to conduct a thematic analysis with the data.

Finally, themes were defined and refined to begin a detailed analysis of the
findings as related to the research questions. This study was guided by two research
questions:

1. *What influencers do undergraduate international Chinese students experience in
   the predisposition stage of their college search?*

2. *What influencers do undergraduate international Chinese students experience in
   the college search stage while working with educational agents?*

This chapter outlines the findings of data collected through interviews, which
were conducted over a period of three months of all five participants. All study
participants identified as undergraduate International Chinese students enrolled in a large,
public research university in South Florida. The purpose of this research was to better
understand the influential factors in the experience leading into the College Choice
Model’s search phase for the specified population. For example, what was the experience
of working with educational agent(s) when searching for schools and applying to colleges
in the United States? In the interviews, students were asked to provide experiences and
reasons why they had planned to attend college, who was instrumental in their
development of aspirations for college, and how they searched for an institution with an
educational agent.
Summary of Participants

Below is a set of short bios representing the students that participated in the interviews for the study. The students have been assigned false names as pseudo-identifiers for the purpose of maintaining confidentiality. The bios provide a brief yet historical and personalized summary of the research participant before transitioning to the analysis results. Table 4 illustrates a simple grade level categorization with summary below.

Table 4
Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dennis</td>
<td>Philosophy and Sports</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Administration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franklin</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>Junior</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Participant #1

*Dennis* - Dennis is an eighteen-year-old student from China, enrolled in the University of Miami as a double major in philosophy and sports administration. Coming from a small city in China with limited options for education, he moved to a larger city many miles from home, without his parents or other family members, in order to attend a
suitable middle school; this experience helped Dennis gain independence and practice responsibility early on and ease the transition of studying abroad. He is passionate about soccer, and this passion led him to aspire to study sports administration. In addition to his love of sports, he decided to pursue a degree in philosophy when he realized that, due to cultural differences, he did not have a religion he identified with or was part of, which he says left him feeling a void. Philosophy became his outlet to fill that void, and help him gain mental clarity and peace of mind. Although he is determined to succeed with his degrees in philosophy and sports administration, he dreams of one day embarking on an entrepreneurial journey; owning a thriving coffee shop, and being a barista.

Research Participant #2

Margaret- Margaret is a twenty-year-old student currently attending the University of Miami. Coming from China, Margaret found it challenging to complete all the required tests in a foreign language in order to apply to colleges in America, but persevered despite the language barrier. She attended an international high school in her homeland, which allowed her to expand her knowledge and exposure to other languages and cultural practices, aiding the acculturation process for her studies in America. She applied to schools in different states throughout the country: Ohio, Louisiana, Iowa, Florida, and New York. Margaret was encouraged to come to America to pursue her college degree by her parents, and they have been very supportive of her decision in attending the University of Miami, a decision she proudly claims as her own. Additionally, a number of classmates she had befriended were in accordance with coming to the United States for college, thus furthering her incentive to do so. She is overjoyed to be attending such a reputable school, and thrilled at the beautiful tropical paradise where
it is located. She studies diligently, but feels as though she is on holiday every time she steps outside.

Research Participant #3

Carol- Carol is a twenty-year-old student from Wuhan, China presently studying at the University of Miami. Her family relocated to Beijing, China while she was in high school but, due to regional limitations, she was unable to attend high school and complete testing in China’s capital. Carol was resolute on studying abroad, and returned to Wuhan in order to complete her schooling and required testing at the international high school she was initially attending, despite the adversity she faced with English as a second language. She received many other offers for schooling in the United States, including University of Delaware and Miami University of Ohio. Being a self-professed independent and determined person, she made the decision, of her own accord, to attend the highest ranked school to accept her, University of Miami. Though she was apprehensive, Carol was ecstatic at the thought of the experience of living and studying abroad. She could not be happier with her decision, and feels the setting of her college in a bigger, metropolitan city with many events, activities, and people are a perfect match for her personality.

Research Participant #4

Charlie- Charlie is a twenty-year-old student from China, and a student at the University of Miami. He is a competitive student that claims to strive for the best, stating he would compete with his classmates to achieve the highest grades and attend the best university. He says the most influential person in his life is his sister who, attending a college in northern Florida herself, inspired him to attend college in America. Although
his culturally traditional grandparents besought him to stay in China, he was steadfast on following his sister’s footsteps, and his dreams, of coming to the United States for his studies. His fortitude pushed him to apply to UCLA, UW, UM, as well as other universities in the United States, working alongside his international counselors, and proved to be a successful feat. With the aid of his sister, who he accredits as being a second mother to him, he has learned the basics of societal functioning in his daily life in the United States, as she briefly sought employment here post-graduation to live with him during his freshman year. He loves the warm, tropical climate of Miami, interacting with people, and having the gratification of attending a university ranked one of the top 50 in the nation.

Research Participant #5

Franklin- Franklin is a nineteen-year-old Chinese student, in his sophomore year, majoring in Mechanical engineering at the University of Miami. He comes from a small-town 10 miles south of Hong Kong, and did not have the opportunity to attend an international high school in his home country, but nonetheless felt very well prepared to study abroad. Franklin’s teachers pushed for him to stay in China and attend Nanjing University, one of the top 8 universities in China, to which he consequently applied to and was accepted. Nevertheless, this did not appease his yearn for a college education outside of China. With his parents’ support, Franklin applied to universities throughout the United States, received acceptance letters from University of Pittsburg and University of Miami, and ultimately decided upon attending the University of Miami due to its ranking and warmer weather. From a young age, he deduced that a graduate degree
would vastly improve his real-life problem solving and critical thinking skills, and be most beneficial to him in the end in a competitive job market.

Thematic Analysis

This section examines the statements of undergraduate International Chinese students relating to their experiences navigating through the college choice process with an educational agent. The main themes and associated subthemes that emerged from analysis of participants’ statements will be presented and discussed in relation to the two research questions. The initial guidance I followed on this was to retain some flexibility because rigid rules really do not work. The question of prevalence is revisited in relation to themes and sub-themes, as the refinement of analysis will often result in overall themes, and sub-themes within those as found in my study. Again, a theme collects something important about the data in relation to the research question, and embodies some level of patterned reply within the data. This is a question of occurrence, both in terms of space within each data item, and prevalence across the entire data set. Ideally, there was be a number of instances of the theme across the data set, but more instances do not necessarily mean the theme itself is more crucial. As this is qualitative analysis, there is no fixed answer to the question of what proportion of your data set needs to display evidence of the theme for it to be considered a theme. These themes were noted and described in a short phrase. It is not the case that if it were present in half the time of one’s data items, it would be a theme, but if it were present only in a smaller percentage then it would not be. Nor is it the case that a theme is only something that many data items give considerable attention to, rather than a sentence or two. A theme might be given considerable space in some data items, and little or none in others, or it might
appear in relatively little of the data set. Thus, researcher judgment is necessary to determine what a theme is. Furthermore, the accuracy of a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures, but in terms of whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question. Nonetheless, prevalence was not crucial to the analysis presented, I chose the most straightforward form, but it is important to note there is no right or wrong method for determining prevalence. Prevalence was counted at the level of the data item in terms of the number of different speakers who articulated the theme across the interviews. Part of the flexibility of thematic analysis is that it allows determining themes in a number of ways.

The next section refers to the purpose of the research to examine the experience international Chinese undergraduate students had in the college choice process. The main themes and associated subthemes that emerged from analysis of participants’ statements will be presented and discussed in relation to the two research questions. I identified two key themes in my research on exploring experiences of international students from China applying to U.S. college(s). These two themes were not necessarily the most prevalent themes across the data set, they appeared in all transcribed interviews, but together they captured an important element of the way in which the students experienced influences while selecting colleges to apply to in the United States. Below are detailed descriptions incorporating direct quotations from the transcribed interviews, which explain and illuminate first-hand experiences the students found while navigating through to the search phase of the College Choice Model. The interviews permit the rich coverage of the experiences each participant shared in the qualitative study resulting from iterative
questioning in data collection dialogues leading into a good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.

Research question 1:

*What influencers do undergraduate international Chinese students experience in the predisposition stage of their college search?*

A major theme and two related subthemes emerged when describing the college choice experiences of undergraduate international Chinese students at the predisposition stage. These themes included: 1) Familial and related influences in the predisposition stage without agents; a) Experiencing family support with opportunities of attending college; and b) Experiencing expectations of college with limited resources.

