

ARE WE IN THE PICTURE? TO WHAT EXTENT, IF AT ALL? MEXICAN AND LATIN
AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT REPRESENTATION ON GLOBAL WEBSITES
OF BORDERLAND HISPANIC-SERVING INSTITUTIONS

By

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Dedication

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Abstract

This study is about how Higher Education Institutions that happen to be Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI) that are located on border states show or portray international students from México and Latin America on their websites or not. International students can be the “ideal” student because they bring prestige and revenue to the institution. However, some international students can suffer stratification or invisibility due to their nationality or race.

I inquiry how visible or not are Mexican students and Latinos on Hispanic Serving Institutions and how service is being implemented by answering these research questions. 1.-Do Borderlands HSI features Mexican and Latin American students in international websites, and to what extent if at all? And 2.- In which ways do international students from Mexico and Latin America forgoing these websites? Is this reflective of neo-racist?

By using a comparative qualitative analysis on public discourse, I will study universities that happen to be on border states such as Arizona and Texas. This sample is composed of five universities, two of them in Arizona and three in Texas. Such as University of Arizona (UArizona), Arizona State University (ASU), University of Houston, Texas A & M, and University of Texas, at El Paso (UTEP). Research on HSI as well as on international students but is limited to the intersection of servingness or how servings applied if to international students.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background

Higher education institutions (HEIs) vary in how they present themselves and how they operate. These practices are reflected in university policies and implementations that affect faculty, students, and institutional funding. At times, such practices may contradict the institution's stated mission, vision, and goals while benefiting those in positions of power and authority. For example, some institutions designated as Hispanic-serving institutions (HSIs) promote diversity and inclusion, while groups considered minorities continue to have limited visibility within these institutions. This contradiction is evident in certain marketing practices at HSIs, particularly in how they target international students. These practices may involve altering the narrative regarding how international students are valued (or not) by the institutions they are meant to "belong" to, thereby shaping perceptions. Such strategies include stratification, systematic exclusion associated with neoliberal agendas, omission, and the aggregation or selective inclusion of ethno-racial categories. These elements often appear in university marketing materials, especially on websites, to enhance the appearance of diversity and appeal to international students.

International students are often viewed as the "ideal" student because of the revenue and prestige they bring to institutions. However, international students may experience stratification or invisibility based on their nationality, race, ethnicity, language, or financial ability to pay tuition (e.g., personal funds versus scholarships or graduate assistantships). This invisibility, which can be understood through the concept of the colonial gaze, can affect international

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students who may be considered “not ideal.” Historically, white communities have controlled access to class mobility, resources, and education—a dynamic that, to some extent, persists today. These racialized social systems allocate different economic, political, social, and psychological rewards to groups along racial lines. As Zeus Leonardo (2013) stated, “Whites do not experience marginalization in non-white spaces” as they bring their privilege” (as cited in Posey-Maddox, 2016, p. 235). This dynamic also applies to academic institutions and power structures, where the majority of individuals in positions of influence are white.

Subjectivity Statements

I am an international student from Mexico, which allows me to experience two different perspectives and positions.

In Mexico, I am from the borderlands—specifically Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Since childhood, I have regularly crossed the border into El Paso, Texas. For me, this routine was normal. I saw students crossing the border daily to attend school or university. I knew people who lived in Juárez but frequently crossed into the United States—not only for tourism, shopping, or medical care, but also for work or to visit family.

I belong to a social group that is generally considered privileged, although I have not always perceived or experienced it that way. This privilege is rooted, first and foremost, in my family background: my last names are of Spanish origin, and my ancestors played notable roles in the history of my home city. Second, my privilege comes from my family's socioeconomic status, which I attribute to the hard work of my parents. Third, it stems from my experiences as a student in the private education system. Finally, my privilege is also linked to the color of my skin. In my home country, my skin tone is considered *blanca* (white).

