

The Relevance of Academic Hospitality: an Investigation of International Students' Evaluation of Quality of Life in the American Universities

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Abstract

With the dramatic increase of international students to the U.S. in recent years, many American universities have realized the importance of offering hospitality to these students. This study proposed the definition of academic hospitality from non-academic perspective, and further investigated international students' quality of life in the American universities from four factors of academic hospitality, including housing, food and beverage, transportation, and social activities. An online survey was conducted among international students at a major university in the Midwestern U.S. The results indicated that housing, transportation, and social activities have significant impacts on international students' quality of life, whereas food and beverage does not. This research provided suggestions for the college and universities in the U.S. to effectively improve non-academic services for the international students.

Key Words: academic hospitality, international universities, housing, transportation, social activities, food and beverage

1. Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) statistics reported that the top three countries that international students chose to pursue their higher education in 2014 were the U.S., the United Kingdom, and France in sequence (UNESCO, 2014). Nearly 880, 000 international students pursued degrees in American universities and colleges during the 2013-2014 academic years (Paulson, 2014). The countries of origin of the largest number of international students in the U.S. were India, China, and South Korea in 2014 (Projects Atlas, 2015). In the past five years (2009-2014), students from these three countries had together comprised almost 40% of all overseas students studying in the American higher education institutions each year (Institute of International Education, 2014). International students contributed approximately \$27 billion to the U.S. economy in 2014, with an increase of \$3 billion from the prior year (Institute of International Education, 2014).

With the awareness of the contribution that foreign students make to host nations both culturally and financially, the American government encourages the higher education institutes to offer the "export service" in the market of international students (Guruz, 2011). Taking steps towards the internationalization of higher education systems, especially in recent years, has resulted in measures in the U.S. to facilitate the arrival and integration of international students, including a large number of amendments that are in process to the requirements and procedures for immigrants (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2000). For these reasons, the U.S. is likely to remain one of the top host nations in an increasingly competitive market of international students for the foreseeable future (Bhandari & Blumenthal, 2013).

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In order to appeal to a greater number of international students and maintain their educational reputations in the global economy, universities and colleges in the U.S. require a comprehension of international students' quality of life issues beyond the merely academic perspective (Murat, 2013). Quality of life measures an individual's overall satisfaction with his/her living experience. In other words, a high quality of life indicates that the living experience of an individual meets or exceeds his/her expectation. In contrast, a low quality of life occurs when the living experience does not meet with an individual's expectation (Mendlowicz & Stein, 2014). Despite the significant influence of quality of life on international students' experience while studying abroad, to the knowledge of the authors, no previous studies have particularly applied quality of life to investigate the hospitality perspectives. The present study aimed to fill the research gap.

The concept of academic hospitality was first introduced by Phipps and Barnett (2007). They described the relationship between higher education institutes and students as hosting and guesting. Academic hospitality addresses different modes of conceptualizing scholarship activities, especially offering, receiving, and sharing the knowledge, analysis, and feedback in the learning process. Therefore, "hospitality" in the definition of academic hospitality proposed by Barnett (2007) is distinct from that in the hotel, restaurant, and tourism fields. The present authors argued that hospitality in these fields explain the hospitable and friendly reception and treatment of guests, which is applicable to describe the non-academic or personal life of students in the universities and colleges.

This study aimed to investigate the experience of academic hospitality with the focus of non-academic perspective among international students in American higher education institutes. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to: (1) re-propose the definition of academic hospitality from the angle of hospitality service; (2) evaluate academic hospitality from four perspectives, including lodging, food and beverage, transportation, and social activities; (3) examine international students' quality of life; (4) establish the relationship between the four elements of academic hospitality and quality of life among international students. The present research provided an innovative direction and theoretical foundation for future hospitality studies focusing on the market of international students. Identifying multiple aspects of academic hospitality can help universities and colleges understand the preferences of international students and determine effective service improvement solutions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. International students in the U.S.

Many previous studies have investigated the adjustment of international students in their host countries from both academic and cultural perspectives (Andrade, 2006; Ramsay et al., 1999; Rienties, et al., 2012). Yan and Berliner (2011) indicated that international students in the U.S. often face diverse life stresses while studying abroad. Andrade (2006) found that the main challenges of international students' adaptation to attending U.S. higher education institutions are language barrier and culture difference. International students need the support from educational services (e.g., intensive English and Orientation Program at universities) and assistance from relevant government agencies (e.g., U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services) and local businesses (e.g., banks) (Yeoh et al., 2013). Bachner, Mcleod and Lin (1977) identified four primary challenges that international student face, the first of which is culture shock, which is defined as the disorientation that individuals experience during the process of adapting to a new environment (Macionis & Gerber, 2010). The second challenge is the ambassador role, which indicates that students are viewed by resident students as embodying the cultural characteristics of their country. The third challenge is adolescent emancipation, which involves the desire of college-age individuals to build an identity as independent, self-supporting, and responsible members of society. The last but not least important source of challenge for international students is academic stressors, specifically those involved with studying.

