Why Nebraska? An Analysis of UNL's International Student Recruitment Touchpoints and Messages as Compared to Student Outcomes

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WHY NEBRASKA?

AN ANALYSIS OF UNL’S INTERNATIONAL STUDENT RECRUITMENT TOUCHPOINTS AND COMMUNICATIONS AS COMPARED TO STUDENT OUTCOMES

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
University Honors Program Requirements
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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Abstract

With decreasing budgets and increasing political tensions, universities in the United States are embracing broader and more creative efforts to reach prospective international students. For such universities, international students are a lucrative recruitment population because they bolster enrollment numbers and tuition revenue while diversifying student bodies. Previous studies have shown that much university marketing to international students is deficient and of little use in helping prospective students make informed decisions (Baldwin & James, 2000), yet information search is a key element of buyer decision models (Beatty & Smith, 1987) as students evaluate educational options. This study sought to see, then, which advertising methods were most effective toward undergraduate international students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). Furthermore, this study sought to see which decision-making factors were most influential in the college decision process. Expectations of UNL’s Office of Admissions are also considered.

Results show that safety, quality of chosen major at UNL, a welcoming environment for international students, availability of scholarships, and overall academic and teaching quality were the most influential factors in international students’ decisions to attend UNL. The majority of international students initially heard of UNL through rankings, however, the UNL website and other UNL-sponsored web materials most effectively communicated the benefits of attending UNL as related to the presented decision-making factors.

Key Terms: advertising, international students, admissions, student recruitment, decision
Dedication

This undergraduate thesis is dedicated to Quinta, my first international friend at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, whose friendship has altered the course of my lifetime passions and pursuits, and Kayla, my daughter in the faith, whose life will be used to impact the lives of generations of international students to come on this campus.
Why Nebraska?

An Analysis of UNL’s International Student Recruitment Touchpoints and Messages as Compared to Student Outcomes

International student enrollment at American colleges and universities is expanding. In the 2016-2017 school year 1.08 million international students studied in the United States (Institute of International Education, Inc, 2017). According to the U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, this marks the eleventh straight year of total international student enrollment growth in the United States, though the number of first-time student enrollments is flattening in comparison to previous years (Institute of International Education, Inc, 2017). Meanwhile, American colleges are wrestling to retain enrollment numbers in the midst of heavy state budget cuts and resulting tuition hikes. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, in 2017, higher education funding in the United States dipped $9 billion below 2008 numbers (2017). The state of Nebraska is no exception. The state plans to cut over $34 million from the University of Nebraska system in the coming calendar year alone, threatening academic programs and positions (Dunker, 2018).

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL), like universities across the United States, is increasingly aware of the lucrative market of international student recruitment because international students boost the financial landscapes of universities (Ross, Heaney, & Cooper 2007). The Institute of International Education reported that in 2016 alone international students brought $39 billion to universities through tuition and on-campus living expenses- an $8 billion increase from the 2014-2015 school year (Turner, 2015). According to UNL’s Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Analytics, in 2017, 2,230 of UNL’s 20,954 undergraduates were
international students (IEA, 2017). If each of those students paid the base tuition for 30 hours of coursework per year, excluding student housing and fees, the university would bring in over $50 million per year.

The recruitment of international students is not only beneficial from a financial standpoint (Ross, Grace & Shao, 2013). In 2009, the International Association of Universities’ Global Survey found that the top five reasons universities are implementing internationalization included the preparedness of international students, curriculum and quality, profile and reputation, research and knowledge production, and increased diversity of student bodies via international students (Ergon-Polak & Hudson 2011).

