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STUDENTS' LIVES: A CASE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF
TEXAS AT ARLINGTON**

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THE ROLE OF WEBSITES IN INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE
STUDENTS' LIVES: A CASE STUDY OF THE
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the Honors College of
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment
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June 6, 2014

ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF WEBSITES IN INTERNATIONAL COLLEGE STUDENTS' LIVES: A CASE STUDY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

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The University of Texas at Arlington, 2014

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The college experience of international students in the United States differs considerably from their American counterparts. When international students pursue higher education in a foreign country, they focus not only on excelling in academics, but also, on their overall development in a new culture. This thesis focuses on ways that university websites impact these students, taking the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) as a case study. This thesis project surveyed international students at UTA and made recommendations to the Office of International Education (OIE) to enhance its website in order to improve international students' college experience. Based on content analysis of survey answers, the research found that international students rely on social networks to cater to their information needs. The topics that interest international

students include course details, visa regulations, housing information, student organizations and tuition costs. The study recommended that the Office of International Education implement different steps to cater to their audience, in this case the international students. If the international students are satisfied with the amount and quality of information provided by the university, they are more likely to enroll and continue their college careers within the same university. This research suggested steps that the university can take in order to establish a strong connection with prospective and current international students.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
ABSTRACT	iv
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	viii
 Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	01
2. METHOD.....	08
3. RESULTS.....	17
4. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS....	27
5. DISCUSSIONS.....	35
6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UTA.....	37
6.1 List of employment opportunities post graduation.....	37
6.2 Detailed information about visa regulations.....	38
6.3 Provide cultural information.....	38
6.4 Create student-faculty forums.....	39
6.5 Create a student forum.....	40
6.6 Hire a Social Media Manager.....	40
6.7 Housing portals.....	41
7. CONCLUSION.....	42

Appendix

A. SURVEY QUESTIONS	43
REFERENCES	45
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION.....	47

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1.1 International students' interest and website usage are based on seniority in college class levels.....	18

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In today's digital age the virtual world has become an integral part of our lives. The use of websites as a source of information is not only important in businesses and academia but also among seekers of higher education. Previously, students would research about their universities from their peers, seniors, mutual friends, books and printed material. Today, students prefer to interact with alumni and current students, through online social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, online forums, and webinars, among others. What is the first thing that one does in the twenty-first century if one does not know a particular thing? It's simple. Google it. Similarly, international students are likely to first Google UTA and stumble upon the official UTA's website, from where they are more than likely to search for opportunities specific to international students at the university in terms of: academic advancement, employment opportunities, networking, and an American college experience. Therefore, the official website is a portal or a window through which international students would be able to get a glimpse of life at UTA.

The United States hosted about 800,000 (19%) of the 4.3 million international students studying across the world in 2012, according to the Institute of International Education's Project Atlas in 2012. According to "Christian Education: Foreign Students in the United States," by Charles D. Hurrey (1924), students have been migrating from one place to another in search of better education opportunities since the ancient Greek

times. Greek culture spread throughout the world because students would migrate to Greece in search of better education. Similarly, Roman civilization played its part in the “spread of materialistic philosophy and the place of force in civilization” when students pursued education in Rome in order to secure better positions and a better quality of life in the Roman Empire (p. 369). At present, it might be difficult to spot the long-term effect or the result of migration of students from all over the world to American universities; however, it is certain that more students are willing and able to attend universities in the United States in hopes of acquiring quality higher education. In the 2012-13 academic year there was a 7.2% increase compared to the previous year in the number of international students who were studying in the United States (Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange, 2013). According to the same report 819,644 international students studied at the colleges and universities in the United States in the 2012-2013 academic years. With American universities hosting the largest number of international students worldwide, and with universities like UTA playing a vital role in hosting this specific population—UTA is one of the top five most diverse universities in the United States and has 3,000 (8.5%) international students—universities in the United States have the responsibility toward addressing international students’ concerns and offering a valuable educational experience (*USA Today*, 2014).

International students uproot themselves from their country of origin to a new place to settle among new people. Anyone who has traveled to a new place would be able to attest to the feelings of uncertainty that are associated with travel. According to a study conducted at the University of Bergen, Norway, the factors that influence

international students studying in the university were: stable financial situation, direct and/or indirect discrimination, support group of friends, and the information that the international students received before embarking upon their study in a foreign country (Sam, 2001). At different points in their college careers international students tend to rely on different sources of information to help them make a decision about attending a university in a foreign country. In order to make an informed decision about choosing the appropriate university for one's college career international students actively seek out information on the Internet. This study focuses on how students use UTA's website at different stages in their college career that is, what kind of information sources such as the UTA website and social networking sites did they access when they were prospective international students, how do their information-seeking habits change when they are enrolled in the university, and what role does the UTA's website play in their lives when they graduate or are nearing graduation? In order to analyze how UT Arlington's website influences the international students' decision-making process and their experience as college students at the university, this study answers research questions such as:

Research Question 1: What kind of information are international students seeking at UTA's website? Apart from the information that international students seek actively by themselves on UTA's website, this study identifies particular topics of interest that influence students' decision to apply and attend the university. Identifying the topics of interest that are the deciding factors for international students to enroll or not to enroll at UTA will help the university recruit more international students and in

turn increase the rate of enrollment. According to Lacina (2002), international students are under great stress to do well academically in the United States because of the large amounts of money provided to them by either their families in the form of loans or their governments in the form of funds and grants. There are different factors that play a role in making an international student's college experience different from that of their local counterparts. In the United States, given the high cost of acquiring a college degree, in addition to the expenses of living in a foreign country, international students tend to stress out about their financial stability. Some other examples of topics influencing prospective international students' decisions are course requirements, research opportunities, quality, and cost of living conditions at the university.

