

## Students' perceptions of university education – USA vs. China

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### ABSTRACT

As we continue in the global, competitive business environment, issues of globalization of education should not be overlooked. With study abroad programs for students and the internationalization of faculty, perceptions of students toward higher educational, particularly aspects of teaching and learning, from various cultural backgrounds will strongly influence educational systems. This research presents a comparative study, US versus China, of students' perceptions toward higher education.

Keywords: University education, student's perceptions, higher education, educational orientation



## INTRODUCTION

Students from different education and culture background may have different perceptions towards higher education—particularly expectations related to teaching and learning. Students' approach and orientation to education may further affect their academic decisions, expectations, and performance. Studies based on psychometric analysis and interviews have shown that there are two generalized types of educational orientation among students: a learning-oriented type and a grade-oriented type (Alexitch & Page, 1996; Katchadurian & Boli, 1985). The former focus primarily on values such as harmony, personal growth, the process of learning and intellectual competence, and this type of student espouses intrinsic values. The grade-oriented student primarily focuses on concerns such as grades, status, competition, and recognition, and they are more interested in extrinsic values (Alexith, 1994; Rich, 1990, Stark, Bentley & Lowther, 1991). Researchers found that learning-oriented students reported the highest grades, and also showed the greatest degree of satisfaction with their university experience (Alexith, 1994). Therefore, students could improve the quality of their learning experience in universities if they could move their perspective towards higher education in the direction of a more learning-oriented approach (Alexith & Page, 2001). This study investigates US and Chinese undergraduate MIS students' perceptions of their university education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Many research (Alexitch, 1994; Alexitch & Page, 1996, 2000; Astin, 1985, 1993; Barbarik, 1980; Bercuson, Bothwell, & Granatstein, 1984; Bloom, 1987; Levine, 1981; Renner, 1988) have express concerns about the current state of affairs about the university environment and about the state of higher education in general Bloom (1987) and Bercuson et al. (1984) have maintained that current university curricula and practices have resulted in a deteriorating academic atmosphere in North American universities. Some researchers (Alexitch, 1999; Holdaway & Kelloway, 1987) have claimed that many students go to university, for the first time, unready to meet the requirements of the university environment (e.g., self-sufficient, time management) and that their expectations (e.g., internship or "Hands on" experience) are far away from the purpose of a university education. The result is that many new students find it is difficult to adjust to university life. Many studies have focused on four different types of learning-oriented (LO) and grade-oriented (GO) students (Eison, 1986; Eison, 1981). Other research work focus on the improvement of the universities 'counselors' level and the function of higher education rather than the problem within students (Alex, 1996). Additionally, the common questions about responses about the purpose of university, students' perceptions of the university environment and students' general academic and care goals are often raised in previous studies.

## METHODOLOGY

Survey methodology was utilized in this study, as it is a good method to capture the large range of students' opinions. The participants of this study are undergraduate students from different USA and Chinese universities. They are either an MIS major or taking an MIS course.

The instrument of the survey is designed based on the previous studies. It has the following sections:

- Demographic questions
- Perceptions of university education
- Purpose of university
- Perceptions of the university environment
- General academic and career goals
- LOGO-II

LOGO-II has 32 items. Items related to learning –orientated such as: 'I find the process of learning new material fun.' 'I browse in the library even when not working on a

specific assignment. Grade-oriented attitudes like ‘I think grades provide me a good goal to work toward’ and behaviors like ‘I will withdraw from an interesting class rather than risk getting a poor grade’.