While universities increasingly desire to bring international students to their campuses, they often struggle to effectively market their university to potential students. Previous studies have shown that much university marketing to international students is deficient and does not facilitate informed decisions by students (Baldwin & James, 2000), yet information search is a key element of buyer decision models (Beatty & Smith, 1987) as students evaluate educational options. Thus, current research explores the strategies universities are undertaking to market themselves to prospective international students. Typical routes of communication include “internal sources, controlled by the institution” such as direct mail, YouTube videos, and university websites, “interpersonal sources” such as university recruiters or university workers who staff online platforms where higher education is discussed (Oliveira & Soares, 2016 p. 126-139). Finally, communication efforts can be indirectly linked to the university, such as the recommendations of friends, family or teachers. These are named “external sources, not controlled by the institution” (Oliveira & Soares, 2016 p. 126-139). The same study showed that interpersonal sources of university information are the most influential, even if the interpersonal
communication is only with a university’s admissions staff. Students are also increasingly drawn to the Internet to learn about overseas education opportunities, as shown in a study of Chinese online research of master’s programs (Gai & Pelton, 2016). Online communication is a relatively inexpensive but effective way for universities to share their real personalities with prospective students (Opoku et al., 2008). All platforms present universities with the opportunity to create a brand that will sell across continents, often without a single visit or phone call ever being made. This is a unique opportunity and threat to universities, which are accustomed to wooing domestic students via campus visits. Research on American college students shows that campus visits “are the single most influential source of information for students in college choice,” and that only 6% of college-bound seniors do not visit a university in the decision process (Art & Science Group LLC, 2004, p. 1). Thus, recruitment of international students is an entirely different process for both the institution and the student. With such a remote process, universities must major on communicating aspects of the university that an individual would need to know to make an informed decision.

Nine factors influence students’ choices to attend universities outside of their home country (Hoyt & Brown, 1999). Those factors are “availability of course, job outcomes, academic reputation, location, quality of instruction, quality of faculty, costs, course reputation and financial considerations” (Hoyt & Brown, 1999, p. 3-10). Previous research shows that aspirations, socioeconomic status, scholarships and availability of courses is also important in the selection process, creating clear market segments to differentiate within student recruitment research (Chapman, 1981).

This study seeks to analyze the advertising and recruiting efforts of the UNL Office of Admissions toward international students. It will consider the factors that most strongly
influence international students’ decisions to attend UNL, and the factors that are less important in the decision-making process. The previously studied factors are parsed out and added to in the present study; the factors are also personalized for the school at hand. Furthermore, this study considers the effectiveness and influence of UNL’s direct and indirect advertising touchpoints, namely the U.S. News & World Report National University Rankings, direct mail sent by UNL, the Global UNL website, visits from UNL International Recruitment Specialists, recommendations of family or friends, and recommendations of teachers. Demographic information as well as parental educational backgrounds are also considered. The research question of this study is to determine the effectiveness of different advertising touchpoints in UNL’s international student recruitment and to identify the most influential factors in international students’ decisions to attend UNL for their undergraduate education. This study should help the UNL Office of Admissions more effectively target international students in recruitment efforts, both via touchpoints and the copy of such touchpoints.

Methods

Participants

A total of 45 international students enrolled at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln were selected through convenience sampling to participate in this study. Participation in this study was on a voluntary basis and no compensation was provided for participants. About 60% (N = 20) of the participants were female, and participants ranged in age from 17 to 42 years old (M = 21.97). The majority (64.4%) of respondents came from upper middle-class families, 28.9% respondents came from lower middle-class homes, and the remaining 6.6% of respondents came from working class or poor families. One participant’s responses were eliminated because he did not
fit the target population. The home country of 88% of respondents \((N = 40)\) was in Asia (India, \(N = 12\), Malaysia, \(N = 10\), China, \(N = 8\), Oman, \(N = 5\), Indonesia, \(N = 2\), Korea, \(N = 2\), and Saudi Arabia, \(N = 1\)). The home country of 8% of respondents was in Africa (Rwanda, \(N = 4\)), and the home country of 2% of respondents was in South America (Colombia, \(N = 1\)). The parents or legal guardians of 53.3\% \((N = 24)\) of respondents had attended college, of which 11\% had attended college in the United States. The statistics of this convenience sample reflect the broader UNL undergraduate international student population, which in fall of 2017 tallied 890 Chinese students, 245 Malaysian students, 180 Omani students, 107 Rwandan students and 68 Indian students (IEA, 2017).