Other research questions that this study addresses include Research Question 2: What information provided by UTA's website facilitated international students' decision to apply and attend UTA? Research Question 3 is what kind of information has helped international students learn about student life and navigate life as an international student in the United States? In order to ensure that the UTA website is the primary source of information for prospective, incoming, and current international students, it is important to find out how the current information presented on UTA's website and especially the Office of International Education's website impacts the students. Apart from financial tensions, the human tendency to feel alienated and uncomfortable in an unfamiliar territory is heightened among international students, since a different language, food, and culture are likely to make them feel like an outsider. International students function in an environment where idioms, phrases and

jargon are different from that of their home country. Even in the academic environment the relationship among peers and between students and professors might be less or more formal than the acceptable social norm at an American university (Ramachandran, 2011). Some students may go through physical symptoms like headaches, insomnia, mental exhaustion caused due to loneliness, culture shock and the stress of acclimatizing to a new culture (Guidry, 2002). This study explores the topics that interest international students in order to understand what helps them make academic decisions so that the university can take measures to provide that information in an easily comprehensible manner. Prospective students have a high interest in gaining all the information available before they join the university. They actively seek out information about the application process, academics, enrollment process, research opportunities and on-and off-campus living options. Identifying the topics of interest that are the deciding factors for international students to enroll or not to enroll at UTA will help the university recruit more international students and in turn increase the rate of enrollment at UTA.

According to “International Students: A Vulnerable Student Population” by Mark Sherry, Peter Thomas, Wing Hong Chui (2010), international students are more likely to build up their self-esteem and confidence and broaden their outlook when they are more likely to become independent and experience new cultures. International students often seek independence and self-determination through their connection with American students (Hurrey, 1924). Even though international students have the potential to become valuable global citizens, educational institutions might not be able

to identify and thus not fully “address the unique needs of international students” (Sherry, 2010, p.34). Thus, international students might feel unsatisfied and unaccomplished because they could not attain their full potential. A welcoming university can give a sense of community involvement and positively influence international students’ mental health. Academics are admittedly important for university students; however, it is imperative for universities to pay attention to other factors that can affect the success of international students (Sherry, 2010, p.34). The research pointed out a factor that solely focusing on “personal characteristics of international students” for example, their fluency in English language might make education providers blind to other factors “such as racism in the host community.” At the University of Toledo international students reported during the study that their major concern was “the absence of friendships with American students” (Sherry, 2010, p.41).

Another research question that this study explores is Research Question 4: How does UTA’s website design impact international students? It is important to build a global view among local and international students in order to create a strong global community, for future global citizens to interact with peers and professors from diverse backgrounds with varied perspectives. Students socialize via online social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter. In a classroom setting, students and professors use Wikis, group blogs and online file exchange system like Google Drive and Blackboard at UT Arlington (Bain, 2012). The questions answered in this paper are what kind of information are international students, both current and prospective, seeking at UT Arlington’s website, what information provided by the university’s website helped

international students make the decision to apply and attend UT Arlington, what kind of information has helped international students learn about student life and navigate life as an international student in the United States, and how has the UTA website impacted international students' trust and connection with the information presented and in turn their impressions about the university? Cultural norms might catch international students by surprise when they pursue higher education in a foreign nation; for example, consumption of alcoholic beverages in a social setting is common in the United States and European countries, which might not be a practice in some of the eastern cultures.

Thus, on the one hand, some international students might feel disconnected with either the peer group that they hang out with who happen to be Americans if they don't drink with them. However, on the other hand, those students who choose to drink with their peers might feel disconnected with their roots of their country of origin (Ramachandran, 2011). It is imperative that there is a healthy cultural exchange between local and international students so that each group understands how to function efficiently in a global community. It is the university's responsibility to facilitate a dialogue and provide a platform for intercultural interactions, and a strong website and virtual presence is important to establish a connection between an international student, the university and the student body. This thesis focuses on exploring international students' information-seeking behavior through a survey and recommending changes to the UTA website, in order to enhance its use for international students.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

An online survey was administered to current international students enrolled at The University of Texas at Arlington through the snowball sampling method. The online survey was open to 3,000 international students enrolled at UTA during the month of April 2014, and 64 international students at UTA completed the survey. Students were asked 15 questions out of which two were close-ended questions and 13 were open-ended questions, asking them to describe different aspects of their experiences as international students at UT Arlington. These questions explored what kind of information current international students searched for before deciding to pursue a degree at UTA, the sources of information that helped them make the decision to choose UTA, and what information they solely relied on when visiting UTA's website when they were prospective students. Other questions examined their current information-seeking behavior when approaching graduation day. A key element of this study is to expose how international students find information about housing on-and off-campus, and how they get information about transportation in and around Arlington, Texas. The final question in the survey invited the survey participant to share her/his recommendations to improve UTA's website in order to better cater to international students' needs.

The survey also included questions about international students' primary and secondary sources of information before deciding to pursue an academic degree in a foreign university. Other questions enquired how they get their information about non-academic, extra-curricular activities, and campus life. The aim behind conducting this particular survey was to examine the information-seeking behavior of international students at different stages of their academic career. The goal was to analyze the answers and recommend the Office of International Education (OIE) and the UTA administration changes in order to enhance their virtual online presence through the office's website and presence on social networking websites.

The following questions were asked in the survey and after administering the survey to the target audience it has been observed that the survey has its merits and demerits. In this section each question has been analyzed in terms of what the survey questions initially intended to measure. In the following chapters the results of the survey have been analyzed in terms of individual answers. In the limitations and future research recommendations chapter the limitations of this particular survey and recommendations for further research have been outlined.

Question 1: Do you accept or decline participation? The first question is in line with the Informed Consent Document (ICD) required by the Internal Review Board (IRB) protocol, and it describes the purpose and methodology of the thesis to potential participants. The aim of this question was to ensure that there is full disclosure from the researcher to the participant about the implications and purposes for which the answers would be used. It also ensured that the potential participants understood that their

responses would remain anonymous and that the researcher would also not know their identity. Sixty-four international students attempted the survey and all of them accepted to participate in the survey.