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In contrast, in the United States, I experience two dualities. First, as an international student, I have noticed how people react when I mention my status. Often, their initial response, especially if I am speaking to someone who is white, is to assume that I am from an “exotic” place. When I say I am from Mexico, some respond with comments like “you don’t look like it” or “you’re too pretty to be from there.” When I mention that I am pursuing a PhD, I have observed a noticeable shift in how people approach or speak to me. Second, as a student-visa holder, or “nonimmigrant visitor,” I have experienced both benefits and challenges, whether in interactions with immigration authorities, with certain faculty, or in how I navigate everyday situations. Being *Mexicana* in the United States also means being viewed by society as a Latina and as part of a minority group. While I do not see myself in those terms, in this country, I have come to learn and experience what it means to be categorized in that way, both in academic settings and in everyday life.

Inquiry Worldview

This research is situated within a critical discourse analysis framework, guided by critical race theory (CRT). CRT examines systems and structures of power, focusing on the intersections of race and inequality.

This study draws on three key tenets of CRT:

- Interest Convergence (Bell, 1980): This concept uses civil rights law to examine and challenge institutional policies that reinforce structural racism. It argues that racial progress tends to occur only when it aligns with the interests of white individuals.

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- Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991): This tenet explores how racism intersects with other forms of subordination, such as sexism, classism, and xenophobia, thereby amplifying their effects.
- Whiteness as Property (Harris, 1993): This concept investigates white privilege by likening it to property. It includes rights such as possession, use, and disposition, as well as transferability, enjoyment, and exclusion based on race.

As an extension and intersection of CRT, I incorporate the concept of neo-racism and deficit notions, which suggest the existence of a sociologically constructed racial hierarchy based on differences among nationalities, ethnicities, and phenotypes (Balibar, 2005, 2007; Farnen, 2000). These differences are often used to “justify discrimination toward an alleged ‘underclass’” (Farnen, 2000, p. 243; as cited in Cantwell & Lee, 2010, p. 497). Neo-racist constructions legitimize exclusion, denial of rights, and mistreatment of “foreigners,” while preserving existing power relationships. In other words, neo-racism serves as a framework for analyzing structural racism in the context of immigration, where race, culture, and nationality interact in complex ways to produce and reinforce a hierarchy of social positions (p. 497).

In addition to CRT, I draw on several key concepts that support the theoretical and analytical foundation of this research.

Academic Capitalism

Academic capitalism describes how colleges and universities are transforming in response to external market pressures and increasingly aligning with neoliberal ideologies. According to Slaughter and Leslie (1997) and Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), academic capitalism provides a contextual lens for understanding how institutions around the world are

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shifting toward market-based models, often at the expense of the public good. This framework also helps explain how existing unequal structures of educational opportunity are maintained (Cantwell & Lee, 2010, p. 510).

Colonial Gaze

The concept of the colonial gaze refers to how colonized individuals adopt the appearances, behaviors, and institutions of colonizers. These acts of mimicry are always partial, contradictory, and ambivalent. On the one hand, they constitute “authorized versions of otherness” (Bhabha, 1994/2004, p. 126); on the other, they are disavowed because they blur the boundaries between colonizer and colonized, threatening the perceived duality of the colonizer self and the colonized other (Bhabha, 1985, p. 158).

Racial Capitalism

Racial capitalism refers to the exploitation of racial identity by white individuals and predominantly white institutions for financial, social, or institutional gain. As Leong (2013) argued, commodifying racial identity is harmful because it reduces a deeply personal and social identity to something that can be bought and sold. This process causes significant harm to people of color by turning their identities into tools of market exchange.

Hispanic-Serving Institutions

HSIs are colleges and universities in the United States where at least 25% of the undergraduate student population is Latinx, and at least 50% of students are from low-income backgrounds. These institutions aim to provide culturally responsive education by centering Latinx ways of knowing and being, with the goal of promoting transformative outcomes, both academic and nonacademic (Garcia, 2017, 2018, 2019).

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Diversity

According to the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (2008), the concept of diversity holds multiple meanings for different groups. Three major types of diversity are:

- *Counting diversity*, which involves empirically enumerating differences within a given population. For example, researchers may count individuals based on race, gender, or ethnicity and compare the demographic composition of schools, workplaces, or government institutions to broader societal distributions.
- *Culture diversity*, which emphasizes the importance of understanding and appreciating cultural differences across racial, ethnic, and gender lines. Advocates of this approach argue that cultural variation should not be evaluated according to a dominant cultural standard. Instead, differences should be seen as contributing to the richness and coexistence of a pluralistic society.
- *Cosmetic diversity*, a term described by Elghawaby (2020), refers to the superficial inclusion of a small number of people of color in an organization to give the appearance of inclusivity, without enacting meaningful structural change.

