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Selection Criteria of Hospitality Programs: A Comparison of  
Undergraduate and Graduate International Students

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## **Abstract**

This paper identifies the importance of various factors between undergraduate international students and graduate international students majoring in Hospitality Management when choosing among different Hospitality programs in the United States. Specifically, the purposes of the study are to: (1) identify the factors that affect international students' decisions on choosing a hospitality program, and (2) compare the similarities and differences between the factors that affect undergraduate international students and graduate international students when choosing a hospitality program. The findings from the data will provide useful information to explain and improve hospitality programs on marketing themselves in order to attract more international students to their programs.

## Introduction

The hospitality and tourism industry has always depended on the number of travelers and the amount of travelers' expenditures. During The Great Recession, the declining economy led to a decline in the number of travelers which caused the hospitality and tourism industry to suffer. The world's gross domestic product (GDP) finally increased 4.1% in 2010 (The World Bank, 2016). Since then, the stable economy has resulted in increasing numbers of travelers all over the world and the corresponding increase in expenditures. According to the American Hotel and Lodging Association (AHLA, 2015), "Resident and international travelers in the United States spend an average of \$2.4 billion a day [in the hospitality and tourism industry]." International travelers who visited the United States brought approximately \$220.6 billion through the hospitality and tourism industry in 2014 (AHLA, 2015). Such a significant amount indicates the importance of globalization and the industry itself. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC, 2014), the hospitality and tourism industry generated almost \$7 trillion of total economic activity worldwide and supported approximately 266 million jobs in 2013. In addition, the hospitality and tourism industry made a significant contribution to the economy in the United States as the travel industry contributed \$2.1 trillion to the economy in 2013 (US Travel, 2013). The increasing demand for the hospitality and tourism industry has also promoted the need for more hospitality and tourism employees. In the United States, there were about 1.86 million employees working in the hospitality and tourism industry in 2013, and the tourism industry will be able to provide 7.9 million jobs by 2015 (AHLA, 2014). This huge job vacancy causes concern for a lack of skilled employees to fill those positions. The other reason for the lack of skilled employment in the hospitality industry is employee turnover. One of the main causes of the high turnover rate is that the employees are sometimes not qualified to be in their positions (Kysilka & Csaba, 2013). This phenomenal growth in the United States has created demand for talented globalized hospitality students, and in turn has resulted in an increased demand for international students to be involved in hospitality programs in the United States.

As the number of international travelers to the United States increased by 6.7% from 2013 to 2014, their contribution to the American hospitality and tourism industry continues to grow (AHLA, 2015). Inter-

national students have played an important role in hospitality programs because the hospitality industry is becoming a more international business (WTTC, 2015). Increasing globalization emphasizes the importance for students to gain the knowledge of different cultures (María Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006). As a result, many international students have sought the opportunity to receive their bachelor's or postgraduate degrees in other nations. Among all of the countries, the United States is the number one destination for receiving a degree (UNESCO, 2014). In addition, USA Today (2016) stated that there were over 865 hotels, with 103,230 rooms, currently under construction and scheduled to open in the United States in 2016. The high demand for talented employees in this industry led to the growth of hospitality and tourism programs in American universities and colleges (Chatfield, Lee, & Chatfield, 2012).

As globalization encourages more students to study abroad and expands the selection of higher education in hospitality programs, the selection criteria become more complicated. According to Kim, Goh, and Gan (2014), U.S. colleges and universities enrolled almost 900,000 international students for the 2013-2014 school year in all majors (Paulson, 2014). In addition, there are already many international students studying in the United States across majors. According to USCIS, the number of international students in United States “grew from 1.05 million in July 2015 to 1.11 million in July 2016, an increase of 5.5 percent” (USCIS, 2016). Many schools also have a large increase in international student enrollment from 2000 to 2014. For instance, University of Tulsa's international student population increased from 6% in 2000 to 20% in 2014 (WSJ, 2015). Hospitality programs are not exempt from this trend.