Question 2: As a prospective international student in the United States, what kind of information were you specifically looking for on the University of Texas at Arlington's website? This question intended to measure international students' information-seeking behavior in their role as a prospective student prior to enrolling at UTA as an international student. This question sought to get an idea of the different range of topics that prospective students are interested in. The aim of asking this question in the survey was to identify the various topics of interest and recommend OIE different pieces of content and different topics that they should include on their website in order to target prospective students' needs and interests. In this way, the OIE's website would be able to get more traffic from prospective international students. If prospective international students are more interested in the content presented on OIE's website, then students are more likely to explore further into what the university has to offer, thus, making them strong potential candidates for enrolling at UTA.

Question 3: As a prospective international student, which sources of information helped you make the decision to choose UT Arlington? This question was intended to measure the number and kind of competitors in the market who provide similar information as provided by UTA's website to international students. The aim is to find out how UTA's website can customize its content to specifically appeal to and suit the

needs of its international student community by targeting prospective international students in particular.

Question 4: As a prospective international student, for what information did you solely rely on UT Arlington's website? The fourth question was included in the survey in order to measure prospective international students' dependence on UTA's website. This question goes hand-in-hand with the previous question to a certain extent; in that, the third question aimed at identifying different topics that prospective students were interested in when deciding on pursuing a degree in a foreign country. The fourth question aims at understanding the topics that the target audience is interested in and rely especially on UTA's website to provide them the complete information. From the analysis of answers, the Office of International Education can get recommendations and suggestions to further enhance the information already on the website that the audience is interested in and ensure that prospective students get an accurate and complete picture of the university both academically and in terms of extra-curricular activities.

Question 5: What information did you receive only from UT Arlington's website which played a major role in your decision to choose UT Arlington? This question was asked in order to measure exactly which topics and pieces of information displayed on UTA's website were instrumental in their decision to attend UT Arlington. This question targeted specifically toward prospective international students was included in the survey so that the answers would enable us to understand the particular pieces of content on UTA's website that have appealed to prospective international students in the past. The aim was to recommend changes and suggestions to the Office

of International Education and the UT Arlington administration particular ways in which the information on the website can be enhanced in terms of details and portraying it in different media. Twelve students (19%) reported that the research related information they received only from UTA's website played a major role in their decision making process.

Question 6: As a current international student, what kind of information do you normally seek at UT Arlington's website? Question 2 to 5 were targeted international students' information-seeking behavior when they were prospective students at UTA; however, this question intends to explore their information-seeking habits when currently enrolled at UTA. The aim of comparing these two separate target audiences was to develop recommendations and suggestions for the UTA website developers so that they can undertake the task of appealing to current international students via their official website and maintaining student interest. At the same time the UTA website's developers can fulfill the role of delivering accurate and updated information to current international students.

Question 7: Once you are approaching graduation, what kind of information do you seek on UT Arlington's website? This question was targeted toward prospective alumni who also happen to be international students. After graduating from an American university, international graduates have different career paths as compared to their local counterparts primarily because of their visa status. International students start applying for jobs and/or further options of higher education such as graduate school and/or doctoral degree. This question was asked in order to explore what topics

graduating international students are interested in and how UTA can better cater to their needs. This question aims to get specific answers about graduating seniors' topics of interest and recommend UTA's website ways in which they can enhance the content on the website in order to better equip graduating students for their future careers. The aim of this question is to get specific from survey participants about the topics that they are interested in, the most, on UTA's website. Another purpose of including this particular question in the survey was to use the answers as a basis to recommend the UTA's website creators to enhance the website content in order to equip graduating students for their future careers.

Question 8: Where did you find information about housing options on-and off-campus? This question was intended to identify international students' source of information about housing and living conditions. Students who live away from their hometown like international students are concerned about their living conditions in a foreign country. The aim of this question is to get an idea of how UTA's website can include content about housing options; for example, adding interactive maps and photo galleries in order to paint a better picture for incoming students who are exploring their housing options.

Question 9: Where do you live? This question was intended to get an idea of how many students who participated in the survey lived on-campus and how many lived off-campus, in order to organize content on UTA's website to cater to the requirements of the targeted audience of international students. For example, on-campus students are interested in learning about safety and activities on-campus, whereas, students who live

off-campus might be interested in activities to do off-campus and transportation options to and from their apartment to campus. Question 9 was a multiple-choice question, which helped to get a clear idea about how many students who responded lived on-campus and how many lived off-campus.

Question 10: Do you have any roommates? The survey included this question to understand if international students preferred to live with roommates or whether they preferred to live by themselves. The answers to these questions are an added piece of information which would help in making recommendations to the Office of International Education and UTA's website building team about the kinds of plans they should start in order to ensure that students are able to connect with each other and decide their housing and apartment sharing plans. This question is also connected to the next question that asks respondents to share how they found their present roommates.

Question 11: How did you find roommates to live with, if any? This question was asked in the survey to understand which platforms UTA's international students, both current and prospective, chose in order to search for roommates. By learning how international students find roommates in Arlington, the Office of International Education and UT Arlington's administration can interact with international students directly via their chosen medium. For example, in this particular survey it is seen that a majority of the respondents have found their respective roommates through social networking websites such as Facebook and Yahoo groups; therefore, it is highly recommended that OIE create an official Facebook group solely dedicated toward helping international students find roommates and encourage intercultural interaction.

Question 12: Where did you find information about transportation in and around Arlington, Texas? Since Arlington is located between two major cities, Dallas and Fort Worth, mobility becomes crucial for international students; some might not have access to a vehicle and/or a United States license. This question was included in the survey to find out how international students received and sought out information about transportation within the City of Arlington, and its surroundings. This helps us understand what steps the OIE needs to take in order to give international students a detailed overview about the transportation system in and around Arlington so that students have a prior idea and can readily access the OIE's webpage in order to stay updated with the changes in routes or prices of transportation services such as the MAX bus service, DART rail service and the UTA shuttle.

