

# Understanding the Factors Influencing Institutional Choice and Satisfaction of International Students from India

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## ABSTRACT

The focus of this study was to understand the factors that influence Indian students' choice of university in the USA and to learn about their experiences as international students. The case study analyzed various factors that attracted Indian students to a specific American university and differentiated choices made by undergraduate and graduate students as well as male and female students overall. Various positive and challenging experiences were identified by Indian students and compared simultaneously at the graduate and undergraduate level. The data used in this study was collected from a survey which was taken by 70% of the Indian student population at the institution in the case study. The results highlighted that receiving a graduate assistantship or scholarship was the most influential factor for Indian students to choose their university. Faculty at the institution along with campus resources were emphasized among the positive experiences, while not having an Indian grocery store or worship center near the campus town was the most significant challenge expressed by the students.

**Key Words:** Indian Students, International Students in the United States, Satisfaction, Push and Pull Factors, Agents, Student Choice

## INTRODUCTION

Although international student enrollment growth in the United States has been leveling off since 2015, there were still 1,095,299 international students studying in

the USA in the 2018/2019 academic year. <sup>[1]</sup> Over 200,000 of these international students came from India, comprising 18.4% of all international students in the USA. India is second only to China for the largest number of international students going to the USA to study. The Indian student population is highly sought after from various nations for the benefits that they bring, whether intellectual, financial, or otherwise. Within nations, universities vie for these students and seek to best understand how international students make the decision to attend a specific overseas institution.

Much study has been given to analyzing the push and pull factors that send students to study internationally, including students from India. Factors that have led the "push" of students out of India include better quality education abroad, higher earnings potential, and courses of study not available in India. <sup>[2]</sup> Another significant push factor has been students' perception of lower quality of education in India. Higher education institutions in India have not been highly rated; many of these institutions have not been accredited and many of the ones that are accredited are not found to be of high quality. <sup>[3]</sup> Many Indian students also are motivated by an intention to eventually settle abroad through their study overseas. <sup>[4]</sup>

Pull factors for host countries for students from India include reputation for quality of education, prospects for better

employment opportunities, a convenient process for obtaining a student visa, and better academic and research facilities. [2,4] There have been conflicting findings regarding whether the presence of family or friends in the host country is influential in the decision of where Indian students choose to study abroad. [2,5] Regardless, recommendations by family, agents, and others in India have been found to be contributing pull factors. [2,4]

In addition to pull factors influencing the choice of country for study, there are additional factors that students investigate when choosing a specific university to attend. Financial issues, both tuition fees and overall cost of living, are some of the most important factors for institutional choices. [6-7] How costs may be offset by institutional assistance such as scholarships and graduate assistantships are a significant consideration for students. Institutional prestige is also a factor, but it is unclear how strong a factor it is compared to financial impacts. Both family and agents can affect institutional choice, [2,8] and some students are influenced by the desire to be in an overseas location with a similar culture. [8]

Once international students arrive at their new institutions, their experience can positively or negatively impact their retention. A key aspect of this is their satisfaction with their university experience. Students from India studying in the USA report higher levels of satisfaction than their counterparts from other countries, but institutions should not assume that this will automatically be the case at the local level. [9]

It is important for American universities to understand what motivates international students to choose specific overseas institutions and identify their performance related to international student satisfaction. There may be significant differences between international student populations, and as India is both a popular yet still emergent source for international

students this study focuses on the motivations and satisfaction factors of international students from India at a single American university.

## MATERIALS & METHODS

This study used a quantitative survey that was sent out to international students from India who were studying at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona, USA during the Fall 2020 semester. Northern Arizona University (NAU) is a public university that has a total undergraduate enrollment of over 26,000 students. It is ranked in the top 200 public universities in the USA. [10] NAU is located in Flagstaff, Arizona, a city with an estimated population of just over 75,000 people. [11] The selection of the institution provides an example of a public, regional American university that has a large student population but is not located in a large city.

The survey questionnaire was developed to identify factors that influenced Indian international students' decision to come to the institution. The questions focused on finances, family and agents, and university reputation. Additionally, respondents were asked to rate factors at the university that may have positively or negatively affected their satisfaction with the institution. The survey included 12 questions, with two of the questions open-ended for students to submit short, written answers if they desired. These two questions were follow-up questions to previous quantitative questions. The questionnaire was made available through Qualtrics.

Due to the focus on students from India, the survey was only sent to the 37 Indian students studying on campus at NAU. Students were contacted through e-mail with a link to the survey questionnaire in Qualtrics. After two weeks, a reminder e-mail was sent out to students to increase participation in the survey. Out of the 37 Indian students studying at NAU, 26 students completed the survey for a 70.3% response rate.

## RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, the survey responses were nearly evenly split between undergraduate and graduate students with slightly more graduate students responding. More males than females responded to the survey.

The findings show that majority of Indian students received a graduate assistantship or scholarship from the

university. For Indian students the financial cost of studying abroad is certainly an important element in deciding to choose which higher education institution they would attend. Thus, being able to receive a scholarship or graduate assistantship not only cuts down the cost, but also adds to the prestige factor for many Indian families that support their children to pursue education from abroad. [2,4,6-7]

**Table 1. Student Demographics: All Indian International Students at Northern Arizona University**

Are you an undergraduate or graduate student?	Number of responses	Percentage of total responses
Undergraduate	12	46.2%
Graduate	14	53.8%
What is your gender?		
Male	15	57.7%
Female	11	42.3%
Did you receive a scholarship or graduate assistantship upon your admission to Northern Arizona University?		
Yes	24	92.3%
No	2	7.7%
Was Northern Arizona University your first choice of higher education institution when deciding to study in the United States?		
Yes	8	30.8%
No	18	69.2%
Did you apply to Northern Arizona University through an education agent?		
Yes	14	53.8%
No	12	46.2%
Did you consider Northern Arizona University for its academic ranking or reputation?		
Yes	16	61.5%
No	10	38.5%
Did you have family or friends residing in Arizona when you decided to come to Northern Arizona University?		
Yes	7	26.9%
No	19	73.1%

Even though Northern Arizona University was not the first choice of higher education institution when studying abroad for nearly 70% of the students in the study, academic ranking or reputation was a factor for 61.5% of Indian students in the study. The data from Table 1 also emphasizes that many Indian students utilized an education agent while applying to Northern Arizona University. This reflects the fact that Northern Arizona University works with several education agents in India and has partnerships that help them connect and recruit students through various education agents. Considering that education agents have several offices in various Indian cities and have a well-structured marketing approach in reaching out to Indian students interested in studying abroad, the majority of Northern

Arizona University's Indian students apply through education agents. Additionally, most of the Indian students in this study applied to Northern Arizona University even though they did not have any family or friends in the state of Arizona.

Responses specific to the undergraduate and graduate students are compared in Table 2. Based on the findings, the undergraduate students utilized education agents at higher percentage compared to the graduate students. Graduate Indian students have a greater focus on their research interests and area(s) of specialization and often take several extra steps in approaching their respective department to receive some form of graduate assistantship, doing so without using an agent.

What also differentiates the choices of graduate students to the undergraduate students is that undergraduate students were more likely to consider the university for its academic reputation than graduate students were. Thus, emphasizing the graduate assistantship or scholarship playing a larger

role in the overall financial decision making when choosing Northern Arizona University for the graduate students. This finding is consistent with the findings from previous studies. [2,4] Undergraduate students were less likely to have family or friends living in the state of Arizona than graduate students.

**Table 2. Undergraduate versus Graduate preferences for Indian Students at Northern Arizona University**

Level	Undergraduate		Graduate	
	n	%	n	%
Total Students	12	46.2%	14	53.8%
Gender				
Male	6	50.0%	9	64.3%
Female	6	50.0%	5	35.7%
Graduate Assistantship or Scholarship				
Received	11	91.7%	13	92.9%
Did not receive	1	8.3%	1	7.1%
NAU being first choice				
Yes	4	33.3%	4	28.6%
No	8	66.7%	10	71.4%
Applying through an education agent				
Yes	8	66.7%	6	42.9%
No	4	33.3%	8	57.1%
Applying to NAU due to academic reputation				
Yes	9	75.0%	7	50.0%
No	3	25.0%	7	50.0%
Family and friends in Arizona				
Yes	2	16.7%	5	35.7%
No	10	83.3%	9	64.3%

The findings in Table 3 compare the results based on gender, showing that there were no significant differences outside of male students being more likely to apply through education agents than female students.

**Table 3. Male versus Female preferences for Indian Students at Northern Arizona University**

Gender	Male		Female	
	n	%	n	%
Total Students	15	57.7%	11	42.3%
Level				
Graduate	9	60.0%	5	45.5%
Undergraduate	6	40.0%	6	54.5%
Graduate Assistantship or Scholarship				
Received	13	86.7%	11	100.0%
Did not receive	2	13.3%	0	00.0%
NAU being first choice				
Yes	5	33.3%	3	27.3%
No	10	66.7%	8	72.7%
Applying through an education agent				
Yes	9	60.0%	5	45.5%
No	6	40.0%	6	54.5%
Applying to NAU due to academic reputation				
Yes	9	60.0%	7	63.6%
No	6	40.0%	4	36.4%
Family and friends in Arizona				
Yes	4	26.7%	3	27.3%
No	11	73.3%	8	72.7%

The findings in Table 4 reflect the most influential factors that Indian students considered when making their choice of university. In the results we find that there is a consensus between graduate and

undergraduate students as scholarships or graduate assistantships being the most influential factor. Additionally, the findings show that the opinions of the students' families have a larger influence on the

undergraduate student population compared to the graduate students who have a greater focus on the university reputation. Also, even though several students utilized an

education agent to apply to universities, the agent's opinion is the least influential factor both for graduate and undergraduate students.