**Materials**

An online survey through Google Forms titled “Why Nebraska?” was created for this research. Computers were used to administer the surveys. An example may be accessed at https://goo.gl/forms/FmMnPnzd3RuhwXgb2. The survey consisted of an information release clause, short answer questions regarding major, home country, and age. The survey consisted of multiple choice questions in which participants coded their family’s financial status, their gender, and whether their parent(s) or legal guardian(s) attended university, and whether that university was located in the United States. Next, participants answered 18 typical five level Likert item questions in regard to the amount of influence different “decision-making factors” had on the participant’s decision to attend UNL. A response of 1 indicated that the participant strongly disagreed that the factor influenced their decision attend UNL. Participants used the 5 ranking to indicate that they strongly agreed that a factor influenced their decision to attend UNL. Thus, high scores mean the factor was influential and low scores mean the factor was not influential. The 18 decision-making factors provided on the survey were as follows:
### Why Nebraska?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall academic and teaching quality</th>
<th>Quality of my chosen major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affordability</td>
<td>Scholarship availability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life in Lincoln, Nebraska</td>
<td>Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research opportunities</td>
<td>Success of current UNL and former UNL students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of UNL student body</td>
<td>Transfer credit availability to UNL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to connect with students from my home country in UNL clubs</td>
<td>A specific program through another university in my home country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNL is well ranked</td>
<td>UNL was recommended to me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends or family attended UNL</td>
<td>Good career service and links with good employers (networking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High graduate employment rate, and</td>
<td>I felt that UNL is welcoming to international students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After participants responded to each of the 18 decision-making factors, they were asked to type the most important factor of the previously listed factors when choosing to attend UNL. Participants were then asked to type other factors that were important in students’ decision-making processes that were not included in the 18 listed factors. A final multiple-choice question asked participants to check all the ways they learned about UNL before they came to Lincoln. The potential touchpoints included were listed as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A list of university rankings</th>
<th>UNL website or other UNL sponsored materials online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recruiter</td>
<td>Recommendation of friend or family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recommendation of a teacher | UNL information was mailed to me.

Participants were permitted to type in another answer if applicable, however, all typed “other” answers could be consolidated into the previously listed touchpoints. Participants were able to list their email to be further contacted through an in-depth interview. Out of 45 participants, 15 provided a valid email to reply to, and 3 participants participated in in-depth interviews, whether at the time of the original survey or on a later date.

Procedure

The researcher selected international student participants on UNL’s City Campus between February 20, 2018 and February 27, 2018. Participants were recruited in person on weekdays and nights in the Nebraska Union, The Adele Hall Learning Commons, Love Library and the Selleck Dining Hall. Participants also accessed the survey via the Internet on Instagram, WhatsApp, email and through links shared while in person. Facebook groups for international students such as UNL International Student Service and UNL International Student Fellowship were also used to solicit survey responses. The researcher also solicited the survey to the Office of Academic Success and Intercultural Services mentors and the International Student and Scholar Office, but it cannot be determined whether any survey responses were obtained via such sources. During in-person surveys the researcher approached participants, introduced herself, and shared that she was completing an undergraduate thesis at the university regarding international students’ decisions to attend UNL. The researcher then asked whether the potential participant was an international student, and if so, whether they would participate in a 5-10-minute survey. If the respondent was not an international student, the researcher asked if the respondent could share the Google Form survey link with any international students he or she may know. Participants could ask questions at any time during the survey. Participants were approached
alone or in up to groups of seven. Participants were welcome to ask any questions or share relevant information following the survey; afterword, they were thanked for their participation. In-depth interviews were conducted with three survey respondents that indicated they would be available and interested in participating in an in-depth interview. Two of the interviews occurred immediately following the survey administration. One interview occurred at a later date. The interview questions were not standard. Rather, the questions followed the course of the conversation as each of the three students shared their own stories of their journeys to UNL. One in-depth interview was conducted with a UNL International Recruitment Specialist at the UNL Office of Admissions on February 6, 2018. The UNL International Recruitment Specialist was identified as a good interview candidate via the “Meet Your Admissions Team” page on the UNL Undergraduate Office of Admissions website.