Question 13: How did you get your supply of groceries? The aim of this particular question was to understand specifically how did international students get to the stores to get their supply of groceries; for example, if they carpoled or used UTA's shuttle service or any other means of transportation particularly to get basic necessities like grocery items. Sometimes students don't realize that they need to look for particular pieces of information, and this is where website designers can anticipate user needs and present the audience with pieces of content that would fulfill their need to know.

Question 14: Were you satisfied with the information about international student organizations available on UT Arlington's website? College students generally get involved in different organizations and clubs of their interest, be they academic or extra-curricular. International student organizations provide a platform for all students from

different countries and backgrounds to interact with each other and form support group systems, which can help international students in adjusting to life in a foreign country, excel academically and motivate them to be sensitive and aware global citizens. This question intended to find out the level of satisfaction with UTA's website regarding availability and easy accessibility of information about international student organizations. This question is in context with Question 15, which asks survey participants to give their recommendations about how Office of International Education (OIE) should improve the content on the website.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

The online survey was open to 3,000 international students currently enrolled at The University of Texas at Arlington (UTA) and yielded a total of 64 responses. All 64 students did not answer all 15 questions because, except for the first question that asked for the students' consent; the remaining questions were optional and participants could skip them if they wished. An overall analysis of answers reveal that international students at UTA browse through UTA's website more frequently when they are contemplating to choose UTA as their school. As prospective students, when their information-seeking interest is high their use of UTA's website is the highest. For current international students, their interest in seeking out information is lower and they tend to use the website to check their emails and class schedules; therefore, their website usage is lowered. As far as graduating seniors and seniors are concerned, their interest in seeking information about future opportunities is heightened; therefore, their website usage goes up again (See Figure 1.1).

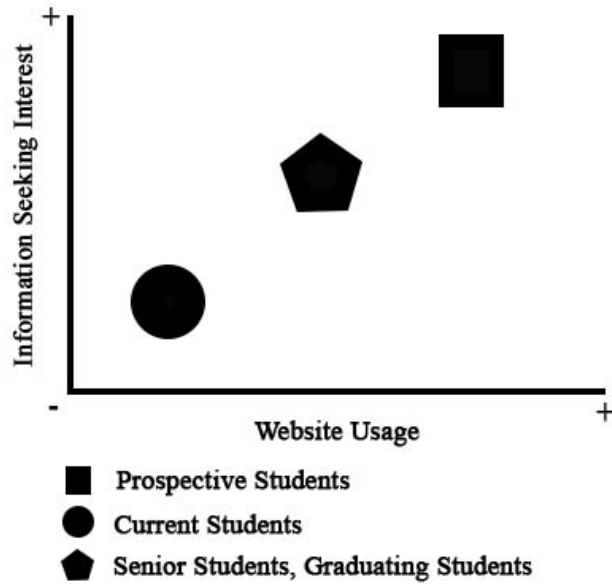


Figure 1.1 Relationship between international students' information seeking interest and website usage

Respondents said that as current international students they access certain sections of UTA's website regularly; however, their interest in the various topics is less as compared to the time when they were prospective international students. Some respondents said they do not access the international student section of UTA's website once they are enrolled at UTA; however, they check back for updated information related to exams, course schedules, and schedule of university related events. Most of the survey participants' UTA related information is acquired through Mav Mail, student center, and emails from professors. As current international students, they access social networking websites and international student organizations' respective webpages to get

information; thus, their website usage of UTA's website remains limited when they are current students. When these international students near graduation or enter their senior year they access the International Student Section of UTA's website mainly to get information about working permits in the United States such as Optional Practical Training (OPT), Curricular Practical Training (CPT), in addition to rules and regulations for graduating and maintaining their visa status in the country while attending college and after graduation. However, international students' first instinct is to approach upperclassmen or other students who have been at the university for a longer period of time. Survey responses reveal a pattern of high interest and/or high traffic to the UTA website of international students when they are first looking for information as prospective students. The interest level reduces as international students become more accustomed to campus life and form their own support groups.

The answers varied to survey Question 2, "As a prospective international student, which sources of information helped you make the decision to choose UT Arlington?" Course related information was a topic of prime concern for 19 students (29%) who reported that they searched for information related to courses offered at UTA on UTA's website, while, 17 students (26%) said they extensively explored the information available about research opportunities with different professors on UTA's website as prospective students at UTA. They turned to UTA's website for all the information related to ongoing research and faculty profiles. Tuition and fee structure was a topic of interest for prospective international students as reported by 13 students (20%) who answered Question 2. Nine students (14%) reported that they used the UTA

website as a source to search for housing and living options during their school years at UTA. Seven students (11%) said they looked up on-campus job opportunities and placement after graduation on UTA's website before enrolling at UTA. Ten students (15%) said they explored the different funding and financial aid opportunities available on UTA's website as a prospective student browsing through UTA's website while applying to different universities in the United States. One student reported that she/he looked for cost of living in the Arlington area when she/he was a prospective student.

Some of the first topics that prospective international students search for on UTA's website are the admission requirements. The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Graduate Record Examination (GRE), and the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores required to even be considered as a potential candidate are the topics of information that arise in international students' minds. Availability, quality, and easy accessibility of this information determines whether they look further into the school or turn to a different website.