**Theme 1**

*Chinese students have great aspirations for studying in the United States*

In Asian societies, because the family unit is inseparable from the individual, some parents view their children as extensions of themselves and, consequently, parents are very much involved in the search and choice stages (Chen, 2001). College students face obstacles when attempting to navigate college or university policies and procedures. Information related to admissions, enrollment, financial aid, and academic standing is daunting for freshman and transfer students alike. Literature indicates that some international students may have influencers linked to the financial costs associated with hiring educational agents in the college choice phases (Pimpa, 2003). This may be especially difficult for students without an understanding of the American higher education system, such as international students whose parents may have pursued higher education in a foreign country or never attended college.
College Choice Predisposition Stage

Predisposition Influencers: Emerging Theme

Theme 1 Subthemes

Experiencing family support with opportunities of attending college

The prominent themes associated to influences in the predisposition period phase, were analyzed and categorized in an encompassing form of influences set of subthemes. A ranking of importance of the experiences is made at this stage. For example, if participants indicated that family and peers are major sources of influence during the analysis of an interview, the researcher became aware that the interviewee is using words and phrases that highlight an emerging theme and specific factors of influence in the international Chinese undergraduate’s college choice process. In one instance, the influence of personal and family friends was the deciding factor for Margaret’s ultimate decision to attend college in the United States:

Ok, so basically, my parents want me to come to America, so I just follow what they said and I went to, uh, international high school, which direct to the America… maybe also a friend, because they were like want to go to, like most of my friend they’re going to Canada, and some of my parent’s friends, children that were friends and they just like “Oh maybe we should go America together”, and we can be like…yeah so, I guess. (Margaret)

This theme demonstrates students usually learned about opportunities from someone they knew. Family and friends’ positive feedback and successful cases were the most important criteria in motivating educational goals in higher education. Students also shared stories of themselves or their friends’ preparing for college while still attending high school. Consistent with Pimpa (2003), subjects in this study show that their families are powerful sources of information or knowledge about higher education. The finding here also point to friend’s or peer supports that are powerful sources of generating
interest in college (Pimpa, 2003). Parents and even grandparents play important and vital roles in creating a platform so that their children/grandchildren attend college. Charlie shared that despite the financial cost, his parents were willing to fully invest in his education abroad:

I would say it’s like I get a lot plan for the future when I was in high school. Yeah, I was thinking like the major, the job I would do in the future, and I just want to be the top…and the influences from myself, from the classmates, also family. I decide in the high school because I think I need a like better education for the university and at that time I know people have high competition for the university in China and also even like everybody’s trying hard but they can’t get what they want finally. Um, also my parents they say they have the capabilities to offer the financials [inaudible]. It’s ok for me to go study abroad. (Charlie)

U.S. students seek private guidance annually, and due to a deficiency of knowledge and support for overseas applicants to U.S. colleges, international students are prime candidates for the kind of individualized support private counselors can provide. These independent educational consultants have begun to fill this niche market by providing college guidance to overseas applicants, and should be factored into current algorithms illustrating their college choice process (See Appendix B for Figure 1). These agents are generally employed by families to support students during the complex U.S. college admission process and can provide valuable support to families during this rite of passage. Of course, not all students have access to agents or choose to use them (Redding, 2013). Family and peer recommendations, or positive reviews, become substitutions for social integration based on how a student foresees feeling comfortable in the college environment and belongs to one or more kinship groups (Tinto, 1993).

Charlie referred to the importance of having an additional resource with his older sister already attending a university in Florida:
Ok, so, um, uh the reason why I attend to a university is, is because like in our country, like basically like most of, most of the students after the high school, they go to college, and that’s the reason I choose university. And, um, the reason why I go to, like, go abroad to Miami to study is because my, my parents sent me to a international school which is like most of students go to abroad to study for higher education. Uh, one possible influence is, uh, my sister. She also attend, uh, the university in, uh, Florida. (Charlie)

Regardless, the majority of students who interviewed responded that they were going to attend their university despite any potential acculturation issues. Dennis shared his own story reflecting on planned goals prior to leaving China; this continued to show the family and peer influence:

Oh, yeah my friends and my teachers. Yeah, I, I just, I just think I should do the same what others are doing, others, others, my friends beside me are all going to college and I, I have never thought about if I’m not enrolling in college. Yeah, and my teachers, yes, they are always talking about if, if you don’t, no, yeah they are only talking about what kind of college we would be enrolling in, yeah. And my parents, they always take this for granted, you should enroll in college. (Dennis)

In short, the influential subthemes found in the predisposition stage include family and peers, and the later barrier subtheme are focused on financial concerns. For others, family was crucial in all aspects of considering to study abroad. The location of where parents moved their families played a determining factor how college plans unraveled regardless of a positive expectation. For example, Carol stated:

I think the most important things is the parents, yeah. Um…and also there’s another things, like our family moved to another city. We living, uh, we living Wuhan is the city name, and then we moved to Beijing. So, but my, I have to, like, study in the Wuhan, the previous city, and to make the test called GAOKAO. But, if I went to study in Beijing I cannot get a test, so I have to back to the previous city, so and my parent think that, that but we can choose to go to study abroad, that’s not a big, we can avoid those problem about the test, the GAOKAO test, so we decided to study abroad. And I also think that it is a, it must be a great experience, so, yeah. (Carol)
These few exerts illustrate a compelling set of narratives that express how international Chinese students are influenced by their families and close friends who are affiliated with these subjects. These stories appear to mimic similar stories heard of U.S. students, and is commonly found to be expected in the College Choice Model. Family appear to be significant sources of information or motivation for international Chinese undergraduate students. While some peer supports exists, a common subtheme was the presence of family in the college search process.

Experiencing expectations of college with limited resources

Financial cost was found in the next subtheme as a prevalent barrier and concern early on. The growing dependence on individuals who can provide private guidance for both domestic and international clients points to a broader challenge in the field regarding access to reliable information. It further suggests a growing chasm between those who have funds to hire these practitioners and those who do not. Consequently, gaps of knowledge international applicants have on admission criteria concurrently created a rise for regulation to the marketplace of educational agencies. This is a problem specifically for international families. Exploitation of clients in this field not only affects applicants, but also shifts the nature of the admission pool and ultimately impedes access for everyone. The collaboration of recruiters in United States and agents is becoming more prominent and is proving a more influential factor for students considering higher education.

Financial issues and concerns involve every aspect of the college choice model including questions about the affordability of college, but additional issues concern the financial issues that pertain to the college search part of the process. International student
recruitment with the assistance from education agents is prevalent in Asian countries for affluent families and has a strong influence on whether and where a student will pursue postsecondary education (Pimpa, 2003). However, less responsible agents could harm students’ study and life, and contaminate institutions’ reputations overseas (Zhang, 2011). A popular reason was that students possessed little knowledge regarding the college application process. Participants reported lack of knowledge in visa application and lack of knowledge in foreign colleges and universities as an important reason. The majority of students interviewed reported that they felt they were more likely to be accepted if they had used an agent. In addition, some students reported that lack of time was another important factor encouraging them to use an agent. Charlie stated that the cost of tuition was a factor considered:

One challenge just might be the, the tuition of the, um, my…The cost of the life in staying in the America. So, rather high compared to if I study in Chinese college. Finances. One, another one is from my grandparents, and they are like, um, they are like traditional Chinese, and they don’t want me to go out to, like, a really far place, they want me to stay around them because, like, they are really, they are really bad condition, uh, old age and just like don’t want to go away without me, yeah, so. (Charlie)

They had to prepare for tests for entering a U.S. college while preparing application materials; or they still attend an international Chinese high school and had to finish all the required course work and examinations. It was important to identify the most important service an agent should provide; surprisingly, none of the students expected the agent to contact all necessary personnel in institutions, departments, or admission offices on their behalf. Students expected an agent to provide advice on choosing a destination country and college based on their personal interests, academic background, financial capability, and other personal factors. Most of the participants
reported a need for information on future goals and career choices. Students also indicated that they would like to receive information regarding visa application. Franklin also recognized that for many peers he knew interested in pursuing college aspirations, both nationally and internationally, financial barriers can be influential or limiting:

Yeah, maybe for some people financial difficulties. But, the tuition in Chinese universities are much lower. (Franklin)

Although Chinese students with completed materials are likely to be awarded government loans, the students from China expressed their concerns and regard paying for agents and college tuition as a massive challenge. Many participants claimed that they planned to use or had started using an agent to assist their college application in China since attending high school. Dennis shared that at times the discussion with family was centered on a core evaluation of realistic limitations and self-reflection determining whether the goals were feasible. Dennis ties both family support and financial concerns sharing about his commitment to even attending a private school like the University of Miami:

Like myself is considering… [inaudible] will be too difficult for me to study and can I like do this? For my family, it’s do they have the capabilities to offer the financials and do they really want me to study abroad and will they miss me too much? For the family, of course the financials, it’s a lot. Especially University of Miami. (Dennis)

Both influencers and barriers associated in the predisposition phase are related to the varying experiences of study participants. To answer the second question of the study, interview questions about the involvement of educational agents linked to the participants’ needs and expectations are asked.
Research question 2:

*What influencers do undergraduate international Chinese students experience in the college search stage while working with educational agents?*

**Theme 2**

*The process of deciding and applying to college for international Chinese students involves adjusting their expectations relative to resources they receive*

The second main theme (Professional advising in the search stage with agents) emerged when assessing the type of experiences international undergraduate Chinese students had while searching for colleges with an educational agent. Many agents provided general services for students and can meet many students’ needs. Also, some students expressed their agents continued to provide services until they were successfully admitted into a U.S. college, universities, or institutions, but neglected to further assist to better adjust to a new learning environment. All interviewees indicated that agents helped them with their entire college application process. They agreed using an agent made their application process much easier. These students focused on preparing language tests while having agents help them with preparing other application materials. Although providing a score of TOEFL/ILTES or ACT/SAT is not required for being admitted by some U.S. universities, these students planned to increase their English skills to gain a high score on the tests to enable them to go to a more competitive university.