Results

In-Depth Interviews

An in-depth interview with a UNL International Recruitment Specialist provided many insights that determined the direction of this study. Insights from this interview will be shared via the SWOT method.

The strengths of the UNL Office of Admissions international recruitment efforts are many. The Office of Admissions has a long tradition of welcoming international students to campus. Thus, the Office of Admissions allocates two full-time positions to international recruitment; one Recruitment Specialist focuses on China, the other Recruitment Specialist focuses on the remainder of the world. Each spring the Recruitment Specialists spend a month traveling abroad to recruit, and each fall the Specialists travel for two months. Much of their
WHY NEBRASKA?

travel looks familiar to that of a regional Recruitment Specialist or Admissions Counselor: they visit with students in high schools, give presentations to classes, set up display tables in lunchrooms and attend college fairs. The Office of Admissions prides itself on the overall quality of education at UNL, great value and a range of well-ranked programs. UNL also benefits from the names of famous alumni, such as Warren Buffet, the chairman and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway and the third wealthiest person in the world. The university shares about the benefits of Lincoln, Nebraska: the fourth largest city in the Big Ten conference, a city full of nature and entertainment alike, all close to an airport and nestled within one of the safest, friendliest regions in the country.

The weaknesses of the UNL Admissions situation are as follows. Though the safety and ease of Lincoln are surely a strong recruiting factor for many students, still others worry about Lincoln’s small city size. “For a student from Seoul, South Korea or Shanghai, China, it doesn’t really have that much going on,” the International Recruitment Specialist shared. The largest reported weakness, though, is UNL’s current placement on the U.S. News & World Report Rankings. Though UNL has been within the top 100 National Universities in recent years, it has recently dropped to a tie for #124. The International Recruitment Specialist noted this is a weakness because, for convenience’s sake, many prospective students do not look beyond the top 100. “If a student says, ‘I’m looking to apply to top 100 universities’, suddenly, we’re not in that. So that’s challenging,” the Admissions employee said.

UNL is aware of many areas of opportunity that exist in the realm of international student recruitment because of UNL’s unique location, programs and offerings. UNL’s Office of Admissions is driven to create a student body through individual people and has the vision to recruit individually. The International Recruitment Specialist summarized it this way:
For us in Admissions, the big picture of what we’re doing is we are building the student body of the University. So, for me to go to Malaysia or Indonesia is going to change us, and what our body looks like over the years. It means that that’s what we want our student body to look like. We allocate admissions people based on how we want to create what the university looks like: a diverse, robust, globally connected student body.

As the student body diversifies and grants diplomas to global students, UNL has the opportunity for its brand to spread organically through the places its graduates live and work. The International Recruitment Specialist used the CASNR Undergraduate Scholarship Program (CUSP) for Rwandan Integrated Science majors as an example. “We’re educating the next generation of agricultural leadership in Rwanda...UNL can be a force for good in education, by educating the people that have expertise,” the International Recruitment Specialist said. There is great opportunity to recruit from places where UNL graduates have shaped the landscape.

Another opportunity is financial: a UNL education is a good value; U.S. News & World Report ranked it #96 in best value schools. For international students seeking to attend a good school but unable to pay $50,000- $60,000 per year for education at an elite private school, UNL’s value can be appealing. Traditionally, UNL and The University of Iowa trade spots for the cheapest education in the Big Ten Conference. Furthermore, UNL students may choose to live off campus in cheaper housing following their first year on campus, creating an opportunity for prospective students to save money.