Marketing

In “Social Marketing: An Approach to Planned Social Change,” Kotler and Zaltman (1971) cited a wide range of definitions to illustrate the complexity of marketing. They noted that marketing has been described as a business activity, a set of related business functions, a trade phenomenon, a frame of mind, a coordinative and integrative policymaking function, a sense of business purpose, an economic process, a structure of institutions, a method of transferring ownership of products, a system of concentration and dispersion, a creator of time, place, and possession utilities, and a mechanism for balancing supply and demand. In addition, Kotler

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(1972) defined marketing management as the “analysis, planning, implementation, and control of programs designed to bring about desired exchanges with target audiences for the purpose of personal or mutual gain. It relies heavily on the adaptation and coordination of product, price, promotion, and place for achieving effective response.”

International Students

Andrade (2006) defined international students as “individuals enrolled in HEIs who are on temporary student visas and are non-native English speakers.” Most international students in the United States hold F-1 visas, which are designated for nonimmigrant visitors who enter the country temporarily to pursue academic studies. F-1 visa holders may also take online courses from anywhere in the world. According to U.S. immigration definitions, a nonimmigrant is someone who meets one or more of the following criteria: (a) intends to stay in the United States temporarily, (b) does not hold U.S. citizenship or legal permanent resident status (i.e., a valid green card), (c) is currently in the United States on a nonimmigrant visa (without a valid green card), and (d) applies for a visa to gain lawful entry into the United States.

Purpose of the Study

This study explores how social and institutional systems operate behind the scenes to uphold systems of privilege and contribute to the ongoing oppression of certain groups, despite stated commitments to equity and inclusion. Through the analysis of public discourse on university websites, specifically those of institutions located in the U.S.–Mexico borderlands, I aim to present an alternative narrative. This narrative highlights: how certain populations experience invisibility in international marketing practices that are shaped by contextual, cultural, and political differences.

The research is guided by the following questions:

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1. Do borderland HSIs feature Mexican and Latin American students on their international recruitment websites, and if so, to what extent?
2. In what ways do international students from Mexico and Latin America engage with or perceive these websites, and can these practices be interpreted as reflections of neo-racism?

This study operates under two working hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: Students from regions such as Asia (e.g., China, South Korea), the Middle East, and India receive greater visibility in international marketing materials than students from Mexico and Latin America.
- Hypothesis 2: Does HSI portrayed on their international website students from Mexico and Latin America?

This study focuses on HEIs that are designated as HSIs and are in the U.S. states that border Mexico. Despite their geographic and demographic positioning, these institutions often do not reflect their borderland identity or their proximity to Mexico on their international recruitment websites. As Rhoades (2022) observed, “This tells you something about the natural order and natural hierarchy of who are the preferred students and who are the preferred nations.” The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the limited body of research on how university websites portray international students, particularly those from Mexico and Latin America. Neoliberal discourses in higher education often promote diversity rhetorically, but only as far as they preserve existing hierarchies of culture and language. Using the frameworks of neoliberalism, neo-racism, and academic capitalism, I will analyze how these marketing practices contribute to the marginalization or downgrading of certain student populations. I also aim to explore whether and how such practices influence academic policy, particularly at HSIs.

Dissertation Structure

This study is organized into six chapters. Chapter One introduces the background and context of the research, outlines its purpose, defines the central problem being addressed, and briefly describes the methodology employed to explore this issue. Chapter Two presents a comprehensive review of the literature relevant to the study, including both the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that guide the analysis. This chapter delves into how marketing practices in higher education—particularly on university websites—reflect broader trends such as academic capitalism and the idea of *servingness* at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). It also examines how these practices contribute to or challenge the visibility of Latin American students in the international recruitment narrative.

Chapter Three describes the research methodology in detail, including the research questions, study design, sample selection, and the approach to website analysis. Chapter Four presents the results of the analysis, which focused on selected HSIs in two border states—Arizona and Texas. The findings are organized by state, highlighting key themes and differences observed in how university websites in each region portray or omit Mexican and Latin American international students. This includes the language used, imagery, student representation, and the overall messaging strategies employed by these institutions.