Similarly, Church (1982) suggested that international students tend to experience a variety of adjustment issues when beginning study at American universities and colleges. The primary concerns of international students include academic problems (e.g., adjusting to non-native languages and new educational systems), personal issues (e.g., homesickness and geographic distance from familiar others), and cross-cultural problems (e.g., understanding and adjusting to new social norms). Among the adjustment issues, previous studies primarily focused on academic issues (Ladd & Ruby, 1999; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006).

For example, Selvadurai (1991) examined the academic needs of international students and their attitudes toward campus services and suggested areas for changes, including facilitating students' English language proficiency, offering course of study counseling, academic advising tailored for the international students, improving rapport with faculty, increasing tutoring service offerings for this population, and providing assistance in getting orientated to the academic setting. Similar with the studies above, many other studies in the education field focused on the scholarship activities (e.g. Kettle, 2011; Rienties et al., 2012; Wang, & Hannes, 2014). However, Westwood and Barker (1990) argued that although studying is the primary purpose of international students in American universities, their basic necessities of life could not be ignored.

2.2. Academic Hospitality

Bennett (2000) described academic life as hospitality. He suggested that academic life is "the extension of self in order to welcome the other by sharing and receiving intellectual resources and insights" (Bennett, 2000, p1). Phipps and Barnett (2007) first formally introduced academic hospitality as a concept. They defined academic hospitality as welcoming and hosting students by providing and sharing knowledges which obsess with material fabric of academic life. Phipps and Barnett (2007) suggested four forms; material, epistemological, linguistic, and touristic. The material form describes what is given and received during the academic travel, such as delivering workshops, conducting fieldwork, and consulting libraries. The epistemological form discusses the practice of academic scholarship. For examples, students are exposed to innovative ideas in classrooms. The linguistic form refers to the challenges of communications among scholars. English is the primary language for the communications among scholars in different countries, which is used in both written (e.g., journal papers) and oral (e.g., presentations at international conferences) formats. The touristic form describes the academic travel as a part of conference programmes or itineraries provided by the hosts which take the participants to the touristic sites with the relevant theme, such as visiting a local university in the itinerary of an educational conference. The four forms work together and interact with each other to shape the academic life of students.

The present author argued that Phipps and Barnett (2007) did not incorporate the original meaning of hospitality to understand academic life. The term of hospitality was originated from the fields of hotel, restaurant, and tourism. Korstanje (2008) indicated that hospitality refers to warm welcoming services both from the reception and entertainment perspective of the host offerings to the guests or strangers. Harrison and Enz (2005, p. 23) defined hospitality as "primarily consists of businesses that provide accommodation, food, and beverage or some combination of these activities." Based on the discussions above, the present authors proposed academic hospitality as all the services that host university or host local area can bring to international students to have better quality of life besides education. In the fields of hotel, restaurant, and tourism, hospitality is composed of multiple components (Chon et al., 2013; Powers & Barrows, 1999). For example, Dittmer and Griffin (1993) suggested four primary dimensions of hospitality include lodging, food and beverage, transportation, and entertainment. Accordingly, the present study evaluated academic hospitality from four perspectives, including lodging, food and beverage, transportation, and recreation activities.

2.2.1. Lodging options

Higher education institutes and their surrounding areas offer a variety of housing options for international students. For example, students could choose to live in on-campus housing, rent apartments off campus, or live with local hosts. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that living on campus, as opposed to commuting from off-campus housing, helps students to increase their tolerance of and openness to diversity. Hughes (1994) also found that the maximum gains in openness to diversity occur when residence hall environments are designed to encourage positive interactions among students on multicultural issues.

Both the physical and social environments in student housing have an important impact on students' evaluation of their higher education experience (Foubert, Tepper, & Morrison, 1998). Housing satisfaction can also be conceptualized as a dimensional structure. For example, Canter and Rees (1982) described the attributes of housing as the referent of interaction, while Francescato (1979) explained them as the domain of the environment. In general, the existing literature classifies the attributes of housing in terms of social/psychological, management/organizational and physical attributes.

Social/psychological attributes encompass privacy, neighbors, security/safety, social densities, and freedom of choice, social relations, and personalization (Francescato, 1979; Rent & Rent, 1978; Spencer & Barneji, 1985). Management/organizational attributes of housing include rules and regulations, maintenance, management staff and policies, participation, and rents (Paris & Kangari, 2005).