UNL experiences relatively few internal threats. However, externally there are situations that could jeopardize the recruitment of international students to UNL. Firstly, an increasing number of universities are beginning to break in to international student recruitment; with increased competition there is potential for decreased enrollment. Secondly, the changing
political climate and policies in the United States may correlate with a trending drop in current international student enrollment numbers. A report by the American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers showed that 39% of university respondents reported drops in enrollment numbers from the 2017 school year, with the majority of the decreased enrollments coming from the Middle East (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers). The study cited potential causes to be “perception that the climate in the U.S. is now less welcoming to individuals from other countries, concerns that benefits and restrictions around visas could change, and concerns that the Executive Order travel ban might expand to include additional countries” (American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers).

Interviews were conducted with three international students who responded to the survey: a male from Saudi Arabia, a male from Oman and a female from China. The Saudi Arabian man shared that safety was a priority in looking at schools in the United States. He said, “first of all, for international students, we’re looking for safety. That’s why I chose Lincoln. It’s one of the safest places in the US.” In response to a question about current events that may have compromised the safety of international students, he said:

At the most safe places, things may go wrong. The most I have seen here in Lincoln is that people walk around with guns, but I have never seen a serious crime. So, Lincoln counts as safe as compared with the other cities in the U.S.

This student commented on his appreciation of the diversity of majors and students at Nebraska, noting that had he enrolled in an engineering-specific university he would not have been able to meet so many other students. This student raved not only about students, but the welcoming environment of Nebraska as a whole, claiming the people to be one UNL’s strongest selling points. He commented “If you make someone else choose from Florida or Nebraska, they would
choose Florida. I would choose Nebraska. If it’s not for the people, I would not be studying in Nebraska.” He attributed the reading he had done about Nebraska as a necessary step in making the decision to attend UNL.

The Chinese female shared that a teacher in China was the most influential factor in her decision to attend UNL. She said her teacher was the first person who told her to consider moving to Lincoln. “They will recommend us to do that. My teacher recommended me to apply for maybe 5 schools. Nebraska was one.” When asked how the teacher heard about UNL, the Chinese student shared that she did not know. The teacher herself had encountered UNL in some way and had caused both the Chinese student and her boyfriend to attend university thousands of miles from home. UNL has a unique opportunity to market itself to teachers abroad, to continue to place its name on the “top five” lists that teachers share with their students. This is particularly pertinent in Asian cultures, where the legitimate authority of teachers is valued highly in comparison to Western cultures. Research shows that “classroom discourse in China is more oriented towards a hierarchical face system and assumes more respect from students toward the teachers,” perhaps creating deeper feelings of trust and respect, then, when teachers give students recommendations on universities abroad. (Zhao, 2007, p. 129).

The Omani student interviewed shared that he did not know where in the world UNL was before coming to Nebraska. In fact, he thought he was headed to the United Kingdom. When he came off the plane in Lincoln in January 2018 he was understandably shocked and very cold. The Omani student had come to UNL because the Omani government offered him a full tuition to the university, so the advertising and credentials of UNL did not resonate with him. This insight is impactful- it shows that not all students make their own decision to receive a four-year degree from UNL. Thus, UNL must market itself to governments and other organizations as well
as students. UNL could do this by educating its International Recruitment Specialists on government relations, and reconfiguring some of its admissions materials and online resources to yield to the questions and musings of governments. The Omani student expressed concern that he was not welcome in America, citing wonders that people might be suspicious of him because he is a Muslim. This concern parallels the previously reported data that students from the Middle East may be increasingly cautious to study in the United States. However, it is important to note that the experience of every student is unique, and experiences are the blend of a variety of factors unrelated to race, ethnicity or religion.