The analysis of the survey data is presented in the next section, this paper is focus on the students’ perceptions of the university. The detailed analysis of LOGO questions is to be discussed in further studies.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

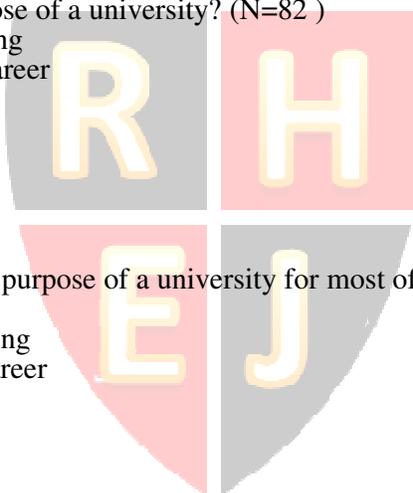
As the study was conducted in two different countries, this section is divided into two parts to discuss survey results from Chinese and American universities respectively.

### Chinese Students

The following are the summary of response from Chinese students in regarding to the purpose of university, perceptions of the university environment and their general academic and career goals.

#### Responses about the Purpose of the University

| Question  | Response Frequency |
|---|--------------------|
| 1. What, to you, is the purpose of a university? (N=82 )  |                    |
| A. For Education/Learning   | 32 (39.02%)        |
| B. To Prepare for job/ Career   | 31 (37.8% )        |
| C. To succeed in life   | 12 (14.63%)        |
| D. Social experience  | 2 (2.44% )         |
| E. Little or nothing  | 1 (1.22%)          |
| F. Unclear  | 3 (3.66)           |
| G. Other  | 1 (1.22%)          |
| 2. What, do you think is the purpose of a university for most of the people in your culture? (N=82) |                    |
| A. For Education/Learning   | 11 (13.41% )       |
| B. To Prepare for job/ Career   | 51 (62.20%)        |
| C. To succeed in life   | 8 (9.76%)          |
| D. Social experience  | 7 (8.54%)          |
| E. Little or nothing  | 2 (2.44%)          |
| F. Unclear  | 3 (3.66%)          |
| G. Other  |                    |
| 3. What, do you teachers tell you about the purpose of a university? (N=82)                         |                    |
| A. For Education/Learning   | 22(26.83%)         |
| B. To Prepare for job/ Career   | 28 (34.15%)        |
| C. To succeed in life   | 16 (19.51%)        |
| D. Social experience  | 4(4.88%)           |
| E. Little or nothing  | 6(7.32%)           |
| F. Unclear  | 6 (7.32%)          |
| G. Other  |                    |
| 4. What did you parents tell you about the purpose of a university? (N =82)                         |                    |
| A. For Education/Learning   | 7 (8.54%)          |
| B. To Prepare for job/ Career   | 38 (46.34%)        |
| C. To succeed in life   | 26 (31.71%)        |
| D. Social experience  | 3(3.66%)           |
| E. Little or nothing  | 5 (6.10%)          |
| F. Unclear  | 4 (4.88%)          |
| G. Other  |                    |



Students provided 82 responses to the question, “What, to you, is the purpose of university?” The most common responses were that the purpose of university was for education/learning (N=32, 39.02%) and to prepare for job/ Career (N= 31, 37.8%). Only one statistical difference in educational orientation was obtained on the basis of student responses to the purpose of a university. Students who felt that the main purpose of a university was to prepare for job/ Career scored higher on the HLHG scale (N=14) than did students who did not mention this as a main purpose of a university.

As reported by students, others (e.g., parents, high school teachers, guidance counselors) had previously communicated similar types of information about the purpose of university to students. For example, 38 students (46.34%) indicated that their parents viewed a university education as important in preparing for a job or career (see Table 1). Interestingly, although students reported that high school guidance counselors frequently told them that the purpose of a university education was to prepare for a career, 26.83% of the students indicated that they had been told that the purpose of a university education was for Education/Learning. And one interesting result is found in question “What, do you think is the purpose of a university for most of the people in your culture? “, more than half of the students select “to prepare for a career”.