Chapter 5 of *Base Practices of Marketing* critically examines how Latin American students, particularly those from México and how they are portrayed or omitted in the international marketing strategies of U.S. universities, especially Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs). The chapter highlights a stark absence of meaningful representation, questioning why Mexican and other Latin American international students are rarely visible in university promotional materials despite their physical and cultural presence, especially in borderland institutions. It explores how neoliberal marketing frameworks prioritize prestige, professionalism, and marketability, often framing international students through a Eurocentric or Asian lens while marginalizing Latin American narratives. Instead of showcasing the real lived experiences of these students, universities tend to present a curated image that aligns with academic capitalism and global competitiveness. The chapter also underscores the power of

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language on university websites, noting how it often reinforces this invisibility by excluding Spanish or failing to acknowledge Latin American student contributions. Through these critiques, the chapter calls for a reimagining of university marketing that genuinely reflects the diversity, positionality, and voices of all international students, including those from Latin America.

Chapter 6 are the conclusion and the implications of this study for practitioners and for researchers.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Competition among HEIs to attract the “ideal” student, achieve economic growth, and maintain prestige has significantly altered educational practices. This competition has also caused the recruitment and enrollment of desirable international students to become a central focus of marketing and admissions strategies. This shift reflects a broader transformation among HEIs—from serving the public good to increasingly focusing on profits. According to Labaree (1997), public educational institutions serve three key purposes: *democratic equality*, which prepares individuals for citizenship; *social efficiency*, which trains individuals to participate in the workforce; and *social mobility*, which enables individuals to compete for social positions and access to the best jobs. However, contradictions in institutional practices, the implementation of policies, individual political agendas, and systemic inequalities suggest that HEIs now serve functions beyond education. These include the reinforcement of social stratification. Posselt et al. (2012) argued that competition in the college admissions process has important implications, including the perpetuation of stratification (i.e., sorting individuals by class or status) and systemic exclusion, particularly in the form of racial inequality.

Neoliberal practices are a way HEIs maintain stratification, reproduce inequalities, and control their public image—for example, through marketing practices that shape how international students are attracted and portrayed. Education is no longer viewed as a public good offered and protected by the government; rather, it has become a commodity that can be traded in the market (Baltonado, 2012). Foucault conceptualized neoliberalism as a form of hegemony that reproduces power relations and functions as a dominant ideology. It operates as a mechanism of social control and a form of “social glue” that binds the masses to elite political-economic projects. Previous research has demonstrated that university websites are influenced by

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neoliberal economic practices, often sacrificing the intrinsic value of education in favor of market-driven outcomes. For instance, the promotion of lifestyle imagery over academic content in recruitment materials reflects a shift toward viewing the student as a client or consumer (Gottschall & Saltmarsh, 2017, as cited in Zhang et al., 2022). Similarly, DeTurk and Briscoe (2020) emphasized how the infusion of corporate culture into higher education contributes to the “erasure of the public good” (p. 969). Such corporate discourses frame education as a marketable product, misaligning institutional goals with broader educational aims such as upward mobility and community enrichment.

Furthermore, the **marketization** of HEIs has affected universities worldwide. For example, Hauptman (2003) found that in New Zealand and Australia, equity in university settings is being threatened by market pressures. Similarly, Prewitt (2003) found that universities in Africa are facing increasing demands to align with market forces, moving away from their role as providers of higher education as a public good. In Russia, Kucher and Turchenko (2005) observed that market reforms have made education increasingly inaccessible to students from low- and middle-income backgrounds. Ning (2005) noted that the marketization of education in China has led corporations to capitalize on the education sector. In India, Gupta (2018) argued that the privatization and marketization of higher education, managed by both the private sector and the government, have widened gaps in access to educational opportunities. According to Sojkin et al. (2012), the Internet, particularly university websites and forums, was the most used source of information among prospective students, followed by brochures and handbooks (as cited in Angulo-Ruiz, 2016, p. 21). These findings highlight how marketing has become a central tool for driving economic growth and maintaining high enrollment levels by attracting students who meet “desired” criteria. Kotler and Zaltman (1971), in their work “Social Marketing: An