**Surveys**

The Office of Admissions presents four main factors in meetings with international students. The Office of Admissions physical recruiting pamphlet is structured accordingly. The four factors are overall academic and teaching quality, success of current UNL and former UNL students, affordability and life in Lincoln. Each expected factor was incorporated into the survey. Listed in Table 1 in Appendix A are Descriptive Statistics for the results of the Likert scale measures regarding the most influential factors students considered when deciding to attend UNL. The results of the survey were analyzed using SPSS software and two-way ANOVA tests.

The top five most influential decision-making factors as shown in the survey are safety, quality of chosen academic major at UNL (as differentiated from perceived worth of major), a welcoming environment for international students, the availability of scholarships and the overall academic and teaching quality of UNL. One of these factors overlaps with that of the Office of Admissions’ primary messaging: overall academic and teaching quality at UNL. The five factors that were least influential among the decision-making factors were family and friends’ enrollment at UNL, a community of students from a home country available via clubs, good
career services and opportunities to connect with employers, a specific program through a home
country or university, and the diversity of the UNL student body. The data regarding academic
and major quality shows that the academic prestige is certainly an important factor in students’
decisions to attend UNL. A safe and welcoming environment is also noted, showing that
international students at UNL not only value the education they receive, but the safe and
welcoming environment they receive it in. When respondents had finished ranking each
decision-making, respondents were asked to type out the most influential factor in their college
decision choice. 36.36% of respondents said the availability of scholarships was the most
influential factor. Another 15.9% said safety, 9.09% said quality of their chosen major, and
another 9.09% of respondents said UNL’s welcoming environment of internationals. No other
factor received multiple responses. This shows internal validity in the survey measure and
reinforces the finding that the top five factors are indeed messages that need to be communicated
to prospective students.

Respondents were surveyed on their process of discovering UNL as a potential
university. Respondents could check more than one option in their synopses of discovery.
Confirming the hypothesis of the Office of Admissions, the majority of international students
surveyed initially heard about UNL via the U.S. News and World Report Rankings. A total of
56.8% of students marked that they first heard about UNL on the list of rankings. An additional
36.4% of respondents were recommended to look into UNL via the suggestion of a family
member of friend. Furthermore, 29.3% of respondents accessed UNL materials through the
global.unl.edu website or other web-based UNL recruiting materials. A total of 27.3% of
surveyed students met with a recruiter, 25% of respondents were recommended UNL via a
teacher, and 6.8% of respondents accessed UNL information through direct mail. A few
respondents noted that their first interaction with UNL was via independent Internet research or the government of their home country. Though many students used the information presented to them, and all respondents responded to the touchpoints in a positive manner (i.e., they enrolled at UNL), some touchpoints advertised UNL’s strengths via the decision-making factors more effectively.

**Recruiters**

Individuals who were exposed to UNL via an Office of Admissions recruiter were significantly less likely to claim the decision-making factors of safety \((p = .028, M = 4.00)\) and high graduate employment rates \((p = .048, M = 2.82)\) as influential aspects of their decisions. In comparison, individuals who were not exposed to UNL via an Office of Admissions recruiter reported significantly higher decision-making factor influence of safety \((M = 5.48)\) and high graduate employment rates \((M = 3.70)\). Individuals who met with recruiters tended to rank overall academic and teaching quality, availability of scholarships, research opportunities, opportunities to connect with students from their home country in UNL clubs, ranking, recommended by a family member of friend, and good career services and good connections with employers higher than other students ranked those items. However, none of those results were statistically significant \((p < .05)\). It is worth noting that there were also no statistically significant mean differences between students who met with recruiters and students who did not meet with recruiters in regard to the four factors listed by the Office of Admissions as key factors to walk prospective students through.

**A List of University Rankings**

There were no statistically significant mean differences between individuals who used U.S. News and World Report rankings to hear about UNL and individuals who did not.
Recommendation of Friend or Family

Recommendations to attend UNL produced a significant result when the mean differences of individuals who were recommended to come to UNL were compared with those who had received no recommendation regarding UNL. Those who were recommended to come to UNL as a touchpoint were significantly more likely to highly rank the decision-making factor of recommendation of friend or family ($p = .01, M = 4.31$), as compared to individuals who did not receive the touchpoint of a recommendation ($M = 3.16$).