### Students’ Perceptions of the University Environment

| Question  | Response Frequency |
|---|--------------------|
| 1. What do you see as the main problem of university today? (N=80)  |                    |
| A. High Costs   | 4 (5. %)           |
| B. Too many university prerequisites  | 5 (6.25%)          |
| C. Large Class Size   | 9 (11.25%)         |
| D. Professors   | 9 (11.25%)         |
| E. Useless Courses  | 13 (16.25%)        |
| F. Poor Infrastructure and Facility   | 10 (12.5%)         |
| G. Awful Course Arrangement   | 10 (12.5%)         |
| H. Other  | 14 (17.5%)         |
| I. Irrelevant or unclear response   | 11 (13.75%)        |
| 2. What Changes (if any) would you like to see in universities today? (N=76)                              |                    |
| A. Low costs  | 1 (1.32%)          |
| B. Better Professors  | 8 (10.52%)         |
| C. More Interesting Activities  | 2(2.63%)           |
| D. Improve Infrastructure and Facilities  | 10(13.16%)         |
| E. Less Useless Courses   | 5 (6.58%)          |
| F. Better Course Arrangement  | 15 (19.74%)        |
| G. More Social Experience and Practice  | 10 (13.16%)        |
| H. Other  | 12 (25.79%)        |
| I. Irrelevant or unclear response   | 15 (19.74%)        |
| 3. What should be the duties and goals of university faculty? (N = 78)                                    |                    |
| A. To Educate   | 32 (41.03%)        |
| B. Help with “real life” preparation  | 15 (19.23%)        |
| C. Mentor and Counsel   | 5 (6.41%)          |
| D. To help students succeed   | 13 (16.67%)        |
| E. Make learning interesting/fun  | 4 (5.13%)          |
| F. Irrelevant or Unclear Response   | 9 (11.54%)         |
| G. Other  | 2 (1.28%)          |
| 4. What changes (if any) would you like to see in how university faculties carry out their duties? (N=75) |                    |
| A. More Personal or intimate contact  | 10 (13.33%)        |
| B. Improve teaching quality   | 5 (6.67%)          |
| C. Encourage more student participation   | 4 (5.33%)          |

|   |             |
|---|-------------|
| D. Make Lectures More Interesting               | 8 (10.67%)  |
| E. Give Students More Information and Direction | 11 (14.67%) |
| F. Other  | 18 (24%)    |
| G. Irrelevant or Unclear Response               | 19 (25.33%) |

In this section, many of the answers are irrelevant or unclear response like “Not Much”, “More Often” and so on, which make no sense. The reason may be English is the second language for all the Chinese Students.

When asked what they perceived to be the main problems in universities today, 16.25% of the sample (N = 13) mentioned high costs. Other problems cited included professors (N=9, 11.25%), Awful Course Arrangement (N=10, 12.5%), Poor Infrastructure and Facility (N=10, 12.5%) and Large Class Size (N= 9, 11.25%).

The changes that students would like to see made in universities to some extent reflect the problems they cited. For example, Better Course Arrangement (N= 15, 19.74%), improve Infrastructure and Facilities (N=10, 13.16%) and the answers are little bit not concentrated for more than 40% students talking about others and irrelevant answers. When asked what should the duties and goals of university faculty be, more than 31 (41.03%) students felt that faculty should educate the students (e.g., “To teach the student the method of how to learn but not only to teach what to learn ") and help with “real life” preparation (N=15, 19.23%) (E.g. teach the things we can use in our further job experience). The question “What changes (if any) would you like to see in how university faculties carry out their duties?”, More than 11 (14.67%) students believe that professors should give students more information and direction and have more personal or intimate contact with all the students. (N=10, 13.33%)