For this reason, many students and their parents chose to use the complete package service while the students were working on the tests. A student who just started her application process in China shared she had felt a great deal of pressure and anxiety. Many worried that the decision that they made was not going to be the best for them, and
preferred to have an expert to guide them through the process and tell them when, what, and how to prepare. One student said that she was only concerned with finding a university that has a major she wanted to study and was highly ranked in the United States when she was searching intuitions with an agent. They questioned the repetitiveness of information collection in the forms and wished the forms could be designed in a simpler and easier fashion. Students also hoped agents could provide extended services after they were admitted into a college or university in the United States. Although some agents provided contact information of older cohorts to the younger ones, it was not written in any contract and it was totally dependent on the older cohorts’ willingness to help. These students were not obligated to help the newcomers to adjust themselves to the new culture and a different learning environment.

Two subthemes emerged when assessing the type of academic support that undergraduate International Chinese students received from educational agents; a) Experiencing agent support with completing college applications, and b) Utilizing guidance from agents to overcome admission obstacles.

*College Choice Search*

**Theme 2 Subthemes**

*Experiencing agent support with completing college applications*

Asian students and their parents frequently cited institutional prestige as the most important factor in college selection; and some research indicates, Asian students were also likely to feel that their parents have great influence in their choice of college, and indicated they had little influence in the selection process (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002). Yet another important theme was the assistance in reviewing the ranking during the
search phase. In short, students’ impressions of institutional quality and overall satisfaction with admissions are precursors of educational attainment and other dimensions of student success (Tinto, 1993). Income became a factor next because the higher the family income the more likely a student is to choose to use an agent during their application process to help with college selections. Agents may be able to help students to make the college application process clearer and visa application less complicated, but based on the findings of this research, it was very rare to have an agent provide students with information regarding their transition to the new living and learning environment. Their services end when students were admitted to the college of choice. Since the study focused on students assisted by agents, we cannot draw the conclusion that students represented by agents were better prepared than those who were independent. It can only be assumed that students assisted by agents encountered less difficulties, but they reported finding a responsible agent as a challenging and significant step in their application process.

A pattern emerged that of those who used an agent planned on reviewing outcome data, and correlated the importance of overcoming a common barrier of an entrance exams or a foreign language test (i.e., TOEFL, IELTS, SAT, or ACT) to meeting admissions to competitive schools. Franklin stressed on the college ranking importance, and goal to achieve admissions into a top fifty school. It was made clear that entrance exams were extremely important for the admissions into a top ranked school in the United States; in addition, Franklin also expressed concern about the Chinese college entrance exam score playing a major part in that goal:

Yeah, maybe for some people financial difficulties. But, the tuition in Chinese universities are much lower. Before enrolling in college, you need
to take, you know, GAOKAO, that’s college entrance examination in China, and the basic, the full score is 750, and if you are below a 200, you can’t get in college, even one college. Maybe that’s the kind of score are important barrier…at least one college ranked in the top 50. (Franklin)

Rankings appear to be a big part of the decision process for international students so universities that value international student enrollments should work on how to improve institution rankings, particularly in global ranking systems (e.g., U.S. News). A major reason for these students admitted to using agents was to increase the likelihood of being admitted into a college or university abroad. The students or their parents wanted to make sure that at the end of process, the students, at least, could receive one admission letter. These students worked on the application process for universities that they were most interested in; meanwhile, they or their parents also asked agents to find quality universities with a greater chance of being accepted. In addition, some students may not have initially intended to use an agent, but their parents urged them to use one or, in some cases, the parents themselves hired an agent preemptively.

Some interviewees indicated that they used an agent’s services for only the most challenging parts of the application process. Preparing for the Visa interview and writing the personal statement emerged as the most difficult procedures according to the conversations with the students. To obtain a student visa to study in the United States, in addition to college admission, Chinese students must go a designated U.S. Embassy Office in China for an interview. This is significant because a student’s application efforts could be totally in vain if he/she failed to obtain a visa. Since it is more subjective than a test, many students viewed the interview as mysterious and were anxious in preparation for it. Many of the participants expressed their concerns regarding choosing a university and/or a major. They were cautious about their decision and hoped to receive
professional advice from a knowledgeable source since they were less familiar with American higher education institutions or institutions in other foreign countries, especially rankings.

Preparation of application materials was continued to be reported by individual applicants as a difficult and complicated part in the process. Writing a personal statement was new to most Chinese students and they felt they had little to write about themselves due to lack of opportunities to explore their personal interests or to participate in extracurricular activities when studying in middle school and high school in China. Preparing personal statements could be extremely overwhelming especially when one applied for multiple universities individually. The expectations returned a focus of success on the applicant’s ability to be admitted into a ranked school. Students also reported that they were frustrated with the process of writing and rewriting personal essays for the admissions process. However, it is also important to recognize another barrier found was stress or pressure of studying abroad in general. For example, Dennis describes how the agent helped alleviate some of the pressure with search assistance, but still closes with the cornerstone of following the theme of college rankings always part of the agents’ guidance:

Um, but for myself it’s, yeah, for myself, I think it’s the pressure. It’s study academic pressure. I know it’s going to be really-really difficult to study here especially like double majoring in philosophy and [inaudible] study and I also know if I go to the university in China it’s going to be easy. A lot of pressure. Like you need to practice English every day. You need to reading. You need to writing. And also like social… do the internship, do volunteer job, all kinds of things… yeah, what I do I go to their agency. They have like specific teacher who can offer suggestion. We can sit down together, look over the documents or the website of the school. Um, they also like ranking all the university. (Dennis)
Subtheme: Utilizing guidance from agents to overcome admission obstacles

All interviewees expressed reservations about their entrance exams even prior to working with an agent, students contended that English tests (i.e., TOEFL or IELTS) or tests in English (i.e., ACT or SAT) was the most challenging part of their application preparation. Some students used every service available due to alterations in their plans for college. They had not thought about going to a foreign country until they learned about their scores of the China College Entrance Examination (GAOKAO). Interviews with students from China showed that many students did long-range planning. They planned to attend a foreign college or university since their freshmen year in high school. Nonetheless, in that time English improvements are hard to achieve. Students also complained what they learned in high school did not necessarily apply to these tests. To gain better scores, many Chinese students transferred to private English training schools, particularly in preparation for these tests or they took courses in an English Intense Language Institute. However, the students who recognize the importance of the exam prep and those students who attend the English training schools were subsequently better prepared for TOEFL exams, Franklin said:

First is the TOEFL test, yeah, like, and also the SAT, and…I just, I guess maybe like the financial difficult I guess, but there is like a policy in China, I remember is like if you are going to, like, overseas study, the government will, like, loan a bunch of money, yeah I guess, because my parents told me like that and they were like “Oh, that’s great then”. And, yeah, but the most difficult is the English language, yeah, yeah. Yeah, maybe not like language barrier, but like the test we have to pass. (Franklin)

Supportive research also contends major difficulties that Chinese students encounter during application preparation, regardless if an agent was commissioned; including college readiness, lack of knowledge, and a poor financial situation. College
readiness was an issue for some students from China because of English tests (e.g., TOEFL) or tests in English (e.g., SAT) that they found challenging as part of their application preparation. Hagedorn’s study exposed that many Chinese students did not do long-range planning, but instead they planned to attend a foreign college or university the next semester, and in such a short period English competency is hard to achieve (Hagedorn, 2010). The two major themes and subthemes described in this section emerged from the perspectives and experiences shared by five undergraduate International Chinese students on their experiences throughout their college choice process in the predisposition and search stages. Recommendations for higher education administration and further student service practice with international students are outlined in the next chapter of this study. In this case, this thematic analysis was driven by a set of particular analytic research questions, and as illustrated by Table 5, found influences and barriers experienced by international Chinese students applying to U.S. universities.
Table 5