In response to the third question targeted toward prospective international students asked about the various sources of information that were instrumental in to students when they were in the phase of choosing universities. Respondents said that some of the factors that helped them decide on UTA as the university as a place where they wanted to pursue their higher education were UTA's strategic location near Dallas and Fort Worth, which are major two cities for employment opportunities. Information related to research projects conducted by professors at UTA was instrumental for 10 students (15%) who reported that they considered this particular factor before making

the decision to enroll at UTA. Ongoing research projects were important for 9 students (14%) who reported that the information provided about the courses offered in different fields helped them determine which school to enroll in and these international students received coursework related information primarily from UTA's website. Websites that rank different universities on the basis of factors such as research and academics were a crucial source of information for 12 survey participants (19%) who reported that they used different ranking websites to determine whether they should enroll at UTA to get a degree. This piece of information was something that this question intended to measure, and one of the strengths of this question is that respondents were able to understand what was asked and were able to answer in detail. Thus, UTA's website would be a one-stop hub for information that students from all over the world look for when choosing to study in a foreign country. Three students (4%) reported that reviews from alumni about the university helped them as prospective international students to decide to pursue a degree at UTA. One student said she/he was influenced by the photos of the university events and buildings posted on the website to make the decision to attend UTA. Interactivity is an important website feature so OIE's website should include photos, photo galleries, videos illustrating the Maverick culture and interviews with other students both international and local about their experiences at UTA. Five students (8%) said the affordable tuition fees played a vital role in their decision to enroll at UTA. Seventeen students (26%) reported that information provided by fellow students and alumni on social networking sites, especially Facebook, was an exceptionally important deciding factor in their choice of UTA as their university.

For the fourth question, “As a prospective international student, for what information did you solely rely on UT Arlington’s website?” 27 students (42%) reported that they solely relied on UTA’s website to provide them with accurate and updated information about course content and structure. They said they depended on UTA’s website to give a detailed course description and list out the requirements for completing their degree. This particular finding shows that UTA should invest in enhancing the existing information available about course structure on the website, in addition to updating it with new information. One recommendation to UTA’s website would be to make the course information page more interactive by adding more photos and also giving examples of how taking a particular course would make students better professionals after they graduate from UTA. Departmental research opportunities and faculty profiles were important interest topics for 12 students (19%) who responded to this particular question, while, 9% (n=6) reported that they depended on UTA’s website to get information about housing options and procedure for living both on-and off-campus. This data shows that prospective international students’ confidence in UTA’s website to provide them with holistic picture of living options in and around campus is relatively lower than their confidence in UTA’s website for academic information.

Question 5 asked students about the information that they received only from UTA’s website and which topics on the website played an important role in their decision to choose UTA. Twelve students (19%) reported that the research related information they received only from UTA’s website was instrumental in their decision

making process. Seventeen students (26%) reported that they depended on UTA's website to give them the correct information about tuition and fee structure.

As current international students, 7 students (14%) reported that they searched for information about different courses offered during their semesters at UTA more often than any other piece of information. In the role of current students at UTA, 11 survey participants (22%) reported that they accessed UTA's website regularly to stay updated with the upcoming events, student activities, and deadlines for registration. Four students (8%) said they were interested in on-campus employment opportunities and regularly browsed UTA's website (SNAP jobs is a portal where UTA's departments post vacancies for on-campus jobs) to apply for on-campus jobs. Three students (6%) reported that they looked for updates from Office of International Education regarding I-20 form, which is issued by a university or college to a student who intends to study in the United States on student visa, Optional Practical Training, student visa and work visa rules before and after graduation.

The seventh question asked about international students' information-seeking behavior once they are close to graduation. Future employment opportunities and job openings are sufficiently important interest topics that 18 students (28%) said they actively browsed through UTA's website. They said they sought more information about jobs so that they can secure employment right after graduation with either a Bachelor's or Master's degree. Nine students (14%) reported that upon nearing graduation they kept a close eye on graduation ceremony details and deadlines to apply for graduation.

Question 8 enquired about where the survey participants find information about housing options on and off-campus. Nineteen students (37%) reported that they relied on UTA's website to get information about on-campus living options. Five students (10%) said they used virtual groups such as those on social networking websites like Facebook to find information about housing options on- and off-campus. Three students (6%) said they relied on their friends and other alumni they met via Facebook and mutual friends to make their housing arrangements.

Out of the 64 survey respondents 52 answered Question 9 that asked survey participants where they lived: whether on-campus or off-campus. About 44 students (85%) reported that they live on-campus, either in apartments or in the residence halls. Eight students (15%) reported that they lived in off-campus apartments. The tenth question asked students if they had roommates, and 47 students (90%) said they have roommates regardless of whether they live on or off-campus, while, 5 students (10%) said they did not have roommates.

Out of the 46 students who answered question 11, around 22 students (48%) reported that they found their roommates via Facebook groups, Yahoo forums and groups, and other social networking websites. Other ways of finding roommates to live with, as reported by 8 students (17%), were interacting with alumni and through mutual friends.

Question 12 asked participants where they found information about transportation in and around Arlington, Texas, wherein, 10 students (20%) reported that they searched on Google and interacted with students, virtually via social networking

sites such as Facebook, to find out transportation information. Eighteen students (36%) reported that they shared car rides with alumni living near the university, roommates, and classmates. Six students (12%) reported that they accessed the city of Arlington website, DART.org, which is the transportation system in Dallas, and www.RideTheMax.com, which is the Metro Arlington Xpress (MAX) that provides bus rides between College Park Center and CentrePort Station.

Apart from information about transportation in and around Arlington, the survey included a question exploring how international students got their supply of groceries, and 26 (52%) reported they took help from friends with cars, carpooled, and paid the friend who drove, in order to go to different shops for grocery. Five students (10%) reported that they owned a car and drove themselves to different grocery stores. Four other students (8%) relied on taxis and bikes. Some students responded with the names of shops where they get their groceries from; for example, 15 students (30%) reported they usually shop at Wal-Mart. Two students (4%) said they shopped at Target and two others said they shopped at Indian stores.