The physical attributes of housing have been much less discussed in the existing literature compared with the other attributes and described factors such as the presence or lack of certain facilities, spatial density, location and size of bedrooms (Galster, 1987; Kahana et al., 2003; Turkoglu, 1997), and the appearance of the building and the floor level (Kaya & Erkip, 2001).

2.2.2. Food and beverage

The second important aspect of academic hospitality is the food and beverage offerings that international students have access to when studying abroad. International students typically have three dining options; the purchase of on-campus meals, the purchase of off-campus meals, and preparation of meals themselves at home. Universities and colleges usually offer or are surrounded by a variety of food purchase options including residential dining centers, cafes, convenience stores, food courts, restaurants, bakeries, and food stores. For students living either on or off campus, universities and colleges generally provide meal plans which can be used in many locations. With regard to purchasing meals off campus, Pan et al. (1999) suggested that international students eat out off campus for few times per week, primarily due to limited food budget, lack of time to go out, and inconvenient transportations (McArthur et al., 1990).

The third option is to cook at home. Many international students, particularly Asian students, prefer to cook their own traditional foods at home, especially on their cultural holidays (Ryan & Zhang, 2007). A small number of international students eat out and try American-style meals on traditional American holidays, which provide contacts with their new culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Consumption of traditional foods on American holidays (e.g., Thanksgiving) plays a role in the dietary changes seen in the international student population (McArthur et al., 1990).

2.2.3. Transportation services

Since many of the universities and colleges attended by international students are located in urban areas, campus transportations cannot necessarily be separated from the city transportation system as a whole. Vuchic (2002) defined urban public transportation as including both transit and paratransit options (such as shuttles), since both are available for the public use. For the convenience of students and faculty, buses run on schedules and bus stop maps are offered on buses and at bus stations, as well as on the internet. Most of the buses are free to students, with free transit passes sometimes funded by student fees or partnerships with local public transportation systems.

Students also can choose to drive their own vehicles. However, students are concerned with limited campus parking and parking fees (Tseng et al., 2004). Although Balsas (2003) indicated that riding bike is 'poor step-child' as an alternative transportation mode. Bicycling has evolved to being emblems of high quality of life (Latimer-Cheung et al., 2013). In recent years, there have been more bicycles than automobiles on some university campuses (Hu & Schneider, 2014). For the short distance from the living place to the campus, some students choose to walk or jog (Pike, 2002).

2.2.4. Social activities

Nearly all American universities and colleges offer a variety of organizations and clubs for a variety of interests, such as language clubs, sports clubs, religion clubs, and others. International students share opinions, ideas, and comments with others with similar interests in these activities (Foubert & Urbanski, 2006). International students also enjoy off-campus social activities in local communities, such as shopping centers, theme parks, and cinemas. Moreover, they enjoy tourism activities during their study period in the U.S., including both natural attractions (e.g., national parks) and human-made resources (e.g., casinos) (Babin & Kim, 2001; Field, 1999).

2.3. Quality of Life

Unlike the concept of standard of living which is mainly subject to income limitations, quality of life (QOL) is "the general well-being of individuals and societies" (Diener, Oishi, & Lucas, 2003, p404).

Quality of life involves a wide range of factors, including international development, health care, politics, and employment. For example, the attainment of a good QOL indicates that dreams can become reality through efforts. Conversely, a poor QOL occurs when an individual's hope does not match with his/ her reality.

Quality of life can change over time and due to circumstances. Lee and Rice (2007) showed that, in order to obtain satisfactory QOL, people's goals need to be realistic, to be changed with time, and to be modified by age and experiences.

The goal of QOL is to help people to reach the goals they have set. On the other hand, a high-quality QOL relates to personal growth and is usually expressed in terms of satisfaction, contentment, happiness, fulfillment, and problem-solving ability (Moons et al., 2006).

The effects of various life factors on college students' QOL has been extensively investigated in previous research (e.g., Chow, 2005; Ng, 2005; Smith et al., 2004; Vaez et al., 2004). Vaez et al. (2004) found a positive relationship between college students' perceived QOL and their self-rated health. Cha (2003) noted the relationship between subjective well-being and personality constructs such as self-esteem, collective self-esteem, and optimism. The results of the study by Pilcher (1998) revealed the ways in which daily events predict life satisfaction among college students. As the basic necessities of life, the four perspectives of academic hospitality investigated in the present study are expected to impact international students' quality of life.