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Approach to Planned Social Change,” noted that marketing has been described in various ways: as a business activity, a set of related business activities, a trade phenomenon, a frame of mind, a policymaking function, an economic process, a structure of institutions, a process of exchanging ownership of products, a system of distribution, and a means of demand and supply adjustment. In this context, HEIs have increasingly focused on their websites as the first point of contact between the university and prospective students. These websites serve as a space where students, both domestic and international, can learn about programs, processes, and what the institution offers. Through strategic marketing, universities design their websites to be accessible, engaging, and curated to showcase the “ideal experience” of being a student at their institution. Zhang et al. (2022) argued that current discussions about international student engagement tend to frame students as objects in a marketing narrative, using websites to promote the idea that broad destinations “make the real difference in the world” (p. 8). This reflects a neoliberal marketing discourse. When it comes to Latinx **marketing at HSIs**, Latinx students are often viewed and positioned as consumers. Johnson and Castellon (2014) noted that although many universities, including HSIs, are enrolling more Latinx students, they have done little to “recode” the dominant discourse. It is also being observed that institutions often brand Latinx culture with values such as loyalty and cultural heritage, using these themes to appeal to prospective students. According to Vargas, some studies have shown that HSIs have an opportunity to develop marketing materials that meaningfully incorporate these cultural concepts. However, challenges arise when attempting to create a brand that authentically reflects HSI designation. In many cases, the promotional message does not align with the lived experiences of students. For instance, an institution may successfully recruit Latinx students and international students from

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Mexico and Latin America, yet these students may still encounter unwelcoming environments in the classroom or on campus.

Research has found that HEIs also use social media to engage and appeal to students, as it creates a space where the exchange of ideas can occur within seconds. Current generations, such as Generation Z, have grown up with the Internet, tablets, smartphones, and social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and others, which offer instant access to information and feedback. Research has shown that more than 50% of admissions departments use some form of social media for recruitment and admissions purposes, and approximately 20% use it to screen applications. These practices align with Steck's (2003) view that corporatized universities adopt many of their processes, decision-making criteria, and organizational structures from modern business corporations (p. 74). In the article "How Social Media Can and Should Impact Higher Education," Blankenship (2010) discussed Rheingold's five interconnected literacies of social media: attention, participation, collaboration, network awareness, and critical consumption (pp. 11–12, 118). These practices illustrate how HEIs adopt cooperative businesslike strategies to advance institutional interests. As part of neoliberal marketing discourse, this research is situated within critical discourse analysis, informed by CRT, to understand how enrollment management—specifically, marketing practices targeting international students—promotes inequality. Two key tenets of CRT guide this approach: first, the idea that racism is ordinary and not aberrational, and second, the concept of interest convergence. CRT holds that racism is a routine and systemic feature of society, sustained by those who benefit from existing structures of power and privilege. Interest convergence, as defined by Bell (1980), asserts that progress for racially oppressed groups occurs only when it aligns with the interests of white elites. In other words, white people are likely to support racial

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justice only when doing so benefits them—a matter of alignment, not altruism. Historically, racism and racial discrimination have been embedded in legal and societal practices that are neither unbiased nor objective. According to Berrey (2005), diversity can be exploited as “a tool, used by elites to obscure inequalities” (as cited in Posey-Maddox, p. 140). Similarly, Cantwell and Lee (2010) explored how neo-racist constructs legitimize exclusion, denial of rights, and mistreatment of “foreigners” while reinforcing power relationships. In other words, neo-racism provides a framework for analyzing structural racism in the context of immigration, where race, culture, and nationality intersect in complex ways to create a hierarchy of social positions (p. 497). University websites, through their visual and textual narratives, may reflect neo-racist practices that reinforce hidden cultural stereotypes.