The distribution of international students in different universities varies. According to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, “The University of Southern California has more F-1 International students than any other school [that has the petition for approval of school for attendance by nonimmigrant students]” (USCIS, 2014). Moreover, during the 2014 to 2015 school year, The University of Nevada, Las Vegas had a total of 1,185 international students out of 28600 (4.14%) for overall enrollment, and The University of Memphis recorded only approximately 600 international students out of 21,356 (2.81%) overall enrollment (ISO, 2015; Rakow, 2014; UNLV, 2015; UNLV, 2016). The absolute difference is 1.33%. In other words, the percentage of international students at

UNLV is 47.33% higher than the percentage of international students at the University of Memphis. This difference is very economically significant. The large percentage difference of international students between the two schools addresses the importance of understanding factors affecting international students' choice of universities. Several existing studies have identified factors for school selection across majors (Chatfield, Lee, & Chatfield, 2012; S. Lee & Chatfield, 2015; K. Lee, Yuan, Hwang & Kim, 2012). Many existing studies have examined students' selection of universities, colleges, and specific programs in the United States (Daily, Farewell & Kumar, 2010; Hoyt & Brown, 2003; S. Lee & Chatfield, 2015; María Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006). However, limited studies exist that focus on the factors affecting undergraduate and graduate international students who are choosing a hospitality program. A review of literature on how to understand international students' decision making process when choosing a hospitality program in the United States is also limited (Hoyt & Brown, 2003; S. Lee & Chatfield, 2015; María Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006; S. Lee, & Chatfield, 2015; K. Lee, et al., 2012). To provide a better understanding of international students majoring in hospitality management, this current study will (1) identify the factors that affect international students' decisions when choosing a hospitality program and (2) compare the similarities and differences among the factors that affect undergraduate international students and graduate international students when choosing a hospitality program.

## **Literature Review**

S. Lee & Chatfield (2015) used eight main factors to examine why students chose Nevada Las Vegas Hotel College based on a very reliable conceptual framework that was constructed by Somers, Haines, & Kenne (2006). These eight main factors were financial variables, net cost, social environment, student background, institutional characteristics, institutional climate, educational achievement, and aspirations. Under these eight main factors, there were also sub-factors. For example, the cost of living and the tuition costs of the institution were the sub-factors under net cost. Among the eight main factors, five factors were also identified as very important by other studies. According to Hoyt and Brown (2003), a highly comprehensive set of factors could produce improved prediction of students' college of choice. In their precise review and summarization of many valuable factors, Hoyt and Brown (2003) analyzed 22 studies that identified

the factors affecting students' selection of universities or colleges. They then sorted a comprehensive selection of factors into ten categories based on their importance. Nine main factors ended up in the most important category: academic reputation, location, quality of instruction, availability of programs, quality of faculty, costs, reputable program, financial aid, and job outcomes (Hoyt & Brown, 2003). Their selection of categories indicated that five main factors from S. Lee and Chatfield (2015) are very valuable. Therefore, in this study, we will be focusing on these five factors: social environment, costs, inspiration, finances, and institutional climate.

It is important to understand that there are also factors that are important only to a certain type of student. For instance, K. Lee et al. (2012) focused on studying the factors that affect doctoral students' selection of universities. Chatfield, Lee, and Chatfield (2012) focused on studying the factors that affect undergraduate students' selection of universities. The two studies were focused on different student groups, so the factors in the two studies gave different results. Certain factors used in both studies such as opportunity for assistantships and reputation of universities were found to be essential to international graduate students while these factors were identified as less important for domestic graduate students. Therefore, this study will also consider the important factors based on certain groups of students identified in previous studies.