3. Methodology

3.1. Survey instrument

The survey was comprised of six sections, including housing, food and beverage, transportation, social activities, quality of life, and demographic information. The first section investigated international students' lodging service with six measurement items which were adapted from Sirgy, Grzeskowiak and Rahtz (2007). In the second section, 17 items were utilized to investigate three perspectives of food and beverage on and off campus, including service, food quality, and facilities. The measurement items were adopted from Andaleeb and Caskey (2007). The third part measures transportation services with 15 items from Eboli and Mazzulla (2007). The transportation section included questions asking whether students were satisfied with bus routes, bus schedules, bus safety, and other factors related to the local transportation systems.

In the fourth section, seven items from Sirgy, Grzeskowiak and Rahtz (2007) were used to evaluate social activities offered by the university and local community. The next section utilized three items to investigate international students' overall quality of life, which were adapted from Sirgy, Grzeskowiak and Rahtz (2007). The demographic information of the participants was collected in the last section of the questionnaire. The respondents were asked to provide personal information regarding gender, age, student classifications, and country of origin.

3.2. Data Collection

With the assistance of the International Student and Scholars Office (ISSO) and Information Technology Service (ITS) at a major university in the Midwestern U.S., the present authors collected data through online surveys to 3,482 international students enrolled at the university during Feb 25-March 13, 2015. An invitation email was sent on Feb 25, 2015 and a reminder email was followed up in one week. A total of 295 surveys were returned with the response rate of 8.47%. Among the 295 returned surveys, 251 surveys were in the usable format.

3.3. Data Analysis

Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (now known as PASW) Version 18 software was used for data analyses. Descriptive statistics were gathered from the demographic data of respondents in order to provide a summary of the sample. Regression analysis was employed to identify whether each of the four academic hospitality aspects had a significant relationship with international students' quality of life.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive Analysis

A summary of the descriptive variables is shown in Table 1. The male and female respondents were 62.2% (n=156) and 37.8% (n=95), respectively. The most prevalent age group of the respondents was 23-25 (35.5%, n=89). Almost 64.5% (n=162) of respondents were graduate students, while 33.9% of respondents (n=85) reported that they were undergraduate students. The sample was heavily dominated by Asian respondents (70.1%, n=176), whereas 15.1% (n=38) from Europe, 7.2% (n=18) from Africa, 3.6 % (n=9) from South America, 3.2% (n=8) from North America (except the U.S.) and 0.8 % (n=2) of the respondents from Oceania.

Table 1: Demographic Descriptive Analysis (N=251)

Variables	Number	Percentage
<i>Region of origin</i>		
Asia	176	70.1
Europe	38	15.1
Africa	18	7.2
South America	9	3.6
North America	8	3.2
Oceania	2	.8
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	156	62.2
Female	95	37.8
<i>Age</i>		
18-19	16	6.4
20-22	60	23.9
23-25	89	35.5
26-28	44	17.5
29-35	31	12.4
36 plus	11	4.4
<i>Current grade</i>		
Freshman	10	4.0
Sophomore	23	9.2
Junior	32	12.7
Senior	20	8.0
Graduate Student	162	64.5
Other	4	1.6

4.2. Internal Consistency Reliability

Internal consistency reliability, mean ratings, and standard deviations were calculated to investigate the internal consistency of items for each of the five constructs in the present study, including lodging, food and beverage, transportation, social activities, and quality of life. A commonly accepted rule for describing internal consistency is a reliability of 0.70 or higher for Cronbach's alpha (Nunnally et al., 1967). The reliability of all of the five factors was all above 0.70, which were deemed acceptable.

Table 2: Internal Consistency Reliability Estimates, Mean Ratings and Standard Deviations (N = 251)

	Cronbach's alpha	Mean	SD
Lodging options	0.827	5.26	1.099
Food and beverage	0.913	5.14	0.913
Transportation	0.919	5.73	0.873
Social activities	0.824	4.75	0.992
Quality of life	0.913	5.47	1.128

4.3. Linear Regression Analysis

The R square of the model equaled 0.540, which indicated that the four factors of the academic hospitality (lodging options, food and beverage, transportation services, and social activities) fit the regression equation, which explains 54.0% of the variance in international students' quality of life.

Table 3. Model Summary

R	R Square	R Square Adjusted	Standard Error of Estimate
0.735	0.540	0.532	0.772

A low p-value (< 0.05) indicates that a null hypothesis can be rejected. In other words, a predictor with a low p-value is likely to be a meaningful addition to a model because changes in the predictor's value are related to changes in the response variable(s) (Rozeboom, 1960). In Table 4, the predictor variables of transportation services (p-value = 0.000), social activities (p-value=0.000), and lodging options (p-value=0.002) indicated that they all significantly affected international students' quality of life. However, the p-value for food and beverage (0.454) was greater than the acceptable alpha level of 0.05, which indicated that it did not statistically significantly influence quality of life.