*Thematic Analysis: ICU College Predisposition and Search Experiences*

---

**Key Themes and Subthemes**

**Findings answering Research Question 1**

Key Theme: 1) Chinese students have great aspirations for studying in the United States:

- Subtheme: Experiencing family support with opportunities of attending college

- Subtheme: Experiencing expectations of college with limited resources

**Findings answering Research Question 2**

Key Theme: 2) The process of deciding and applying to college for international Chinese students involves adjusting their expectations relative to resources they receive:

- Subtheme: Experiencing agent support with completing college applications

- Subtheme: Utilizing guidance from agents to overcome admission obstacles

---

**Summary of Results**

The themes identified, coded, and analyzed are a reflection of the content of the participants’ interviews. In this analysis, a rich overall description is maintained, and interviewing was a particularly useful method when investigating an under-researched area, working with international Chinese undergraduate students. As a result, the majority of students claimed that they received good service from the agent, and that the agent
prepared everything after learning some basic information about them at their first meeting.

Once the student began working with an educational agent in the search phase of the College Choice Model, the influential themes were supported by a need to have the agents provide guidance in how to best prepare for their applications, and the barrier themes were commonly related to entrance exams in particular. This concludes a review of the results chapter in where the assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated, and the analysis affords a resounding and regimented story about the data and topic themes. The two themes described in this chapter emerged from the perspectives and experiences shared by five undergraduate international students from China on their experiences with searching for college in the United States.

Recommendations for international recruitment and ISSS student service practice with Chinese students are outlined in the next chapter of this study. The choice between inductive and deductive onto how and why you are coding the data as well. I coded for specific research questions which mapped onto the more theoretical deductive approach. With a theoretical approach, I was interested in the way students experienced searching for a college played out across the data, and focused on that particular feature in coding the data. What this resulted in was a number of themes around influences, which included or expanded on something resembling study outcomes found in the literature review. The first key theme: Chinese students have great aspirations for studying in the United States:

a. Subtheme: Experiencing family support with opportunities of attending college
b. Subtheme: Experiencing expectations of college with limited resources. The second key theme: The process of deciding and applying to college for international Chinese students
involves adjusting their expectations relative to resources they receive: c. Subtheme: Experiencing agent support with completing college applications d. Subtheme: Utilizing guidance from agents to overcome admission obstacles.
Chapter V
Discussion

The findings of this study originated from the exploration of the experiences and needs of five participants who all identify as undergraduate International Chinese students who received assistance in the college search process from educational agents. The qualitative study focused on how the students experienced the navigation of their college choice process. I used Hossler and Gallagher’s College Choice Model as the theoretical conceptualization for the study and employed a deductive approach to the thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The College Choice Model was used to inform the research questions in the predisposition and search phases, the coding method chosen for the study allowed for themes to be developed from analyst driven research questions.

The purpose of the study was to contribute to the research on international students and their college search process, as literature evaluating international students’ needs are limited. Furthering knowledge on this topic will lead to informing the literature on practice, particularly those related to student services and recruitment for administration in colleges and universities in the United States. I focused the research questions on the predisposition and search stages of the College Choice Model, two aspects of the participants’ experience in the model. This chapter connects the College Choice Model and the related literature as discussed in Chapter 2, and describes the results of a deductive thematic analysis conducted using data collected from five student interviews. The literature review and the results of the study support that educational agents assisting with college applications has become a popular practice among Chinese students with the financial resources who intend to pursue a degree at a higher education
institution outside of China. Students and parents seek out agencies for their specialized knowledge in the entire college application process.

Educational agents are regarded as experts in international education, who possess rich resources of information regarding quality of higher education institutions in foreign countries, college application procedures, costs of education, and other facts. Based on the analysis of qualitative data, I identified four most commonly referred to themes based on analyses of participant interviews. I further explored the themes and created two subcategories (subthemes) of influences within a more narrowed scope of the predisposition stage and the search phase utilizing an educational agent. The aim of the first research question was to explore the type of experiences that undergraduate International Chinese students have had throughout their predisposition stage of their college choice process. Two themes emerged to describe the experiences of the study participants. The main themes are 1) Chinese students have great aspirations for studying in the United States and 2) The process of deciding and applying to college for international Chinese students involves adjusting their expectations relative to resources they receive. The study also presents the following subthemes a) Experiencing family support with opportunities of attending college, b) Experiencing expectations of college with limited resources, c) Experiencing agent support with completing college applications, and d) Utilizing guidance from agents to overcome admission obstacles. It is important to recognize that the College Choice Model has its limitations through the search phase without longitudinal case studies, and unfortunately where in domestic student cases financial aid records can help fill the observational gap, international
student do not receive federal financial aid in the United States thus exposing a limitation for the model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987).

**Discussion of Findings for Research Question 1**

Study participants shared experiences related to influences and barriers they encountered in their college predisposition stage. These experiences range from the absence of financial aid or familial financial circumstances that participants are attempting to overcome. The first subtheme, experiencing family support with opportunities of attending college, identifies influencers that the participants experienced through their predisposition stage of electing higher education. Additionally, the subtheme recognizes support systems participants rely on within their predisposition experience. The second subtheme, experiencing expectations of college with limited resources, identifies additional concerns that have not been addressed within the participants’ expectations and potential hardships. These concerns range from the absence of federal financial aid to more personal financial circumstances that participants are attempting to navigate while considering college.

*Experiencing family support with opportunities of attending college*

The motivations of the students in taking up a higher level of education are similar to the motivations found in the literature review. Parents, friends, and relatives were the most influential factor for international Chinese students to attend college. Particularly for students who grow up in a family that thinks that education is a very important value and encourages the student to attend school. The findings related to family and peer support provided in a comprehensive picture of what study participants are facing as they make their way through their college trajectories. In Asian cultures, as
the family unit is inseparable from the individual, some parents view their children as extensions of themselves (Kim & Hong, 2007), and consequently, parents are very much involved in the search and choice stages (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). In this interdependent and collectivistic context in which a child’s accomplishments reflect more about the worth of the family than the individual, parents take responsibility for their children’s actions (Kim & Hong, 2004). Among Asians, females were twice as likely to submit to paternal influence in where they attend college and the type of graduate school preferred (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002). The study participants, both male and female, indicated their parents provided support throughout the predisposition stage, and maintained a baseline expectation of a college education. Participants Charlie and Dennis discussed the preset expectations their parents had for them attending college including a sibling already attending college in Florida in Charlie’s case. Consequently, both Charlie and Dennis innately trusted on familial support systems such as parents and siblings.

This pattern is consistent with previous research and demonstrates the important role family played in deciding to attend college. Additionally, we now have greater insight in recognizing the specific role parents have in influencing students’ usage of an educational agent, later examined in this chapter, during the search stage of the College Choice Model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). To make international students feel that they are in control and not overwhelmed, parents must remain supportive without reaching expectation extremes beyond the students’ capacities. One example is learning more about the student on an aptitude level by providing a holistic review of their academic profile, which includes transcripts, academic performance, and educational progress. Student profiles can include extracurricular activities, internships, and memberships to
student/professional clubs. These student evaluations would provide parents a better sense of how to best support their child, and also help align the student to feasible educational goals. Charlie described his experience as a younger sibling whose parents often linked his educational goals to his sister already studying abroad in Florida. He explained that he considered and searched various colleges in the United States; nonetheless, his parents and sibling’s influence was the determining factor in choosing a university in Florida.

*Experiencing expectations of college with limited resources*

The predisposition stage of the model captured concerns the participants expressed they experienced when considering higher education abroad and hiring an educational agent for the next search phase. While not all international students use educational agents, many independent educational agents are, generally, hired and compensated by the student and their family; thus, they have no formal relationships with colleges or universities. This is especially important to consider, as research indicates that financial issues and concerns involve every aspect of the college choice model including questions about the affordability of college, but additional issues concern the financial issues that pertain to the college search part of the process. It was interesting to learn that despite the study taking place at a private university, where current tuition and fees are $47,004 per academic year (U.S. News & World Report, 2016), students still expressed concern of finances related to the cost of hiring educational agents. I would be curious for further research to explore the most challenging criteria, financial cost, of hiring an educational agent for international students attending a state school or community college that may not come from affluent families with the capacities to afford them. Despite
financial assistance from parents for tuition, study participants expressed concern about other financial circumstances aside from simply studying abroad such as the financial cost of hiring an educational agent.