As mentioned before, when focusing on certain groups of students, many researchers also suggested that the different factor rankings depend on the different types of students (Chatfield, Lee, & Chatfield, 2012; S. Lee, & Chatfield, 2015; María Cubillo, Sanchez, & Cervino, 2006; K. Lee et al., 2012). Under this suggestion, several researchers divided students into different groups, and each group was studied individually. Chatfield, Lee, and Chatfield (2012) categorized students into three groups: (1) in-state, (2) out-of-state, (3) and international. According to their results, net cost was a high-ranking factor for out-of-state and international students, while in-state students were more focused on other factors. Furthermore, Lee et al. (2012) divided doctoral students into domestic and international. This study revealed that domestic and international doctoral students consider the importance of certain factors differently. For example, reputation of program is not as important to international doctoral students as to domestic doctoral students. International doctoral students consider the availability of assistantships to be a more important factor than the



reputation of program. However, domestic doctoral students consider the reputation of program to be a more important factor than the availability of assistantships. The results of the comparison among different groups of students proved the importance of dividing students into different groups based on their characteristics and could help this study to accurately identify the factors affecting international students.

In addition, there were not many existing studies that divided international students into undergraduate and graduate students. According to the results from Obst and Forster (2011), who conducted a survey of students from different countries, the most important reason for most students to receive a bachelor's degree in another country is to improve themselves and become more independent. However, the master's students from other countries are more focused on being able to compete for an international career (Obst & Forster, 2011). For students who wanted to receive a doctoral degree, both domestic and international doctoral students chose the quality of faculty as the most important factor (K. Lee et al., 2012). The diverse reasons for undergraduate and graduate students to receive a degree in another country implied the possibility of different reasons for undergraduate and graduate students to choose among different colleges in the United States. Chatfield, Lee, & Chatfield (2012) surveyed students who were enrolled in the Hotel College undergraduate program at University of Nevada, Las Vegas. These undergraduate students listed career support as the most important factor. However, K. Lee et al. (2012) surveyed a group of doctoral students in Hospitality and Tourism Programs and found that career support was listed as the least important factor. The comparison of the Chatfield, Lee, and Chatfield (2012) and the K. Lee et al. (2012) studies further illustrated the variety of reasons for undergraduate students and graduate students to choose hospitality programs. Therefore, it is important for this study to divide international students into undergraduate and graduate groups.

In this paper we will base our analysis on the following eight factors: (1) career support, (2) finances, (3) inspiration, (4) environment, (5) family support, (6) facility institution character, (7) net cost, and (8) academic perspectives. Additional factors like graduate school opportunities after graduating from the hospitality program, faculty members who are known as excellent researchers, financial support from parents or guardians will also be added based on the different groups of internation-

al students. Furthermore, this study will enhance the value of the factors for international students to choose a hospitality program and measure the importance of different factors that affect undergraduate international students and graduate international students when selecting a hospitality program in Unites States.

## **Methodology**

We developed a questionnaire based on existing studies about factors affecting students' school choice (e.g., Hoyt & Brown, 2003; S. Lee, & Chatfield, 2015; S. Lee & Chatfield, 2014). The questionnaire focuses on three components: (1) the factors for international students, (2) factors in choosing a hospitality program in the US, and (3) unique factors for specific groups of international students. The questionnaire asked respondents to rate 50 items using a five-point Likert scale (1- [not at all important] to 5- [extremely important]). Participants anonymously completed online and on paper surveys. The initial survey included questions about demographic factors: gender, year of birth, country of origin, academic classification, GPA, attending school and hospitality focus. In the beginning of the survey, students were given a definition of international students to guarantee the accuracy of data collection.

### **Data Collection**

The data were mainly collected using the Qualtrics survey software. A paper version of the survey was distributed as well in order to collect more data. Our analysis combined the data from both the software version and the paper version. The survey was approved by the IRB (Institution Review Board) in November 2015. The pilot test was conducted with 30 international graduate students and undergraduate students from 11 different hospitality programs from November to December 2015 from the 1st Hospitality Teaching and Learning conference. We also collected data at the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Research Summit for Tourism and Hospitality, the 1<sup>st</sup> USA-China Tourism Research, and the 21<sup>st</sup> Annual Graduate Education and Graduate Student Research Conference in Hospitality and Tourism in January 2016. The paper version of the surveys were passed out at the beginning of each conference, and the surveys were later collected at the end of each conference. Surveys were not used if the respondent failed to meet the definition of international student. Qualtrics surveys were also emailed to students and professors whose email addresses were available on their

university's website.