Table 4: Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Purchase Intent (N=251)

	B	SE B	T	sig	
Lodging Operations	.171	.054	.166	3.170	.002*
Food and Beverage	.062	.083	.050	.749	.454
Transportation Services	.440	.080	.340	5.516	.000**
Recreational Activities	.395	.063	.347	6.268	.000**

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

5. Conclusion & Implications

This research re-proposed academic hospitality from the service perspective. Among all the services that international students can get from host areas, lodging, social activities and transportation have significant influence on their evaluations of quality of life. This study makes substantial contributions to the theoretical development and examination of QOL. To the knowledge of the authors, it is the first research to apply QOL to investigate academic hospitality as it pertains to international higher education students. This application in a new context contributes to the body of knowledge on academic hospitality and further verifies the effectiveness of the theoretical framework. The present study provides a theoretical foundation for future research on international higher education students' lives in host countries.

The U.S. has one of the world's finest college/university systems, with outstanding programs in nearly all fields (Tyack, 1974). The number of international students in the U.S. continues to rise as more and more students choose the country as a place to broaden their experiences and further their education. Although the main purpose of study abroad is to obtain a degree, experiencing a different culture is also an important consideration. As a result, it is critical to gain an understanding of hospitality services that are needed to adequately support international students in the host country. The findings of this study offer practical suggestions from four different perspectives.

From the perspective of lodging, convenient location plays an important role in international students' housing decisions. Therefore, the present authors suggest that local businesses offering housing rentals should seek to develop more offerings close to campus or on bus routes convenient for commuting to campus. Housing application processes and security have less influence on international students' housing choices. International students rated living community activities as the least important, because they devote considerable time to studying and have little time available to enjoy community activities.

Transportation, especially public transportation, has a significant effect on international students' quality of life. The majority of large universities are located in transit-rich, bikeable, and walkable cities that are well served by a number of transportation modes, and most of them offer a variety of bus and shuttle routes. For example, the Georgetown University Transportation Shuttle (GUTS) in Washington, D.C. operates five shuttle routes, connecting the campus to the surrounding Georgetown communities (Georgetown University Transportation Shuttle, 2015).

Arizona State University offers four shuttle routes for connect campus and the surrounding places (Arizona State University, 2015). In addition to transportation schedules, how frequently shuttles and buses run is a significant factor for international students. As a result, higher education institutes and local public transportation services should work together to provide enough stops for students and improve the frequency of runs during busy hours, including mornings between 8:00 and 10:00 AM and late afternoons between 4:00 and 6:00 PM.

International students take into account social activities offered by universities and colleges when they measure their quality of life in their host countries. These social activities offer international students opportunities to engage with others and receive social support. The result of the present study is consistent with the findings of Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002) which indicated that engagement in extracurricular activities is positively related to students' general life satisfaction, benefits drawn from academics and extracurricular activities, and levels of academic involvement.

The results of the present study suggest that international students are overall satisfied with the recreational activities in the college towns. They desire an increasing number of malls and other shopping areas. Moreover, the church-sponsored activities may appeal more international students to participate in. However, few international students showed interests in athletics, since many of the activities are not popular in their original countries.

It was found that food and beverage options have no significance influence on international students' quality of life. There are several reasons that can explain this phenomenon. First of all, students from Asian countries constitute the majority of international students in the U.S., and nearly all college towns have Asian restaurants as well as Asian grocery stores that provide necessary supplies to cook traditional Asian cuisines at home. Furthermore, Asian students show a marked tendency of cooking at home rather than dining out. While people who are recently immersed in a new culture are often willing to try foods they haven't experienced before and many Asian students like to try American cuisine at the early stage of their stays in the U.S., they tend to then revert to their original home cooking habits. Therefore, it can be concluded that on- and off-campus dining options are not particularly important to the majority of international students.

6. Limitation and Future Research

The present study has several primary limitations. First, the population of this study consisted of international students at only one university in the U.S and the response rate was lower than 10%. This narrow study population limits the generalizability of the findings. Second, bias may exist in this study due to the prodigious percentage of Asian respondents (70.6%), although Asian international students currently comprise the vast majority of international students at nearly all American universities and colleges. Third, the present study only considered four components of academic hospitality and tested them as the antecedents of quality of life. The four perspectives may not comprehensively cover academic hospitality. Future studies could consider other factors of academic hospitality, such as safety, university culture, and others.

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