According to Hagedorn (2010), students may not intend to use an agent, but their parents urged them to use one or, in some cases the parents themselves hired an agent without informing the student, in the pre-dispositional stage. Research has shown parents and students, from Asian countries, elect hiring an educational agent to increase the probability of admissions (Hagedorn, 2010). I understand the investment both parents and students make in an educational agent; however, I only realized after the study how challenging and how potentially vulnerable the experience can be for the students involved. Although it would appear that the majority of agents, accredited by the China Ministry of Education, are responsible and provide satisfactory services, the interviews identified a major problem associated with the high prices students and their families pay agents. Conversely, the growing dependence on individuals who can provide private guidance for both domestic and international clients points to a broader challenge in the field regarding access to reliable information. It further suggests a growing chasm between those who have funds to hire these practitioners and those who do not. Consequently, gaps of knowledge international applicants have on admission criteria concurrently created a rise for regulation to the marketplace of educational agencies. This is a problem specifically for international families. Exploitation of clients in this field not only affects applicants, but also shifts the nature of the admission pool and ultimately impedes access for everyone. It was obvious that many students, as well as their parents, lacked the in-depth knowledge necessary to effectively search or apply to universities
outside of China. The collaboration of recruiters in United States and agents is becoming more prominent and is proving a more influential factor for students considering higher education. International student recruitment with the assistance from education agents is prevalent in Asian countries for affluent families and has a strong influence on whether and where a student will pursue postsecondary education (Pimpa, 2003). However, less responsible agents could harm students’ study and life, and taint institutions’ reputations (Zhang, 2011).

**Discussion of Findings for Research Question 2**

The aim of the second research question was to explore the type of experiences that undergraduate international Chinese students are having with their educational agents in the search phase of their college choice process. According to research, Asian cultural values and beliefs include: collectivism, conformity to norms, deference to authority, emotional self-control, family recognition through achievement, filial piety, humility, hierarchical relationships, and avoidance of shame suggest that although there are significant within-group differences among Asian Americans (Kim & Hong, 2004). In retrospect, it is acknowledged that additional research on international students’ experiences as well as their psychological and social developments affect their college search. For decades, research on students' identity formation has expanded to focus on social identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic class.

To adequately support students' strong psychological need to explore and affirm their different social identities, it is important to understand how those identities develop and intersect. Following the thematic analysis process, two themes emerged to interpret
what study participants are ultimately experiencing when working with educational agents during the search phase of the college choice process. The main theme is professional advising in the search stage with agents. Study participants shared reasons and expectations they had on educational agents to best guide them through their college choice process. Two subthemes are used to interpret the findings through this theme. Conversely, examining the predisposition stage showed international students may feel underprepared to search for college abroad despite the support from their parents because they do not entirely understand higher education in the United States. As discussed by Hagedorn (2010), participants reported a lack of knowledge in visa application and in the admissions processes of foreign colleges and universities, and students also reported that they felt they were more likely to be accepted if they had used an agent (Hagedorn, 2010). Furthermore, other notable categories were coded in the analysis that indicated not only a concern for financial cost generally linked to the expense of attending college abroad, but also an unprecedented price for the service packages charged by agents. Educational agents are in an ideal position to serve international college students due to the ability to engage students from as early as orientation and serving as a steady point of contact throughout their college search. In addition, Hagedorn found students may not intend to use an agent, but their parents urged them to use one or, in some cases the parents themselves hired an agent without informing the student, in the pre-dispositional stage (Hagedorn, 2010). International student recruitment with the assistance from education agents is prevalent in Asian countries for affluent families and has a strong influence on whether and where a student will pursue postsecondary education (Pimpa, 2003).
Experiencing agent support with completing college applications

The first subtheme discusses the practice of using educational agents in finding a set of colleges with an appropriate fit, and also heavily considers school prestige and ranking. It also emphasizes the lack of knowledge about international schools and need the student and family have for an agent to help list options. This subtheme also recognizes the need for additional assistance from agents beyond the realm of admissions information to provide more comprehensive service to international students.

International college students must balance a host of different concerns. Concerns can include leaving family, college admission/entrance exams, rising tuition costs, and other family responsibilities such as setting or maintaining expectations for family and peers. Participants described an educational agent relationship that would ideally work for them as one that offers support, accurate information, and helps achieve admissions into a top ranked school. The idea of an educational agent who is well-informed on the participants’ institution and program of choice as well as school rankings, was a popular response among study participants.

Franklin’s perspective on rankings resonates with Dennis in how it becomes a primary objective to review admissions criteria, from high ranked colleges, with their educational agent. It revealed to me that ranking not only played a part in searching for specific colleges, but it also served to motivate the participants to do well academically to be considered by their desired school. In addition to overall rankings, educational agents working with international students should also know about all degree program options and how they can best match to the applicant preferences. I see the need for further research to again filter background demographics on international students applying to
institutions in the United States such as: first generation, immigration, and social economic status. Students and parents may also have difficulties understanding every item on the contract, what procedures they have to follow, and what specific services they need from the agent.

To prevent using an irresponsible agent, students and parents could do research on the ability and knowledge of a prospective agent, but they have less power in the relationship. This is an additional task, unfortunately a challenge for first generation international students, of researching the reliability of an agent for the intended purpose of helping attain admission into their dream school. The agents not only provide services but also recommend what type and to what extent services that the principal needs. Like many areas of higher education, much power of prospective students rests on giving feedback to the services, recommending friends or relatives to use or not to use the agent, based on their own experiences. Apparently, negative feedback from students could have adverse effect on the agent’s reputation, similar to rating a faculty member, although it could be very difficult to report the unethical practice of the agent without a governing body to report it to. The research revealed that word-of-mouth feedback plays an important role in selecting an agent for students and parents. The majority of students shared that the most important criteria of finding an agent is whether it has a good reputation, particularly whether someone they know, friends or siblings, had a positive experience. Moreover, this theme categorizes motivational variables in the search process while working with educational agents and makes suggestions for improvement in research students and parents can conduct when selecting an agent. A reliable agent can benefit students by offering useful information and valuable suggestions, as well as help
colleges and universities become more competitive in foreign target markets by providing direct access to students with the same language, a local infrastructure, timely feedback, and permanent representation (NACAC, 2010).

Utilizing guidance from agents to overcome admission obstacles

The second subtheme highlights the concept of admissions criteria as barriers for international students and how they are addressed by the student/agent working relationship. This theme also explores ways that educational agents can serve as engaged organizers for the international student seeking to overcome potential academic profile deficiencies and related challenges. Participants described experiences during the search phase and provided areas of applying where they had trouble understanding the admissions criteria such as entrance exam scores and personal essays. As referenced in the previous chapter, study participants emphasized stress related to meeting certain entrance exam scores in order to qualify for admissions and relying on the agent for accurate information necessary for application preparation. Franklin captures a stressor that even domestic students face when applying to college, the potential of being denied admissions from a preferred school, and the resiliency necessary to overcome such hardship. It would be interesting for further research to explore the most important criteria when hiring an educational agent for international students aspiring to attend a public school or community college. The College Choice Model provided structure for inquiry into the background and characteristics of the participants in the study; however, it was limited to in depth analysis into the social identity development of the students. Identity formation has long been established as an important developmental goal of the college years. Chickering's groundbreaking work in this area defined the multiple
components of identity and how typical developmental tasks during the college years contributed to its formation (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This theme also ascertains ways that educational agents are able to focus the students’ efforts on specific areas of the application process (e.g., entrance exams).

Participants indicated that they used an agent’s services for only the most challenging parts of the application process, and preparing for the entrance exams and writing the personal statement emerged as the most difficult procedures according to the conversations with the students. Since an educational agent can serve as a supportive advocate, participants shared that identifying clear goals and needs in the very first meeting can help reduce worry and help them concentrate on areas of their applications. This belief is consistent with preceding research that shows how ethnic identity, Asian values and related stress are collectively and uniquely associated to psychological well-being among Asian international college students (Kim & Hong, 2004). By establishing an open professional relationship from the initial meeting, students can become more comfortable speaking with their agents about external concerns that can ultimately affect academic planning, applications, and admissions. I focused on information searching before applying that influenced the decision-making and while searching for colleges, and found that there are four types of information that overseas Chinese students seek during the first two stages of the College Choice Model (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987). The present study selected a framework for college choice that linked to Hossler’s model (1987), with four factors within in the predisposition and search stages. The information is divided into four primary influencers found in the four subthemes within the College
Choice Model’s Predisposition and Search Phases: Family Input, Institutional Ranking, Financial Cost, and Entrance Exams (See Appendix B for Figure 1).