### Students’ General Academic and Care Goals

| Question  | Response Frequency |
|---|--------------------|
| 1. In general, what is your main goal in life? (N=82)                                       |                    |
| A. To be Happy  | 38 (46.34%)        |
| B. Get a Good Job   | 6 (7.31%)          |
| C. To Succeed   | 31(37.8%)          |
| D. To Have a Family and Children  | 3 (3.66%)          |
| E. To Help Others   | 2 (2.44%)          |
| F. Others   | 3 (3.66%)          |
| 2. How important is it for you to succeed it for you to Succeed in Business/ Career? (N=82) |                    |
| A. Extremely Unimportant  | 4 (4.88%)          |
| B. Somewhat Unimportant   | 3 (3.66%)          |
| C. Neither Important nor Unimportant  | 2 (2.44%)          |
| D. Somewhat Important   | 46 (56.10%)        |
| E. Extremely Important  | 27 (32.93%)        |
| 3. How important is it for you to succeed financially? (N=82)                               |                    |
| A. Extremely Unimportant  | 4 (4.88%)          |
| B. Somewhat Unimportant   | 5 (6.10%)          |
| C. Neither Important nor Unimportant  | 7 (8.54%)          |
| D. Somewhat Important   | 39 (47.56%)        |
| E. Extremely Important  | 27 (34.15%)        |
| 4. How important is it for you to Succeed in Education? (N=82)                              |                    |
| A. Extremely Unimportant  | 4 (4.88%)          |
| B. Somewhat Unimportant   | 9 (10.98%)         |
| C. Neither Important nor Unimportant  | 22(26.83%)         |
| D. Somewhat Important   | 33 (40.24%)        |
| E. Extremely Important  | 14 (17.1%)         |
| 5. Which of these Goals do you think is more important? (N=81)                              |                    |

- A. Helping Others 26 (32.1%)
- B. Looking After Yourself First 55 (67.99%)
- C. Undecided

Many students reported that their main goal in life was "to be happy" (N=38, 46.34%) and "to succeed" (N=31, 37.8%). Students who reported that their main goal in life was to "succeed" had higher LO scores than students who did not report this main life goal.

When asked how important it was to succeed in business, nearly 46 students (56.10%) reported that it was somewhat important and 27 students (32.93%) thought that was extremely important and very few students thought it was neither important nor unimportant.

When asked "How important is it for you to succeed financially?" 39 students (47.56%) reported that it was somewhat important and 27 students (34.15%) reported that it was extremely unimportant and very few students thought it was neither important nor unimportant, which looks the same as the previous.

When asked "How important is it for you to Succeed in Education?" The answers are quite different from those two, 33 students (40.24%) reported that it was somewhat important and 22 students (26.83%) reported that it was neither important nor unimportant reported that somewhat important.

Lastly, Many students reported that were asked to choose whether it was more important, 54 students choose looking after yourself first (N= 55, 67.99%) and 26 students choose helping others (N=26, 32.1%).

**American Students**

The following are the summary of response from American students in regarding to the purpose of university, perceptions of the university environment and their general academic and career goals.

**Responses about the Purpose of the University**

| Question   | Response Frequency |
|--|--------------------|
| 4. What, to you, is the purpose of a university? (N=152 )  |                    |
| H. For Education/Learning  | 40 (26.3%)         |
| I. To Prepare for job/ Career  | 78 (51.3%)         |
| J. To succeed in life  | 16 (10.53%)        |
| K. Social experience   | 9 (5.9%)           |
| L. Little or nothing   |                    |
| M. Unclear   |                    |
| N. Other   | 8 (5.26%)          |
| 5. What, do you think is the purpose of a university for most of the people in your culture? (N=152) |                    |
| A. For Education/Learning  | 21 (13.8%)         |
| B. To Prepare for job/ Career  | 75 (49.34%)        |
| C. To succeed in life  | 25 (16.45%)        |
| D. Social experience   | 22 (14.47%)        |
| E. Little or nothing   | 2 (1.32%)          |
| F. Unclear   | 4 (2.64%)          |
| G. Other   |                    |
| 3(1.97%)   |                    |
| 6. What, do you teachers tell you about the purpose of a university? (N=152)                         |                    |
| A. For Education/Learning  | 56 (36.84%)        |
| B. To Prepare for job/ Career  | 59 (38.82%)        |
| C. To succeed in life  | 29 (15.08%)        |
| D. Social experience   | 2 (1.32%)          |
| E. Little or nothing   | 7 (4.6%)           |
| F. Unclear   | 2 (1.32%)          |

|  |             |
|--|-------------|
| G. Other   | 1 (0.66%)   |
| 4. What did you parents tell you about the purpose of a university? (N =152) |             |
| A. For Education/Learning  | 33 (21.7%)  |
| B. To Prepare for job/ Career  | 56 (36.84%) |
| C. To succeed in life  | 43 (28.29%) |
| D. Social experience   | 4 (2.64%)   |
| E. Little or nothing   | 13 (8.6%)   |
| F. Unclear   | 2 (1.32%)   |
| G. Other   | 1 (0.66%)   |