UNL Website or Other UNL Sponsored Materials Online

Of all touchpoints surveyed, this touchpoint received the greatest number of statistically significant results. Respondents who heard about UNL via the Internet were significantly more likely to have high scores on the decision-making factors of success of current UNL and former UNL students ($p = .002, M = 4.25$), research opportunities ($p = .022, M = 4.33$) and high graduate employment rate ($p = .013, M = 4.25$) than respondents who first heard about UNL through other touchpoints. For students without the influence of the UNL website, scores on the decision-making factors of success of current UNL and former UNL students ($M = 3.16$), research opportunities ($M = 3.46$) and high graduate employment rate ($M = 3.18$) were significantly lower. These three p-values communicate that prospective students who access the UNL website are statistically more likely to make a decision to attend UNL based on their understanding that UNL graduates are successful, employed post-graduation, and given research opportunities while at UNL. This finding is not surprising, considering that these three messages are readily accessible on the global.unl.edu website. With one click on the Academics tab, prospective students can read that “The University of Nebraska–Lincoln’s Undergraduate
Creative Activities and Research Experience (UCARE) program was ranked as one of the top 28 undergraduate research programs in the United States,” and:

At the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, we prepare you to succeed after graduation. Not only will you gain knowledge and experience, we provide you with the skills and services to help you pursue your career goals or continue to graduate school.

If one scrolls further down the page, one can read that Lincoln is “fun & safe,” and that “all are welcome at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

**UNL Information was Mailed to Me**

There were no statistically significant mean differences between individuals who heard about UNL via direct mail and individuals who did not.

**Recommendation of a Teacher**

Individuals who heard about UNL via a teacher in their home country were significantly less likely to choose university ranking ($p = .014, M = 2.91$), good recommendation ($p = .029, M = 2.45$), or graduate employment rate ($p = .048, M = 2.82$) as important factors in the decision-making process. Thus, those who were not recommended by a teacher were more likely to decide to attend UNL because of its good ranking ($M = 3.82$), good recommendation ($M = 3.76$) and good graduate employment rates ($M = 3.70$). These findings are significant because they identify which aspects of university life are communicated less prominently as teachers recommend UNL to their students.

**Discussion**

**Conclusion**
Overall, UNL’s direct and indirect touchpoints effectively communicate UNL’s strengths. Whether through a face-to-face meeting or an Internet screen, international students who choose to enroll at UNL have come to understand a degree of the university’s points of pride. The results of the survey show that there are certain areas of communications that have been more thoroughly presented or understood, and others that have not. I recommend that the UNL Office of Admissions look at the survey responses and consider whether their direct and indirect touchpoints in advertising are understood as the university desires that they be. It is possible that the Office of Admissions advertises some aspects more heavily yet seeks to ultimately present its brand as something entirely different. Whatever the case, the Office of Admissions must recognize that its communication efforts have direct and statistically significant impacts on the way international students view, and ultimately make decisions about, UNL. I recommend that The Office of Admissions consider its varying touchpoints and determine whether it wants to use certain platforms to target certain decision-making factors or streamline communications evenly throughout. A streamlined communication would lack in depth of message but may be effective in communicating a broader concept of the UNL experience than current segmented models.

An effort of streamlined communication is already underway in UNL Office of Admissions-produced materials, such as direct mail, pamphlets, and web-based content. However, the person-to-person communication of UNL’s strengths as an institute of higher education are much more fragmented. This is unsurprising, since the fragmented communications are not tailored by the university itself, rather, they are the interpretations of the university via outside sources. To nullify this effect, I recommend the university looks to streamline the messages communicated by those outside sources through educational sessions
tailored to non-university information sources, such as teachers and governments. I recommend
the International Recruitment Specialists invest 20% of their recruitment efforts toward
educating influencers such as teachers, principals, and departments of education over the next
five years. During those five years, I recommend the UNL Office of Admissions continue to
survey incoming international students regarding the most influential factors pertaining to their
UNL enrollment as well as the internal and external recruitment touchpoints they encountered in
deciding. The analysis of these factors will help the UNL Office of Admissions determine
whether its pursuit of streamlined messages across internal and external communications is
effective in recruiting international students to UNL.