**Implications for United States Colleges/Universities**

The findings of this research investigation, collectively, give rise to a number of important considerations and implications for educational practice, federal and institutional policies, and further research. Institutions need to consider establishing new and innovative means or methods of delivering services or assisting ICU students in their search process. Similar to initiatives established within an American context, higher education leaders should work with faculty and academic personnel to explore the implementation of specific academic majors not offered at competitive academic institutions internationally; this may improve the institution’s capacity to attract a wider array of international prospects. In turn, it is important to consider and endorse those practices that have the potential to increase awareness of your institutions academic quality and value, nationally and internationally. Whether the influences originate from the family or demographics, or are attributable to the institution, whether real or perceived, institutional rankings and academic rating guidebooks are highly informative and succinct ways to describe the likely institutional value to the applicants; consequently, these resources are likely to access to study abroad opportunities for foreign students. Much the same way domestic students will seek to study at Oxford University or University of Cambridge while not considering other less reputable or less prestigious foreign institutions, ICU students are likely to use these ranking references as a means of determining one’s affinity toward particular institutions of higher education here. Leaders should also work with faculty on developing accurate English placement
assessments and flexible curriculum degree requirements for non-native English speakers and collaborate closely to intensive English programs on campus. Rankings are a big part of the decision-making process for international students, thus, universities interested in increasing enrollments of international students should work to improve the institution’s rankings, particularly within global ranking systems (e.g., *U.S. News and World Report*).

**Implications for Practice**

During a time of performance-based funding and limited resources, it would be a strategic investment to put university resources into active recruitment. State universities in Florida are evaluated based on SUS Board of Governor’s metrics, and institutional rankings on these metrics determine a share/proportion of the government budget allocations these public institutions are awarded or reduced/penalized. While these budget considerations do not pertain to the University of Miami, the case study institution, the potential deleterious effects of the availability could act as a signal for institutional practical suggestions for change. On a separate issue, the United States should implement recent practices related to international recruitment strategies; this suggestion can ensure that U.S. institutions remain competitive against emerging international education leaders. These international countries are supporting a competitive educational environment the United States is defending against in higher education (Altbach, 1989).

Many universities, both public and private, would benefit from admitting international students with academic stipulations regarding their enrollment status (e.g., full-time enrollment), that can in turn raise both retention and graduation rates for the metrics being evaluated. However, increasing international enrollment by a significant
percentage would require putting staff and financial resources into areas such as: credential evaluation, immigration advising, and recruitment travel. There are advantages to being considered the international leader of hosting high numbers of foreign students; as a result, taking a targeted recruitment path can ensure success in areas that are showing prime recruitment populations. With the largest number of international students coming to the United States from the Republic of China, with more than double the amount of the second-place runner up India, it is imperative to develop strategic partnerships to ensure continued and successful recruitment (Institute of International Education, 2014). Aside from the country producing the highest count of international students at a given institution, college recruiters in the United States need to also focus on other top countries from which international students are increasing each year.

Additionally, expanding recruitment efforts by finding pockets of international recruitment areas currently not saturated in the marketplace can create new avenues of recruitment populations. An institution should develop a recruitment strategy that is broad but considers important variables such as student demographics as well as their finances. This does not mean just working with agents, recruitment efforts should be focused at both levels of education, graduate and undergraduate. While many institutions might only seek to recruit undergraduate students, the international market has a sizable prospective graduate student population too.

Technology in the information era would require marketing and communication teams to develop a robust online presence, not only with your internal websites but also with other international higher education websites, as well as a social media presence in multiple countries. Although it may appear rudimentary, recruiters should be sending
timely and individualized communication through email and phone calls to prospective, admitted, and deposited students. Another institutional effort should be making college applications and admission processes easily understood and readily accessible to a broad audience. Rolling admissions deadlines could better serve international students because of the varying educational calendars used in many countries. Recruiters should use currently enrolled international students on campus as a source of information; institutions can survey why these students enrolled at their institutions collecting valuable information that may be used in future admission cycles. Another suggestion could include the use of these students as international ambassadors or the initiation of a student organization where prospective students can directly contact currently enrolled students for information purposes.

**Implications for Policy**

Further research is needed to explore roles that agents play in other types of recruitment and the exchanges between educational agencies and the U.S. higher education institutions in Chinese undergraduate student recruitment. Federal policy should change to permit limited employment opportunities particularly within the institution, and employers should assist in the hiring of international student workers. Recommendations for improvement include initiatives to raise the profile of international students, improve financial assistance and scholarships, and create opportunities for international students to improve their college application skills. The director of public policy and research for the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC) notes that the search for full-pay international students has been likened to a modern-day gold rush (Hawkins, 2012). The following research questions served to open
a discussion, from the lens of international Chinese undergraduate students, and explore themes found in their college choice experience. As enrollment of international students grows at college campuses nationally, whether due to the activities related to educational agencies or a combination of other recruitment methods, it is essential for admissions experts to engage in ongoing campus discussions. These discussions would ensure that ethical, coordinated, and adequate support services are in place for the international student subpopulation (West, 2014). Working with BOSSA and COSSA to strengthen their educational agency policies could strengthen international relations, develop educational agents to practice more ethically, and make U.S. institutions more willing to consider working with these foreign educational practitioners.

The research questions provided a better understanding of the applicants’ search process under the umbrella of the College Choice Model, as well as how they may have been influenced by an educational agent when applying to an institution of higher education in the United States. Gathering data through a qualitative approach of research into a student’s firsthand experience in their college search phase rendered a personalized and accurate needs assessment. The outcome of directly inquiring what their experiences were lead to directly understanding what effectively worked from the institutions’ active or inadvertent recruitment efforts. Thus, this can also shed great clarity in successful practices utilized in transfer and transition departments once students have matriculated. Future collaborative efforts between educational agents and foreign students serve to strengthen these positive images and connections. The research questions may have revealed the potential problems for international students facing specific challenges found in their college search phase when utilizing an educational agent. The second questions
helped gauge the influence educational agents may have in the search phase leading to college choice, and the assistance the educational agents provided in potentially overcoming common hurdles and barriers. Based on family influences found in the analysis, institutions should consider a parent program for international students so international parents can be kept in the loop with what is happening on campus, as well as being able to use parents to help recruit students in their country. It would be prudent for universities to customize orientation, class registration, placement exam, and academic advising structure to be internationally friendly.

For performance funding, it is important to have clear four-year graduation plans for undergraduates, both domestic and international. Faculty and advisers should monitor and ensure students are progressing within their program curriculum maps and allow for internships, co-ops and study-abroad experiences, and still be able to graduate in four years. Researchers interested in international student success should work with central administration to start a campus buy-in to internationalization of the university. Internationalization and international student enrollment need to be a priority to the university president, and in the strategic plan, with specific efforts from the president’s and provost’s offices recognizing and embracing the benefits of international students on campus. Colleges that are going to succeed would invest in a dynamic International Students and Scholars team that can both navigate complex immigration policies, as well as be able to counsel international students through orientation, cultural adjustments, and issues on and off campus. These International Students and Scholars offices make sure international students have the opportunity to be involved in campus clubs and activities as well as have a voice through Student Government and in the Department of Student
Activities and Student Organizations. Institutions should be truthful and clear to international prospects with the amenities and services available, because international students may want to transfer out to another institution if the expectations they had of the university community did not match their experiences (e.g., if your institution is in a small town, it should not be advertised in a large metropolitan setting). Another strategic investment can lead to develop an international alumni network that can reach out to current and prospective international students about their time at your institution, as well as collecting outcome data on what they are doing post-graduation in their careers.

Higher education is examining outcome data, especially as it pertains to performance funding metrics, and career, internship, and co-op assistance are important. Institutions need to offer career and internship advising services are available to international students and career advisers need to know about U.S. employment laws for international students.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this study has been to deepen understanding, both descriptive and theoretical, of the experiences international Chinese students undergo during their college choice process (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987); and the use of agency-based recruitment in the United States from an organizational perspective (Fischer, 2011). Having utilized a qualitative approach, my first recommendation is that future research investigate this from a quantitative platform to see any causal effects of having used an agent, versus those who do not use agents, to determine how to proceed for the betterment of the international student population. Quantitative research looks at the general case and moves toward the specific, such as how the College Choice Model was used in a
deductive approach in this research study to examine the potential influencers. Expanding the study, again through a mixed method study, to multiple institutions is certainly worth pursuing. It is important for continued research to include different types of institutions within higher education: public, for-profit, and community colleges. I was partial towards utilizing qualitative methods for this research, specifically for achieving a more in-depth form of data collection. Qualitative methods, such as interviews or a combination of interviews and surveys, allow the researcher to observe body language and expressions that may otherwise not be captured in data collection using only an online questionnaire. I examined this from an institutional and student perspective in order to provide a basis for the university setting used, and raw insight from the student into a much-understudied practice that involves a growing number of international students in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2014).