## Results

Fifty-five participants completed the survey. These participants were international students from 10 different countries who enrolled in 13 different universities' hospitality programs in the United States. The variety of participants provided a more accurate insight for hospitality programs in United States. There were 30 participants who identified themselves as graduate international students and 25 participants who identified themselves as undergraduate international students. The majority of the participants were female (65.5%), consistent with the fact that hospitality programs usually have more female students than male students. For example, the survey data of Chatfield, Lee & Chatfield (2012) included 64% female and 36% male respondents.

### Factors in College Choice

Table 1 presents the results of all factors' mean, variation and standard deviation based on the 55 participants. By comparing the mean of all the factors, the top 11 factors were indicated as the most influential ones. Overall results showed that undergraduate and graduate international students had both similarities and differences when choosing a hospitality program.

Table 2 lists the top 11 factors chosen by undergraduate international students and the top 11 factors chosen by graduate international students. By comparing the results of undergraduate and graduate international students, we can identify some similarities between the two groups. When choosing a hospitality program, both undergraduate and graduate international students consider academic reputation of the hospitality program worldwide, variety of course options, living cost, and hands-on experience as part of top ten factors. Academic reputation of the hospitality program worldwide was listed among top three factors for both groups. This is not surprising, considering the fact that companies hire students by looking at the reputation of students' hospitality programs. This trend is especially important for students from Asian countries where the reputation of an academic program sometimes determines students' future career opportunities.

The second similarity of both student groups was the variety of course options. This factor was listed as the fifth important factor for both groups. The importance of the variety of course options indicated that

both groups of students focus on learning about different areas of hospitality. The variety of courses may also help students to find their specific interests in the hospitality industry. Hospitality programs should focus on helping students to learn more details related to their specific interests.

The third factor chosen by both student groups among the top 11 factors was living cost. Tuition is already a huge cost for international students. Table 2 shows financial support from parents or guardians as the 9th most important factor for undergraduate international students. Therefore, undergraduate international students receive most of their financial assistance from their parents. Also, the exchange rate and the buying power between the U.S. dollar and the currency of some developing countries makes living costs in the U.S. more expensive than in the international students' own countries. Graduate international students might have family members with them, so the living costs are sometimes the living costs of a whole family. The location of hospitality programs and assistance with living costs are therefore important factors in student choice for both groups.

Hands-on experience was listed as the ninth and tenth most important factors by undergraduate and graduate international students respectively. The importance of hands-on experience to undergraduate students showed that gaining experience is a very important factor because work experience can help students to find a good job in the future. However, opportunities for further study and research are more important to the graduate international student.

On the other hand, there are also some significant differences in the lists of top factors between undergraduate and graduate international students. Undergraduate international students chose academic reputation of the hospitality program and opportunity to obtain OPT (an employment authorization document issued by the US government) as the top two factors. These two factors pointed out that future career opportunities were especially important to undergraduate international students. The reputation would help students to find a job whether they intend to work in the United States or in their own countries. The OPT can also help students to find a sponsor and stay in the United States. On some occasions the company that students worked for during the OPT would be able to provide students with good positions in their own countries. The top two factors chosen by graduate international students, however, were having faculty members who are effective teachers and faculty members who are known

as excellent researchers. For graduate students, good research skills and publication opportunities would be more likely to help them to find a job. A faculty member who was an excellent researcher or effective teacher would better help graduate international students accomplish their research projects. Interestingly, undergraduate international students did not place much emphasis on scholarships or financial aid compared to graduate international students. It is possible that universities and hospitality programs did not offer a lot of scholarships or financial aid to undergraduate international students. There was also a possibility that undergraduate international students were not familiar with scholarships or financial aid from universities and hospitality programs. Also interestingly, undergraduate international students chose Wi-Fi service within the building among the 11 most important factors.