International students are a valuable and essential piece of a thriving student body. If
UNL truly desires to build its student body to reflect the globe, the Office of Admissions must
continue to invest in international student recruitment, and increasingly competitively so. The
current political age presents the challenge of fear in students seeking to find an educational
home in the United States. The current economic state of many universities nationwide presents
challenges as well. More than ever, universities are competing to attract the best and brightest
from the nearest and farthest corners of the globe. UNL must communicate its strengths
effectively and broadly if it expects to continue to enroll thousands of international students per
year. The Office of Admissions must continue to create and refine its strategic international
student recruitment plan to be competitive among the increasing number of universities targeting
international students in the United States.

Limitations

While the survey conducted sought to identify the reasons international students chose to
attend UNL, it is possible that students’ answers were swayed by mood or by a self-report bias.
Firstly, students may have responded to the survey with biased answers in regard to how they felt at the time the survey was conducted. The Saudi Arabian student made note of this in his in-depth interview. “I believe, not much people would expect the questions, and they would not answer all the same time the same answers,” he said. “They may answer today something different today from tomorrow. It depends on your situation during the survey.” The student then referenced current grades as a stressor that could negatively influence scores. However, with a sample size of 45, there is some control for the bias in survey results. Furthermore, self-report bias could have influenced the results because participants could have been self-conscious of their scores and reported what they believed the researcher wanted to hear, or participants wrote what they wanted to be true about their experience.

Furthermore, this study does not quantify the truth behind any of the decision-making factors. Thus, it may seem as if university communications poorly communicate a factor, whereas the reality may be that the factor is not relevant to the UNL experience. For example, diversity of the UNL student body was one of the bottom 5 factors. This survey does not classify whether this result is because UNL is not diverse, or whether UNL is diverse, but UNL’s diversity is simply not important to international students as they choose to attend UNL.

International students are a difficult population to access and survey. Thus, the sample size was limited. This study heavily relied on data collected through survey respondents of Asian descent. While the majority of UNL international students are Asian and four of UNL’s top five countries where international students come from are on the continent of Asia, surveying other groups of student populations—namely, more South Americans and Europeans, could increase external validity of these results.

Future Study
Future study should examine the differences in decision-making factors between students from varying nations and financial backgrounds. Each nation and socioeconomic background may exert particular influence on survey results, and, thus, show UNL how it might more effectively promote its brand to diverse segments of prospective students.

Future study should examine whether the decision-making factors and the expectations therein effectively translated into the true experience of international students. Are the reasons international students chose Nebraska the reasons they stay over the course of four years? Are there promises made through UNL advertising that are not commonly fulfilled to international students? Once on campus, do international students feel equipped and confident to ask the questions that need to be asked to take advantage of all the unique services and programs that drew the students to UNL in the first place? All such questions could be examined through further in-depth interviews.
References


WHY NEBRASKA?


Ion-funding


### Appendix A

#### Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Decision Making Factors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor*</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4.43</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of my chosen major</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcoming to international students</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarship availability</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall academic and teaching quality</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affordability</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research opportunities</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer credit availability to UNL</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>1.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNL is well ranked</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.59</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNL was recommended to me</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>1.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life in Lincoln, Nebraska</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High graduate employment rate</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>1.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Success of current and former UNL students</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of UNL student body</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>1.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A specific program through my country</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good career service, links with good employers</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>1.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to connect with my country in clubs</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends or family attended UNL</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2.36</td>
<td>1.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Factors are abbreviated. Reference full factor in Methods section.