A second recommendation is to conduct a study inclusive of different nationalities. Most international Chinese students revealed that international education is expensive and intangible, thus they rely on the information and recommendations from agents to ensure that the optimal choices are made. A major finding of this study shows that family and peers influences are strong on the decision to study abroad and the choice of country and of city during the preposition stage. Similarly, the influences from agents (information and ranking) are strong on the choice of academic course and university during the search phase. Changing the study to include students from other nationalities, such as from additional top international countries India and Saudi Arabia, can show how having different cultural, political, and economic contexts can certainly change the outcome of responses. Understanding the international student demographic is important,
and they should not be expected to fit into American models. International students have unique needs and must be accommodated differently than U.S. students for these student services. Therefore, it is recommended that further research focusing on international students from specific nations include additional countries to broaden the scope and have a better understanding of the motivations of the students from individual nations through comparison. Ultimately, by understanding the influencers of these international students during the process, it is also hoped that this research will provide positive implications for colleges in the United States in promoting, attracting and assisting future international students.

Additionally, another recommendation of widening the scope of research on graduate students may yield many new findings. Graduate student responses for influencers in the search process may include: reputation of the institution and the specific major, accreditation, post-graduation internships, and program rankings. A comparison of factors dissimilar between undergraduate and graduate international students can better structure collaboration efforts from educational agents too. Further, more research should be conducted to better understand the similarities and differences between the undergraduate and graduate college choice process to ultimately lead to a framework of graduate student recruitment. Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) three-phase model used in this research could be adapted to align with the needs of prospective graduate students. This framework will lead to strategic decision making for programs to better allocate scarce resources and expensive recruitment budgets.

Furthermore, the final recommendation is to expand this study to international students studying at countries other than the United States. This would produce a more
informed comparison, and analysis would be enhanced by having a better understanding of the motivations of students when deciding to study abroad, and the thought processes utilized when selecting higher education institutions within, and out of, the United States. Conversely, the sample in this study is composed of undergraduate international Chinese students who are currently studying at the University of Miami. International Chinese students showed reasons for attending; however, more research should be done on the international Chinese students who finally decided not to enter the University of Miami as a comparison. The University of Miami can learn from the students specifically which aspects they should improve upon that caused these students to withdraw their application. Even though the results of this study did not indicate program of study as a significant factor, it is important to understand the viewpoints of international students on their majors and their employability. The results from the qualitative phase indicate that international education is an attractive investment that carries both influences, perceived as pros, and barriers, perceived as cons. Nevertheless, it would be insightful research to view these results in comparison to international students who chose to study abroad outside of the United States.

Limitations

Qualitative research has its limitations when used in generalizing to other cases (Glaser, 1992); nevertheless, there is no intent to generalize the findings to cases outside of this study, as all institutions function differently with different circumstances and strategies impacting international student recruitment. Peer persuasion is particularly strong among international undergraduate students when they are choosing a destination country, but the study does not capture international graduate students’ experiences. This
study may be used by institutions that have concerns with the use of transparent and ethical practices surrounding the use of educational agents/agencies. I realized other studies primarily selected the use of institutions that only worked with governing bodies such as American International Recruitment Council (AIRC). Unquestionably, one of the apprehensions about this practice is that there may be agencies that are not using ethical or transparent practices to recruit international students, as in research found in chapter two regarding issues of fraud found with “The China Conundrum” (Fischer, 2011). Due to the inherent international nature of my study, there were language considerations, all of the students who participated in the interviews were not native English speakers, and I do not speak any of their native languages.

At times, participants may have been unable to express exactly their thoughts and feelings in regards to a question I asked. In these cases, I clarified as much as possible through follow up questions, and I left their words transcribed verbatim, even when it might not have been the appropriate English rhetoric. International students play the central role in the use of agents in recruiting. Simply stated, without them there would be no need to recruit. I interviewed students for this project, and the student experience was kept the main focus of my research. Without a doubt, student decision-making involving the use of agents is a subject that needs much further research. I utilized works from scholars that composed my literature review to illuminate this focus on my study and dissertation.

Several personal and professional experiences influenced my decision to undertake this study. I am especially concerned about motivations of institutions that pursue internationalization arbitrarily and without defined purpose, and most especially, I
am always concerned for the well-being of international students as they pursue studies
outside of their home countries. Another limitation is that this case study site was limited
to a private university, neither inclusive of public universities nor inclusive of junior
colleges. A public school may have had very different political, economic, and funding
environments that alter the ways in which international students experience college
choice and how institutions use agencies. This could be another limiting factor to
genralizing to other institutions. This is a regrettable but necessary action to take in
order to bind this dissertation appropriately. Another limitation is that this case study site
was located in one state.

**Conclusion**

Foreign students bring many positive aspects to schools and universities. They
introduce a diversity of thought and attitudes to the college campus that provides
American students with opportunities to interact in a close manner with people of other
nations. Foreign students help to fill under-enrolled science classes and provide support
for teaching and research, particularly in the sciences. They enrich graduate programs and
education, and add important financial resources to the university economy. For example,
according to the Institute of International Education, more than 70% of undergraduate
foreign students pay full tuition, with foreign students and their dependents spending $12
billion in our economy each year (Institute of International Education, 2014). Having a
positive experience with their sabbatical in the United States, international students take
their understanding and appreciation of our culture and their feelings of goodwill back to
their homeland.
Future collaborative efforts between American academics and foreign students serve to strengthen these positive images and connections. Thus, the foreign student on a university campus is a precious commodity who needs to be protected and the relationship fostered. Colleges and universities in the United States have opportunities in ways that can open the doors to greater assistance for the international student population. International students are no different and need support beyond the realm of enrolling for courses and attending classes. By examining current services and programs in place to serve international students, colleges and universities can combat institutional isolation of this student population and can remain the world leader of international student enrollments, and offer the students the best services as institutions of higher education (Altbach, 2004).

The study suggests that influences at different stages of the college choice process, including assistance from educational agents, exert strong influence on their decision to study abroad and choice of university. Conversely, the study also captures two themes in the analysis that demonstrate barriers at different stages of the college choice process. The students expressed experiencing financial dilemmas in the predisposition stage and problematic concerns with the entrance exam component of their application process. It can be concluded that the international students experienced an evolving set of influencers as they navigated through the college choice process, in the predisposition and search phase, respectively. This suggests that for the students interviewed, international education may evoke similar experiences in not only general terms but also specific to stages of searching and applying to U.S. colleges and universities.
Finally, the study suggests that international Chinese undergraduate students from different backgrounds and different gender perceived the influence of peers and agents in a similar way and barriers alike. Therefore, it can be concluded that the experiences of students using international agents, and the decision-making process of this group of students regarding influences and barriers, are similar. It is recommended that the themes found in the analysis should be considered carefully, and used to create a baseline for future institutional research (e.g., access through survey), linking to additional initiatives discussed in the implications sections of the chapter. This may help American institutions increase their retention, recruitment, and overall international student success.
References


Beijing Service Industry Association, BOSSA, the Beijing overseas study service association, http://www.bossacn.org/


Devers, K. J. (1999). *How will we know "good" qualitative research when we see it?* Beginning the dialogue in health services research. HSR: Health Services Research 34:5 Part II (December 1999).


Kotler, P. (1976). *Applying marketing theory to college admissions*. In the college entrance examination board, a role for marketing in college admissions (pp. 54–72). New York, NY: College Entrance Examination Board.


NAFTA North American Free Trade Agreement www.americanactionforum.org/NAFTA


U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs [www.exchanges.state.gov/](http://www.exchanges.state.gov/)


APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Introduction Questions:

1. Demographic (age, gender, enrollment status)
2. What is your home country?
3. How would you describe the process of deciding whether or not to attend college? Influences?

College Choice Model’s Search Questions:

1. How would you describe your experience applying to college in general?
2. What was your experience searching college options with an educational agent?
3. How would you describe your process of searching college options? Influences?
4. How did you choose to apply to the University of Miami?
Figure 1. Flow Chart. Influence and Barriers on College Choice Model’s Search Phase.
APPENDIX C

EMAIL INVITATION

I am a doctoral student within the University of Miami’s School of Education and Psychological Studies conducting a research project on College Search Experiences from International Chinese Undergraduate Students, and I would appreciate your assistance. This research will help me better understand the services you receive from educational agents when applying to American universities.