Question 14 and 15 explored the international students' level of satisfaction with information about international student organizations on UTA's website and what the students' recommendations were to improve UTA's website. About 50 students answered this particular question and 32 (64%) said they were satisfied with the information about international student organizations available on UTA's website. Eighteen students (36%) said they were not satisfied with the amount and quality of information provided on UTA's website about international student organizations on

campus. Question 15 yielded detailed answers, with a majority of survey participants pointing out that they would like to see more interactivity on OIE's webpage. Other recommendations from the answers to this particular question are discussed in the Recommendations for UTA chapter.

CHAPTER 4

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

The survey could have been divided into different sections, each pertaining to a targeted section of the audience. For example, the first question would be common to all participants, whereas Questions 2 to 5 would be targeted toward prospective international students and current international students would answer Questions 6 onward. In this way, the survey participants would have more energy and interest in answering specific questions targeted toward them and the answers received would be relatively more coherent and concrete.

A limitation of the second question (As a prospective international students in the United States, what kind of information were you specifically looking for on the University of Texas at Arlington's website?) is that it wasn't framed in the form of a multiple-choice question. For future research purposes, this question could be phrased as a multiple-choice question with options such as: A. research opportunities, B. scholarships and financial aid, C. cost of living, and D. other; as the possible choices to check. This survey question should have had multiple choice answers so that it would have been possible to measure a definite level of interest in different topics among the targeted audience, which in this case are the prospective international students who access UTA's website because of their interest in getting to know how an American university system works.

The methodology of this thesis should have been constructed to reflect a qualitative focus which would include small sized (about 10-15 students) focus groups in order to conduct in-depth interviews of students chosen from these particular focus groups. If this question were asked in an interview, the students would be able to give a detailed description of their information-seeking behavior. Dividing the target sample into prospective and current students would have been an efficient way of ensuring that the respondents were not confused because of the questions that did not apply to them.

Question 3 explores which sources of information prospective international students relied on for their decision to enroll at UTA. For future research, I would recommend dividing the survey questions into specific sections, each section targeted towards a particular audience, such as, prospective students, current students, and graduating students. It would have been easier for the survey participants to distinguish between their roles and understand the question better, if the survey questions were divided into different sections. The question asked about sources of information; however, some of the answers reflect the factors that influenced their choice of university rather than from where they found that information.

Question 4 (As a prospective international student, for what information did you solely rely on UT Arlington's website?), should have been rephrased as a multiple-choice question. As a multiple-choice question, this particular question would have yielded more specific and measurable answers. This question should have been rephrased as "As a prospective student how would you rate your reliance on UTA's website for information? A. very high; B. high; C. low; D. very low; E. I relied mostly

on other sources of information. By phrasing the question in a different way it would be possible to measure the interest level of prospective international students in the different topics on UTA's website.

The next question, "What information did you receive only from UT Arlington's website which played a major role in your decision to choose UT Arlington?" had its limitations in its phrasing, in that it would have yielded specific and tangible answers if it had followed a differently phrased previous question. The participants would have understood better if the previous question (Question 4) had asked them their level of dependence on UTA's website and was followed by this particular question (Question 5) thus giving the survey participants an opportunity to elaborate and explain in detail regarding the information that helped them make a positive decision about enrolling at UTA.

In order to get a specific response, Question 6, which was originally phrased "As a current international student, what kind of information do you normally seek at UT Arlington's website?" should have been phrased as a multiple-choice question where the options would be Courses, Calendars, Rules and Regulations, My Mav, Other (with space provided to elaborate on anything else that they look for on UTA's website). A similar question was asked in the earlier questions of the survey; however, it measured the information-seeking behavior of prospective international students. This particular question targeted current international students. In order to enhance this particular research further, in terms of ensuring that the data collected would yield strong and conclusive results, I recommend that the survey should have a healthy mix of

open-ended, close-ended, and multiple-choice questions. This question, for example, if phrased as a multiple-choice question, would provide survey participants with a starting point for their thought process, if there are available options to choose from. If they do not find the option that they were looking for, they can add their opinion in the Other section.

Question 7, which was originally an open-ended question (Once you are approaching graduation what kind of information do you seek on UT Arlington's website?), if phrased in the following way might have yielded a more detailed response from survey participants: "As a graduating international student, what information should UTA's website include in order to cater to your career interests?" I believe this question would have encouraged respondents to go into specific details about current and potentially useful information presented on UTA's website. For the purposes of further research I recommend conducting in-depth interviews with recent alumni in order to observe their information-seeking behavior and the kind of content they prefer to browse through, so that the Office of International Education can devise appealing and useful content for the website in collaboration with the Student Alumni Association.

Question 8 was intended to explore how international students received information about on and off-campus housing and UTA because housing and living conditions are a primary concern for international students moving to the United States from a different country. This question would have yielded specific values if it was phrased as a multiple-choice question with options such as A. UTA website; B. social

networking websites; C. other (with space provided to go into specific details). Framing the original open-ended question as a multiple-choice question would have reduced the participants' time spent in taking the survey in addition to helping the researcher get more accurate results.

Question 9 was a multiple-choice question with two options to choose from (Where do you live? On-campus; Off-campus). A primary limitation of this particular question might have been the lack of a common definition of on-campus and off-campus. For some respondents on-campus might have meant those apartments that are on-campus and off-campus are those that are situated farther away from campus. The different interpretation of the terms "on-campus" and "off-campus" might have yielded skewed data. A recommendation for further research is to define the term "on-campus" as a university-owned housing property and "off-campus" as externally owned housing property, regardless of the distance between the housing property and campus buildings.

Question 10 asks whether the participants have roommates or not in the form of a yes-or-no question. An apparent limitation of this particular question is that it does not define the word "roommate" and there might be different cultural connotations of the word. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the word "roommate," as a person who shares a room, apartment or house with someone else. As a future recommendation for further research, I would recommend defining the meaning of "roommate" within the question in order to make sure that all survey participants are on the same page in order to ensure clarity in the answers. Another recommendation would be to include options, such as A. no roommate, B. one roommate, C. two roommates, D. three and/or more

roommates, so that participants can choose from a variety of options and give the researcher a clear understanding of the target audience's information needs.