**Table 4: Influential factors for Indian students when deciding to go to Northern Arizona University**

Question: How influential were the following factors when deciding to go to NAU?	Unimportant		Slightly Important		Moderately Important		Important		Very Important	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
University reputation	15.4%	4	0.0%	0	42.3%	11	26.9%	7	15.4%	4
Scholarship or Graduate Assistantship	11.5%	3	3.9%	1	0.0%	0	15.4%	4	69.2%	18
Family's opinion	15.4%	4	15.4%	4	26.9%	7	23.1%	6	19.2%	5
Education Agent's Opinion	53.9%	14	3.8%	1	15.4%	4	23.1%	6	3.8%	1

As shown in Table 5, among the most positive student experiences at Northern Arizona University, the campus environment was the most significant factor for Indian students. Although, if the findings are broken down into graduate and undergraduate students then graduate students seemed to highlight faculty at Northern Arizona University as the biggest positive factor, compared to the undergraduate students who seemed to consider campus environment as a more significant factor. In addition to the campus environment, the environment of the surrounding city of Flagstaff also received very high marks from students.

Perhaps surprisingly, participation in the Indian Association of Northern Arizona (the Indian cultural club at the university) seemed to be at the bottom of the list for both graduate and undergraduate students. Also, experience with a part-time job or assistantship was ranked higher for graduate students as compared to undergraduate students. This could be partially assessed to the factor that graduate students often focus on an area of interest in their research assistantship as compared to undergraduate students who may not necessarily find a part-time job linked to their area of study or may not have experienced a part-time job on campus.

**Table 5. Positive experiences for Indian students at Northern Arizona University**

Question: What have been some of your best experiences at Northern Arizona University?	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Faculty at NAU	3.8%	1	3.8%	1	42.4%	11	50.0%	13
Campus Environment (safety, resources, transportation etc.)	0.0%	0	3.8%	1	38.5%	10	57.7%	15
Flagstaff is a great city to live and pursue higher education.	0.0%	0	11.5%	3	34.6%	9	53.9%	14
Indian Association of Northern Arizona (student organization).	11.5%	3	19.2%	5	38.5%	10	30.8%	8
Experience with part-time jobs or assistantship on campus.	7.7%	2	7.7%	2	34.6%	9	50.0%	13

In terms of challenges, the findings in Table 6 show the Indian students feel that having no Indian grocery store or worship center near Flagstaff, the college town for Northern Arizona's main campus, was the biggest challenge they faced after arriving at Northern Arizona University. Similarly highlighting that having a small population of Indian students at Northern Arizona University was another major challenge they faced at the university. These points highlighted that Indian students appreciate the support of an Indian community even when they go abroad for their education. Thus, not having that support on-campus or off-campus indicates a challenge for Indian students who maybe undergoing

academic and culture shock when arriving in a new country and faced with a new education system.

**Table 6. Challenges faced by Indian students after arriving at Northern Arizona University**

Question: What are some of the challenges faced by you after arriving at Northern Arizona University?	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
Rural location of the university.	15.4%	4	46.2%	12	26.9%	7	11.5%	3
The academic programs at the university are not high quality.	23.1%	6	50.0%	13	19.2%	5	7.7%	2
Small population of Indian international students.	26.9%	7	23.1%	6	46.2%	12	3.8%	1
No Indian grocery store or worship center near Flagstaff.	3.8%	1	7.7%	2	30.8%	8	57.7%	15
It is difficult to find a part-time job on campus.	19.2%	5	46.2%	12	23.1%	6	11.5%	3

## DISCUSSION

The survey results highlight the priorities that Indian students must juggle when choosing where to study abroad. Approximately 30% of students did not have this university as their first choice to study and nearly 40% of students did not consider the institution for its academic ranking and reputation. This is in contrast with over 90% of the students in the study reporting that they received either a graduate assistantship and/or a scholarship that assisted them with the cost of their education, and 69% reporting that having financial aid was a very important factor in their decision-making. These findings show the likelihood that international students from India research and apply to several higher education institutions abroad but may eventually choose the destination based on financial considerations. This finding is in agreement with some previous literature and in disagreement with other previous research. [2,4] Thus, even though Northern Arizona University may not have been the first choice to study abroad for some of the students, considering the various factors including receiving admission along with some scholarship or graduate assistantship helped them to choose NAU over other higher education institutions.