All you need to do is participate in a short interview, which should take approximately 45 minutes. If you do not wish to participate, simply discard this email. Responses will be completely anonymous; your name will not appear anywhere on the survey.

Keep this letter for your records. If you have any questions regarding the research, contact Dr. Villarreal, Study Principal Investigator and Dissertation Chair from the School of Education & Human Development at the University of Miami via email pvx52@miami.edu

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please visit the Human Subjects Research Office site at the University of Miami http://hsro.med.miami.edu/

Thank you again for your help.

B. Jose Porta, EdD (c)
University of Miami, School of Education and Psychological Studies
b.porta@umiami.edu
APPENDIX D

CONSENT FORM

Study: College Search Experiences from International Chinese Undergraduate Students

You are being asked to participate in a study to examine the experience international Chinese undergraduate students have in their college choice search phase. We are hoping to help better understand the services international Chinese undergraduate students receive from educational agents when applying to American universities. You will be asked to complete an interview at the University of Miami Coral Gables Campus and should take about 45 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded to capture all the comments, with your permission.

No risks or direct benefits are expected for your participation. Your participation is voluntary, and your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the University of Miami. You are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

All of your answers will be coded by a pseudonym rather than your name. All electronic data will be stored in computer files that will be on password-protected computers. Only people who are directly involved with the project will have access to those records. When the project is finished and results are reported, no individual will be identified in any way.

Do you have approximately 45 minutes to participate in this research study? Would you like to participate now or at a later time? If so, let’s schedule it for a future time.

By you answering the survey/interview questions that I will ask, this means you consent to participate in this research project. Do you have any questions?

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact: Study PI Dr. Villarreal, Co-investigator Brocdyl Porta. Room 312R Merrick Building 5202 University Drive, (305) 284-3196.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the University of Miami, Human Subject Research Office at (305) 243-3195.
APPENDIX E

Coding Categories for Candidate Themes

Code Focus: The college choice experience of undergraduate international Chinese Students

CATEGORY

Code: Definition, Data Sample, Note, Sub-code(s)

1. Predisposition
   a. Determination to pursue postsecondary schooling

   **Definition:** In the first phase, students determine whether they want to pursue postsecondary schooling. A student’s background characteristics, family, significant others, educational activities, and other factors combine with institutional characteristics to formulate in the student a desire to pursue further education.

   **Data Samples:** “I would say it’s like I get a lot plan for the future when I was in high school.”…“Yeah, and my teachers, yes, they are always talking about if, if you don’t, no, yeah they are only talking about what kind of college we would be enrolling in, yeah. And my parents, they always take this for granted, you should enroll in college”

   **Note:** Familial, Peer Influence, Personal Expectations, Education goals, Parents, Financial Resources, Behavior, Attitude,

2. Finances
   a. Financial resources

   **Definition:** 1) Questions or worries about financing college education, 2) Uncertainty regarding who to speak with about finances at school.

   **Data Samples:** “One challenge just might be the, the tuition of the, um, my… The cost of the life in staying in the America. So, rather high compared to if I study in Chinese college.” “Like myself is considering… [inaudible] will be too difficult for me to study and can I like do this. For my family, it’s do they have the capabilities to offer the financials and do they really want me to study abroad and will they miss me too much? For the family, of course the financials, it’s a lot. Especially University of Miami”.

   **Note:** Family, Unmet needs, Peer support, Personal traits, Lack of, Immigration status, Difficulty with Transition, Advising, Emotional Experiences
3. Parental/Familial
   a. Parent(s) influences

   Definition: 1) Parental influence may be given by instruction and interaction, and can influence attitudes and behaviors regarding higher education.

   Data Samples: Ok, so basically, my parents want me to come to America, so I just follow what they said and I went to, uh, international high school, which direct to the America… maybe also a friend”

   Note: Information on Schools, Exams, Admissions, Ranking, Employment, Self-identification, Unmet needs, Lack of, Emotional experiences, Advising, Difficulty with transition, Immigration status, Personal traits

   i. Peer influences
   Definition: Peer pressure (or social pressure) is the direct influence on people by peers, or an individual

   Data Samples: “You need to writing. And also like social… do the internship, do volunteer job, all kinds of things…yeah, what I do I go to their agency”

4. Education Agent
   a. Search assistance

   Definition: 1) An education agent can tell you about your options for studying and living internationally and assist with visa and institution applications.

   Data Samples: “Oh, yeah my friends and my teachers. Yeah, I, I just, I just think I should do the same what others are doing, others, others, my friends beside me are all going to college and I, I have never thought about if I’m not enrolling in college.”

   Note: Information on Schools, Exams, Admissions, Ranking, Employment, Self-identification, Lack of, Emotional experiences, Advising, Difficulty with transition, Immigration status, Personal traits

   i. Application assistance
   Definition: 1) Admissions criteria, Essays, Extra Curricular, Test prep, 2) Student VISA

   Data Samples: “You need to writing. And also like social… do the internship, do volunteer job, all kinds of things…yeah, what I do I go to their agency.”
5. Search Phase
   a. Actively seeking information

   **Definition:** In the Search Stage, once a student has formed a desire to pursue additional schooling, he or she gathers information about various institutions and forms a “choice set” of institutions that match his or her criteria and values.

   **Data Samples:** “They have like specific teacher who can offer suggestion. We can sit down together, look over the documents or the website of the school. Um, they also like ranking all the university.”

   **Note:** Information on Schools, Exams, Admissions, Ranking, Employment, Self-identification, Lack of, Emotional experiences, Advising, Difficulty with transition, Immigration status, Personal traits

   i. Application, Integrity and Choice

   **Definition:** 1) Under no circumstances should students work with agencies that offer to write essays, fabricate letters of recommendation or alter test scores

   **Data Samples:** “It’s your responsibility to get the answers…be forceful and clear with what you need.” “Don’t be scared to disclose information because it won’t be used against you.”

6. Test Challenge
   a. Entrance exams

   **Definition:** 1) Chinese Exam GAOKAO, 2) U.S. Exams SAT, ACT, TOEFL

   **Data Samples:** “First is the TOEFL test, yeah, like, and also the SAT, and…I just, I guess maybe like the financial difficult I guess, but there is like a policy in China, I remember is like if you are going to, like, overseas study, the government will, like, loan a bunch of money, yeah I guess, because my parents told me like that and they were like “Oh, that’s great then”. And, yeah, but the most difficult is the English language, yeah, yeah. Yeah, maybe not like language barrier, but like the test we have to pass.”

   **Note:** Information on Schools, Exams, Admissions, Ranking, Employment, Self-identification, Lack of, Emotional experiences, Advising, Difficulty with transition, Immigration status, Personal traits
7. College Ranking
   a. Name branding

   **Definition:** 1) Rankings, done right, are a powerful, useful source of information for consumers as well as policymakers. U.S. News & World Report, we've been ranking colleges for 30 years.

   **Data Samples:** 1) “Before enrolling in college, you need to take, you know, GAOKAO, that’s college entrance examination in China, and the basic, the full score is 750, and if you are below a 200, you can’t get in college, even one college. Maybe that’s the kind of score are important barrier…at least one college ranked in the top 50”

   **Note:** Information on Schools, Exams, Admissions, Ranking, Employment, Self-identification, Lack of, Emotional experiences, Advising, Difficulty with transition, Immigration status, Personal traits

   i. Employability
   **Definition:** Expressing concerns regarding job opportunities after graduation, education quality.

   **Data Samples:** “Yeah, I was thinking like the major, the job I would do in the future, and I just want to be the top… and the influences from myself, from the classmates, also family. I decide in the high school because I think I need a like better education for the university and at that time I know people have high competition for the university in China and also even like everybody’s trying hard but they can’t get what they want finally. Um, also my parents they say they have the capabilities to offer the financials [inaudible]. It’s ok for me to go study abroad”

8. College Choice
   a. Selection of school

   **Definition:** 1) In the Choice Stage, the student is influenced not only by their choice set, but also by the yield activities of potential institutions.

   **Data Samples:** “Ok, so, um, uh the reason why I attend to a university is, is because like in our country, like basically like most of, most of the students after the high school, they go to college, and that’s the reason I choose university.”

   **Note:** Information on Schools, Exams, Admissions, Ranking, Employment, Self-identification, Lack of, Emotional experiences, Advising, Difficulty with transition, Immigration status, Personal traits