Question 10 and 11 go hand-in-hand; in that, one is a yes-or-no question asking participants whether they have any roommates and the other is a follow-up enquiring how these participants found their roommates (if any). In order to make the survey taking method more efficient Question 11 should have been conditional to the answer of Question 10; for example, if a respondent said "No" to Question 10 they would directly be referred to Question 12 and if they reported "Yes" to Question 10 they would be able to answer Question 11.

Question 12 and 13 explored the transportation aspect of international students' lives. As far as the limitations of Questions 13 are concerned, the question itself is vague, in that, it seems to have misled the participants with what exactly the question was trying to ask. Instead of "How did you get your supply of groceries?" rephrasing the question as "How did you get means of transportation to get your supply of groceries?" would have yielded uniform answers about whether they use their own vehicles, drive with friends, take a taxi and/or ride a bike to get to the nearest grocery store. This question is in context with the previous questions exploring international students' source of information on transportation related needs. However, it appears that this question misled some survey participants into thinking that the survey asked them for the names of grocery stores where they shopped from. This piece of information was something that the survey did not intend to find. At the same time, it is interesting to note that more students visit Wal-Mart than any other grocery store. This finding can be

used to recommend Office of International Education, UT Arlington shuttle service, and the city of Arlington transportation services to expand on the shuttle service available to and from Wal-Mart next to the Cowboys stadium two or three times a week.

If Question 14 had been phrased as a multiple-choice question it would have been possible to get an idea about the survey participants' opinion on a scale of high satisfaction with the information provided on UTA's website to a very low level of satisfaction. The options could use a Likert scale and provide choices such as A. highly satisfied; B. satisfied; C. neutral; D. not satisfied; E. disappointed. Question 14 and 15 were placed one after the other because Question 15 asked participants to share their suggestions to improve UTA's website. The results from these two particular questions can be used to recommend changes to the Office of International Education. At the same time, there is opportunity for further research; in terms of using these results as a foundation to devise an interactive website dedicated to international students and building up a social media networking presence for the OIE.

The survey method was beneficial to a certain extent, in that, it was possible to get the opinion of many international students and understand their information-seeking behavior; however, if the thesis used a qualitative method of gathering data through interviews it would have been a smaller focus group but it would have yielded more in-depth answers. This thesis has just scratched the surface of what could potentially be a further in-depth study of the information-seeking behavior of international students not only at UT Arlington but also in other universities across the United States. This particular set of questions administered by this survey can serve as a starting point to

build up a set of more coherent and specific questions that would yield more concrete results.

Another weakness of this particular survey is the respondents' self-knowledge, because this factor could skew the data and the results of the study; for example, the students might report that they access UTA's website more often than they actually do because every time a student logs into an on-campus computer, the default website appearing on the screen is the university's website. Additionally, the size of the sample is small; however, this study is one of few studies available focusing on international students' online information-seeking behavior. The methodology of this particular thesis can be used as a foundation to construct a cohesive survey method. Another option would be to focus on the interview method in order to get a wholesome picture of the concerns of international students at UTA. This would help in devising a concrete action plan catering to their information-seeking and social needs through the digital medium of websites. An interactive website can be created using the information and data collected through in-depth interviews and survey results.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSIONS

Even though the Office of International Education's (OIE) website has links to different types of information on their website, the survey answers show that students prefer talking to their peers and current students in the university in order to get the information they need. Seldom do they actively seek out the OIE's website, which can be accessed directly through the UTA's website. The front page of the website does not have a direct link to the Office of International Education. Website visitors are required to either type-in relevant keywords in the search bar (e.g.: international, international education, international students, etc.) to reach the OIE's webpage. Given the statistics that of 35, 000 enrolled students at UTA, about 3,000 students are international, the website needs to reflect that; in that the front page should have a direct link to the OIE's website.

The rotator on the front page of the Office of International Education's website shows the latest news and events. On the left there is a list of "Quick Links" to information specific to international students such as Immigration Links, Office of International Education Programs Facebook page, etc. Through the "Programs & Events link" students can access information about student organizations; however, there is only one student organization listed on the tab, and that is the "International Student Organization." Instead of students having to search for different international

organizations by themselves on the Mavorgs website, I recommend that the website have a tab with a list of links to the websites of individual student organizations' websites. In that way, the whole list will give the students an idea of different international organizations at UTA in one single place on the website.

A major objective of designing informational websites is that the designer has to anticipate the kind of information that the user might want, a process known as anticipating user demand and designing the Graphic User Interface catering to the users' demands. In today's world, users generally don't know what they are looking for, especially international students who are unaware about the different facets of campus life both academic and co-curricular. Therefore, website producers need to anticipate the user's demands and create content and design websites in such a way that the users, in this case the students, get all the information they need and the information that they want, easily at their fingertips.

CHAPTER 6

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR UTA

The Office of International Education's website could use some changes in terms of the content that is presented on the webpages and the way in which they are connected to the rest of the UTA website.

6.1 List of Employment Opportunities Post Graduation

As far as the content of the website is concerned, it is observed from the survey answers that students would like to get a realistic picture of employment opportunities after graduation. They want to know how a degree from the University of Texas at Arlington would help them in the proverbial real world. One recommendation is to include a comprehensive list of companies and firms that have a record of hiring international students. The process to hire an international student on a company's staff is different from hiring a local student, and some potential employers might not be aware of it or might not have the resources to process the paperwork required to hire international students. In order to portray a realistic picture of the job scenario after graduation, the university needs to be transparent with the student body to help prospective international students plan their higher education at UTA. International students develop a global perspective in the workplace environment that encourages them to look for opportunities elsewhere in the global market. In order to cater to this

particular demand the university job listings should include internationally located employers so that the students have a wide range of exposure and flexibility to apply and explore from.