Students provided 152 responses to the question, “What, to you, is the purpose of university?” The most common responses were that the purpose of university was to prepare for job/ Career (N= 78, 51.3%) and for education/learning (N=40, 26.3%). Only one statistical difference in educational orientation was obtained on the basis of student responses to the purpose of a university. Students who felt that the main purpose of a university was for education scored higher on the LO scale (N=44) than did students who did not mention this as a main purpose of a university.

As reported by students, others (e.g., parents, high school teachers, guidance counselors) had previously communicated similar types of information about the purpose of university to students. For example, 56 students (36.84%) indicated that their parents viewed a university education as important in preparing for a job or career (see Table 1). Interestingly, although students reported that high school guidance counselors frequently told them that the purpose of a university education was to prepare for a career, 36.84% of the students indicated that they had been told the purpose of a university was for Education/Learning.

### Students’ Perceptions of the University Environment

| Question  | Response Frequency |
|---|--------------------|
| 1. What do you see as the main problem of university today? (N=129)           |                    |
| A. High Costs   | 36(27.9%)          |
| B. Too many university prerequisites  | 3 (2.3%)           |
| C. Large Class Size   | 3 (2.3%)           |
| D. Professors   | 29(22.5%)          |
| E. Useless Courses  | 15(11.6%)          |
| F. Grade-Oriented   | 8 (6.2%)           |
| G. No academic counseling   | 7 (5.4%)           |
| H. Other  | 19(12.7%)          |
| I. Irrelevant or unclear response   | 8 (6.2%)           |
| 2. What Changes (if any) would you like to see in universities today? (N=117) |                    |
| A. Low costs  | 21 (17.9%)         |
| B. Better Professors  | 16 (13.7%)         |
| C. More Personal Contact  | 5 (4.27%)          |
| D. Less Grade-Oriented  | 12 (10.3%)         |
| E. Less Useless Courses   | 14 (11.97%)        |
| F. Other  | 35 (22.9%)         |
| G. Irrelevant or unclear response   | 11 (9.4%)          |
| 3. What should be the duties and goals of university faculty? (N = 130)       |                    |
| A. To Educate   | 82 (63.1%)         |
| B. Help with “real life” preparation  | 25 (19.2%)         |
| C. Mentor and Counsel   |                    |
| D. To help students succeed   | 6 (4.6%)           |
| E. Make learning interesting/fun  | 9 (6.9%)           |
| F. Irrelevant or Unclear Response   | 11 (8.46%)         |
| G. Other  | 2 (1.5%)           |

4. What changes (if any) would you like to see in how university faculties carry out their duties? (N=89)

|   |            |
|---|------------|
| A. More Personal or intimate contact    | 15 (16.9%) |
| B. Improve teaching quality             | 36 (40.4%) |
| C. Encourage more student participation | 6 (6.7%)   |
| D. Irrelevant or Unclear Response       | 11 (12.4%) |
| E. Other                                | 28 (31.5%) |