In contrast, graduate international students were very interested in the availability of scholarships for international students in the hospitality programs and financial aid from the universities. The age range of the graduate international students was from 27-years-old to 39-years-old. Considering the age, graduate international students were more likely to have their own families. On the contrary, undergraduate students were mainly supported by their parents. They were not as financially sensitive as the graduate international students. Therefore, graduate international students were more sensitive to anything that was related to finance. The hospitality graduate programs must provide enough scholarship and financial aid to cover at least a part of the living costs of these graduate international students. Graduate international students also chose well-paying job opportunities after graduation as one of the top 11 factors. Graduate international students have to dedicate a huge amount of time to complete their graduate degrees. If most international students in hospitality graduate programs were able to receive a well-paying job after graduation, it makes the time that these international students dedicate worthwhile. As a result, students would be more willing to choose this hospitality graduate program.

Overall, graduate international students showed their interests in doing research. Undergraduate students are more interested in more practical classes that will help them to succeed in the industry.

## Conclusion

This study analyzes the most significant factors of international students' when choosing a university hospitality program. The results were determined from 50 different factors such as living costs, Wi-Fi service within the building, and availability of tutoring for international students. Overall, the results showed that there were both similarities and differences between undergraduate and graduate international students. The differences, however, indicate that undergraduate and graduate international students should be targeted differently.

After comparing the 11 most significant factors of undergraduate and graduate international students' college choice, we found some interesting results that previous studies have not reported. There were three similarities among the two groups of international students. First, the reputation of hospitality programs was most important for both groups of international students. Second, both groups of international students wanted to learn more about hospitality in order to determine their specific interests within the field, so a wide array of courses was an important concern. Third, finances were an important issue to both groups of international students because different parts of United States have different living costs. There was one significant difference between the two groups of international students. When choosing a hospitality program in the United States, undergraduate international students tend to be more focused on the helpfulness of the hospitality program related to finding industry jobs. However, graduate international students were more focused on the financial support available when choosing a hospitality program in the United States. This is not surprising, because graduate international students were older and more likely to have families to support.

The findings of this study provide substantial insight into hospitality programs in the United States so that they can better market themselves to attract more international students. The findings suggest that hospitality programs should improve their own reputations in the world to attract more international students. The findings also suggest that hospitality programs should provide more resources and courses that will help international students to successfully find jobs in the industry. Doing so would help hospitality programs attract more undergraduate international students. Furthermore, hiring high quality faculty and providing adequate financial support will attract more international graduate students. Also,

because of the time limit, the number of international students that we reached was relatively small.

In conclusion, hospitality programs will give both domestic and international students a small taste of being in an international environment before entering the global workforce. Hospitality programs should identify and accommodate the needs and priorities of international students. Higher enrollment by international students will help all students be more successful in their future careers. The more talented and globalized our human resources become from studying in the hospitality field, the more likely our industry is to have a bright future with high economic growth.

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**Table 1.** College Choice Factor Analysis for All International Students

#	Items	Mean	SD
01	Academic reputation of the hospitality program worldwide	4.55	0.57
02	Faculty members who are effective teachers	4.45	0.63
03	Variety of course options	4.38	0.80
04	Well-paying job opportunities after graduation	4.33	0.67
05	Opportunity to obtain OPT (Optional Practical Training) after graduation	4.25	1.05
06	Living costs (e.g., house rental fee, dorm fee, food and transportation)	4.24	0.92
07	Strong academic environment within the hospitality program	4.18	0.72
08	Faculty members who are known as excellent researchers	4.18	0.82
09	Offers hands on experience for students in different classes	4.18	0.88
10	The partnership between hospitality program and hospitality companies	4.18	0.92
11	Availability of scholarships for international students in the hospitality program	4.16	1.05
12	Faculty and staff who can provide international students with internship opportunities	4.15	1.06
13	Tuition costs of the school	4.13	1.17
14	Financial aid from the University	4.11	1.07
15	Academic reputation of the university worldwide	4.07	0.79
16	Opportunities to obtain CPT (Curricular Practical Training, including employment, internship experience, cooperative education experience etc.) and work outside of the school while attending the school	4.05	1.08