The results show an interesting difference in the number of students who did not choose the university for the academic reputation compared to the number of students reporting on the quality of their academic programs. Nearly 40% of students did not choose NAU for its academic reputation but approximately 75% of the respondents did not feel that their academic programs were low

quality. This indicates that students' perceptions of university prestige before their arrival may be significantly different than the quality of education that they received after arriving.

The influence of education agents on Indian students' university choice was not a significant factor in the results. It is likely no coincidence that 14 students reported not using an agent and 14 students also rated an agent's opinion as unimportant. Of the remaining 12, half of those students reported their agent's opinion as important and another third reported the agent's opinion as moderately important. Thus, when used, an agent's opinion is not without value but not as important as other influences on a student's opinion.

The United States remains as the top destination to study abroad for Indian students. This is strongly reflected in the perspective that we see from Tables 2 and 3 that Indian students chose Northern Arizona University even though majority did not have family or friends living in the State of Arizona. From previous studies we find that having family or friends nearby is not the most significant factor for Indian students to consider a destination while studying abroad. [4,6,8] While having family nearby was not significant for the students, that do not mean that having aspects of Indian culture nearby is not important to them. As shown in Table 6, Indian students emphasize the lack of an Indian grocery store or worship center in the surrounding community as one of the biggest challenges they face. The context of the Indian grocery store makes sense since majority of the Indian students at Northern Arizona University live off-campus often

with other Indian students and cook Indian food. Living together and being able to share similar food is not just for cultural perspective, but also to cut living expenses which is directly tied to the overall cost of attendance in studying abroad. [4,6,8] Thus, not having an Indian grocery store in the town of Flagstaff makes the students travel two hours one way to Phoenix, Arizona for Indian grocery shopping if they do not purchase items online. Also, many Indian students studying at Northern Arizona University consider practicing a faith a big part of their identity. Particularly in times of Covid-19 when there are fewer opportunities for students to travel back to their families or see their friends on campus, the lack of a worship center adds to the mental health challenges for students adapting to the socio-cultural changes of living abroad. Both issues of lack of Indian grocery store and worship center are also reflected in Table 6 where 40% of the Indian students emphasize the rural location of the university as a challenge. [2]

What stands in contrast to the challenges faced by Indian students at Northern Arizona University is their appreciation for Flagstaff as great place to live and pursue higher education. In Table 5 we see that 88% of the Indian students emphasize their experience of living in Flagstaff as one of the strongest positive experience. This may be due to Flagstaff being known as a college town with accessible public transportation and many housing options close to the university.

Another aspect that stands in contrast to the Indian students' emphasis on lack of an Indian grocery store or worship center is the lack of enthusiasm for the Indian Association of Northern Arizona, the cultural student organization at the university, as well as the indifference in opinion for the small population of Indian students. Both these points relate to the perspective shared by Indian students in respect with having family or friends as a

reason to choose their destination to study abroad. As the biggest group of International students outside of China studying in the United States, Indian students value their return on investment through experiences with their faculty and campus much higher than cultural experiences shared with other Indian students. [1]

Findings from this study regarding areas of student satisfaction are in line with previous research showing Indian students experiencing high satisfaction at American institutions when they are socially and academically integrated at the university. [9] Over 90% of the students surveyed were satisfied with the campus environment, and nearly 90% of students were satisfied with the surrounding Flagstaff community. Also, approximately 85% of students reported satisfaction with their assistantship or on-campus employment. These findings suggest that the students felt socially integrated in the university. Academically, 92% of students in the study reported satisfaction with the faculty at the university. This finding, combined with the context of many students having a positive experience with their assistantship, indicates that the students felt academically integrated in the university as well. This level of satisfaction is important for the university to maintain, as it may make students more likely to pursue additional degree programs at the university and/or provide positive recommendations to potential students about the university.

## CONCLUSION

Although international students from India may not have rated the institution's academic reputation as highly before arriving, the students in the study were overall very satisfied with their experience. Students expressed satisfaction with the quality of their education, faculty, and the campus environment. Although students felt that the institution's rural location and lack of Indian grocery store and worship center

were challenges, the majority of students were satisfied with the city. This highlights a significant difference between the students' understanding of the university before and after arrival. The primary factor that influenced the Indian students' choice of university was the offer of a scholarship or graduate assistantship to offset the financial burden of studying abroad in the USA. The offer of financial aid enabled students to make a choice that they may not have made otherwise based on limited information about their university of study. Further study is needed to understand what sources of information students utilize to learn about institutions abroad, as well as the factors that influence the decision-making of students coming to the US from other countries besides India.

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How to cite this article: Rust D, Singh R. Understanding the factors influencing institutional choice and satisfaction of international students from India. *International Journal of Research and Review*. 2020; 7(10): 376-383.

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