6.2 Detailed Information About Visa Regulations

Visa regulations and maintaining a legal status are common concern for an international student in any country. The survey answers show that about half of the students surveyed until now would like to see a detailed and easily understandable overview and specific details about the visa process and visa regulations. In order to make international students feel more welcome and comfortable with the visa process, I recommend that the Office of International Education to host videos on their website, where an advisor gives a step-by-step overview of the process, including captions in common languages spoken around the world. Creating videos with advisors would make the website more interactive and at the same time students would connect better with the university.

6.3 Provide Cultural Information

This might seem quite basic, but international students would like to get a clear idea about the culture, norms and holidays celebrated in the United States. This information is available on multiple websites students can search through on Google. The findings suggest students are looking for information about the events, activities and support groups that they can be a part of, how they can feel comfortable, and at home when studying at UTA. When asked about what kind of information students would like to see on the website, more than half of the respondents said they would like

to know about different kinds of cuisines available around campus, and a few tips from local students about on-campus and off-campus life. My recommendation for the OIE's website designing team is to include a video of international students sharing their experiences at UTA and a video of non-international students sharing their experiences of being at the university. A video on campus life would help international students understand UTA in a better way and make them inclined to be involved on campus. One student's response to the question "How would you improve UTA's website to better cater to international students' needs?" was "It should have documents, videos, images, maps, and be more interactive in ways other than the traditional old standard ones. e.g.: a food map around the campus and city. I know for a fact that vegetarian students from Asia at least go to a few different places before they can find a place where there's something vegetarian. I feel sorry for them as this 'something' is almost always hash browns or fries."

6.4 Create Student-Faculty Forums

In the survey students expressed that they want the opportunity for more interaction with faculty members. Some suggested creating a departmental forum so that students could ask questions and receive answers from professors about research work and courses. An advantage of a student-faculty forum is that students would be able to get an idea of what the other students are asking and probably many of their questions will get answered in the process. Based on the findings from the survey, it is recommended to create a university-hosted online forum so that students in countries that have Internet censorship would be able to access the forum. Also, in this era of

online social networks, an online forum is likely to create a sense of community among the incoming international students primarily on a departmental level, which would later help them function well in teams.

6.5 Create A Student Forum

Students in the digital age go to online social networking websites before they explore an academic website. A primary reason could be the sense of community that these online social networks provide. Creating a student forum hosted on UTA's website would bring all students in one place and would generate more traffic toward the university's website. More importantly, the authenticity and the accuracy of the information shared would be verified if the forum is hosted on UTA's website, ensuring that students are not misled by the plethora of information exchanged on online social networks like Facebook and Twitter.

6.6 Hire a Social Media Manager

Nowadays most companies have a social media manager who works to maintain the firm's online social media presence, personality and credibility. The Office of International Education should have its own Facebook page and Twitter handle. A student employee should be hired as a social media manager so that she or he can maintain a dialogue going with incoming and current students. She or he would be able to direct questions to the correct source of information and establish a connection. Online social media updates could include sending out reminders about registration deadlines, visa renewal deadlines and Optional Practical Training (OPT) deadlines or even cultural information like registration for International Week, participating in UTA

Volunteers, the Big Event, etc. In this way the Office of International Education would be able to create an online hub where students interact with one another and forge bonds with their classmates and their alma mater.

6.7 Housing Portals

I recommend that the UTA administration work closely with the Apartment and Residence Life and Office of International Education in order to identify the best possible options for international students to live, in and around UT Arlington. From the answers to survey questions it can be seen that international students tend to interact with alumni and friends at UT Arlington via social networking websites which act as a vital source of information for prospective international students; therefore, based on this particular finding and considering that only 9% of the students who took survey said they relied on UTA's website for information about housing options, I would recommend the Office of International Education and the Apartment and Residence Life become active on social networking websites like Facebook so that they can reach the target audience of prospective international students on the platform that the students are most active on.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

A strong online presence is a tool to attract prospective international students to UT Arlington and encourage them to participate in the ongoing academic and community involvement activities that they can be a part of. Catering to international students' interests, making the UTA website a central portal for all interested international students; thus, facilitating interaction among currently enrolled students, local students, international students, faculty, and alumni. When international students interact with different members of the UTA community, they will connect with each other and identify themselves as an integral part of the Maverick community.

APPENDIX A

SURVEY QUESTIONS

Survey Questions

1. Do you accept or decline participation?
2. As a prospective international student in the United States, what kind of information were you specifically looking for on the University of Texas at Arlington's website?
3. As a prospective international student, which sources of information helped you make the decision to choose UT Arlington?
4. As a prospective international student, for what information did you solely rely on UT Arlington's website?
5. What information did you receive only from UT Arlington's website which played a major role in your decision to choose UT Arlington?
6. As a current international student, what kind of information do you normally seek at UT Arlington's website?
7. Once you are approaching graduation what kind of information do you seek on UT Arlington's website?
8. Where did you find information about housing options on and off-campus?
9. Where do you live?
10. Do you have any roommates?
11. How did you find roommates to live with, if any?
12. Where did you find information about transportation in and around Arlington, Texas?
13. How did you get your supply of groceries?
14. Were you satisfied with the information about international student organizations available on UT Arlington's website?
15. How would you improve UTA's website to better cater to international students' needs?

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BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Vallari Sandip Gupte earned her Bachelor of Arts in Communication (Broadcasting) at The University of Texas at Arlington. She worked on Honors College projects in History, Communication Theory, English and Astronomy during her college career. Gupte's research interests are in communication technologies influencing higher education, and how journalism and information-gathering techniques can help the field of higher education. Her immediate future plans include earning a Master of Science in Journalism from Columbia University in New York. Her long-term goals include focusing on applying research techniques in the broadcasting and journalism industries.