17	Faculty members with intensive field experiences	3.98	0.91
18	An advisor who helps international students with class selection	3.98	0.93
19	Availability of scholarships for international students in the University	3.96	1.17
20	The overall ranking of the hospitality program in national magazines	3.95	0.93
21	Safety around the campus	3.91	1.06
22	Wifi service within the building	3.87	1.38
23	Offers academic resources to help students on their research (e.g. library access)	3.85	0.76
24	Faculty members have available office times to help students	3.82	0.88
25	Financial support from parents or guardians	3.84	1.33
26	Graduate school opportunities after graduating from the hospitality program	3.76	1.39
27	The hospitality program's philosophy	3.73	0.93
28	Alumni networks	3.73	1.06
29	The reputation of the program in your home country	3.67	1.11
30	Other international student support (e.g., Writing center, ESL)	3.53	1.00
31	Well-known international companies near the university	3.49	1.23
32	College town atmosphere	3.47	1.10
33	The interaction between local students and international students	3.47	1.27
34	The ratio between students and professors	3.45	1.07
35	Mentoring programs for students on campus	3.44	1.17
36	Classrooms with technologies (such as projector)	3.42	1.32

37	ACT/SAT/Toefl/IELTS/GMAT/GRE score requirements	3.38	1.10
38	Diverse nationalities of faculty members	3.36	1.11
39	Volunteer opportunities in the program	3.25	1.32
40	Availability of tutoring for international students	3.18	1.29
41	Parents' opinions about the university and the hospitality program	3.16	1.37
42	Accessible computer labs with available computers and printers for students	3.15	1.33
43	The recommendation from your own country's professors	3.11	1.18
44	Student organizations and clubs within the hospitality program	3.11	1.21
45	Total number of international students in the hospitality program	3.04	1.41
46	A student lounge for students to relax and hang out together	3.02	1.30
47	Classrooms with comfortable seats and desks	2.98	1.25
48	Public transportation around the campus	2.89	1.29
49	Parents or guardians have to support other siblings	2.89	1.52
50	The number of international students from your home country in the hospitality program	2.69	1.26

The following table (Table 2) ranks the most important factors in college choice. Some factors were on the same level of importance, and as a result were listed in the same position. For example, in the list of undergraduate students, there were two equally important factors in the third position, and as a result, the next position is numbered 5 instead of 4.

**Table 2.** Top College Choice Factors Selected by Graduate and Undergraduate International Students

Rank	Undergraduate Responses
1	Academic reputation of the hospitality program worldwide
2	Opportunity to obtain OPT (Optional Practical Training) after graduation
3	The partnership between hospitality program and hospitality companies
	Opportunities to obtain CPT (Curricular Practical Training, including employment, internship experience, cooperative education experience etc.) and work outside of the school while attending the school
5	Tuition costs of the school
	Living costs (e.g., house rental fee, dorm fee, food and transportation)
	Variety of course options
8	Wifi service within the building
9	Financial support from parents or guardians
	Offers hands on experience for students in different classes
	Faculty and staff who can provide international students with internship opportunities

Rank	Graduate Responses
1	Faculty members who are effective teachers
2	Faculty members who are known as excellent researchers
3	Academic reputation of the hospitality program worldwide
4	Well-paying job opportunities after graduation
5	Variety of course options
6	Strong Academic environment within the hospitality program
7	Availability of scholarships for international students in the hospitality program
8	Living costs (e.g., house rental fee, dorm fee, food and transportation)
	Academic reputation of the university worldwide
10	Offers hands on experience for students in different classes
	Financial aid from the University