When asked what they perceived to be the main problems in universities today, 27.9% of the sample (N = 36) mentioned high costs. Other problems cited included professors (N=29, 22.5%) and useless courses (N=15, 11.6%). The changes that students would like to see made in universities directly reflect the problems they cited. For example, low costs (N=21, 17.9%), Better Professors (N=16, 13.7%) and the answers are little bit not concentrated for 35 students (22.95) talking about others. When asked what should the duties and goals of university faculty be, more than 82 (62.1%) students felt that faculty should educate the students (e.g., "To teach the student the method of how to learn but not only to teach what to learn ") and help with "real life" preparation (N=25, 19.2%) (E.g. teach the things we can use in our further job experience). The question "What changes (if any) would you like to see in how university faculties carry out their duties?", to some extent, reflect the question what should the duties and goals of university faculty be. More than 36 (40.4%) students believe that professors should improve their teaching quality and have more personal or intimate contact with all the students. (N= 15, 16.9%)

### Students' General Academic and Care Goals

#### Question

| Question   | Response Frequency |
|--|--------------------|
| 1. In general, what is your main goal in life? (N=150)                                       |                    |
| A. To be Happy   | 72 (48%)           |
| B. Get a Good Job  | 4 (2.7%)           |
| C. To Succeed  | 54(36%)            |
| D. To Have a Family and Children   | 9 (6%)             |
| E. To Help Others  |                    |
| F. Others  | 11 (7.3%)          |
| 2. How important is it for you to succeed it for you to Succeed in Business/ Career? (N=151) |                    |
| A. Extremely Unimportant   | 41 (27.2%)         |
| B. Somewhat Unimportant  | 10 (6.6%)          |
| C. Neither Important nor Unimportant   | 4 (2.6%)           |
| D. Somewhat Important  | 20 (13.2%)         |
| E. Extremely Important   | 76 (50.3%)         |
| 3. How important is it for you to succeed financially? (N=151)                               |                    |
| A. Extremely Unimportant   | 25 (16.6%)         |
| B. Somewhat Unimportant  | 28 (18.5%)         |
| C. Neither Important nor Unimportant   | 4 (2.6%)           |
| D. Somewhat Important  | 29 (19.2%)         |
| E. Extremely Important   | 65 (43.0%)         |
| 4. How important is it for you to Succeed in Education? (N=151)                              |                    |
| A. Extremely Unimportant   | 26 (17.2%)         |
| B. Somewhat Unimportant  | 27 (17.9%)         |
| C. Neither Important nor Unimportant   | 5 (3.3%)           |
| D. Somewhat Important  | 45(29.8%)          |
| E. Extremely Important   | 48(31.8%)          |
| 5. Which of these Goals do you think is more important? (N=146)                              |                    |
| A. Helping Others  | 91 (62.3%)         |

B. Looking After Yourself First  
C. Undecided

55 (37.7%)

Many students reported that their main goal in life was "to be happy" (N = 72, 48%) and "to succeed" (N = 54, 36%). There is not significant selection difference between the high LO and high GO group.

When asked how important it was to succeed in business, nearly 76 students (50.3%) reported that it was extremely important and 41 students (27.2%) thought that was extremely unimportant and very few students thought it was neither important nor unimportant.

When asked "How important is it for you to succeed financially?" 65 students (43.0%) reported that it was extremely important and 28 students (18.5%) reported that it was somewhat unimportant and very few students thought it was neither important nor unimportant, which looks the same as the previous.

When asked "How important is it for you to Succeed in Education?" The answers are quite different from those two, 48 students (31.8%) reported that it was extremely important and 45 students (29.8%) reported that it was somewhat important reported that somewhat important. While remaining 35.1% students thought it was somewhat unimportant or extremely unimportant.

Lastly, Many students reported that were asked to choose whether it was more important, 54 students choose looking after yourself first (N= 91, 62.3%) and 26 students choose helping others (N=91, 62.3%).

## DISCUSSION

Educational systems are the foundation upon which progress depends and the quality of educational systems heavily impacts the long term political and economic success of countries. Global competitiveness encompasses educational systems and thus highlights to importance of quality education systems. The results from the study reveal insights of the culture and systems' impact on students' perceptions of higher education. US higher education competitiveness is being called into question and the results of this study can be part, along with similar studies involving other educational systems, help provide direction for higher education systems. This is especially important in the highly dynamic field like MIS.

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