These practices can be better understood through the lens of **academic capitalism**, which suggests that colleges and universities worldwide are becoming increasingly aligned with market forces, often at the expense of the public good (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Cantwell and Lee (2010) further noted that “academic capitalism explains how current unequal structures of opportunity are maintained” (p. 510). International students are not exempt from these systems of oppression. In this context, mimicry, a concept rooted in colonial ideology, is defined as something “almost the same, but not quite.” Another key concept that supports this study is the colonial gaze, an important framework in postcolonial and poststructuralist studies of racial and ethnic minorities, diasporas, and migration. Mimicry, within this framework, is not a mask and does not conceal an essence or identity. Rather, the colonized subject may adopt the appearance and manners of the colonizer and mimic their laws and institutions. However, these representations are always partial, contradictory, and ambivalent. On one hand, they are “authorized versions of otherness” (Bhabha, 1994/2004, p.

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126); on the other hand, they must be disavowed because they threaten to dissolve the binary between the colonizer self and the colonized other (Bhabha, 1985, p. 158).

Previous research focusing on international students has explored themes such as institutional commitments to diversity and global reach (Cantwell, 2015; Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). The growth in international student enrollment, particularly at public universities, has also become a source of controversy and conflict (Shih, 2017). For instance, in 2017, California enacted a state policy to limit international enrollments at public universities (Watanabe, 2017). Other studies have examined international students' experiences of alienation and discrimination within higher education spaces (Li, 2019; Su & Harrison, 2016), their motivations for pursuing education abroad (Hazen & Alberts, 2006), psychological well-being (Arthur, 2008; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011), and academic and social integration into campus life (Zhao et al., 2005). Researchers have also identified financial difficulties, language barriers, and social isolation as significant challenges to academic success (Abdullah et al. 2014; Owens & Loomes, 2010; Sherry et al., 2010). Additionally, various studies have examined how HEIs can better serve the unique needs of international students (Cho & Yu, 2015, as cited in Holand Ford, 2020, p. 1196; Jackson et al., 2019). However, research specifically focusing on Latinx or Hispanic international students remains limited, as these students often experience exclusion and underrepresentation. For example, Vázquez (as cited in Vasquez, 2020, p. 126) found that Latinos face a double jeopardy in their pursuit of the American Dream: their social mobility is constrained by both inadequate education and a lack of equal protection in the labor market. Valencia (2002) identified three major barriers preventing Latinos from fully participating in a globalized economy: (a) an irrelevant and low-quality education, (b) a sorting process that

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systematically separates students along racial and ethnic lines, and (c) a higher education system that is increasingly expensive and selective.

HEIs often pride themselves on being highly diverse and inclusive, and some are officially designated as HSIs. However, upon closer examination, many of these institutions demonstrate diversity primarily in terms of the number of international students enrolled, while falling short of genuine inclusivity in their practices and policies. For instance, *counting diversity* refers to quantitative data such as enrollment figures for local and international students, whether at the graduate or undergraduate level. In contrast, *culture diversity* emphasizes the importance of understanding and appreciating differences in race, ethnicity, and gender—an essential component of *servingsness* in HSIs. Despite institutional commitments to inclusion, implicit barriers continue to affect historically excluded populations. Research has shown that once Latinx students enter HSIs, they may encounter a hostile campus climate that undermines their morale, sense of belonging, and academic success (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016; Maestas et al., 2007; Sanchez, 2019). Eddie et al. (2021) found that racially minoritized students at HSIs reported heightened awareness of racism in various forms, institutional “magical thinking” regarding the benefits of diversity, and the need to develop strategies to navigate racially charged postsecondary environments. Similarly, Lee and Rice (2007) found that traditional theories of adjustment do not fully explain the discrimination and unfair treatment experienced by international students, particularly those from Asia, India, Latin America, and the Middle East, who are more likely to encounter bias than students from Western or English-speaking countries. According to the Institute of International Education (2019), international students from Latin American countries account for more than 6.4% of international enrollment in the United States. Students from Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, and Colombia rank among the top 25 sending

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countries to U.S. colleges and universities. Meanwhile, countries such as China, South Korea, India, and various European nations send even larger numbers of students, which may contribute to these groups being perceived as the “ideal” international students. Their high enrollment rates are often viewed through an economic lens, as sources of institutional revenue. In contrast, international students from Mexico and Latin America are frequently racialized through colonial frameworks, contributing to their marginalization. This gap in representation and treatment highlights the need to investigate the following research questions:

1. Do borderland HSIs feature Mexican and Latin American students on their international recruitment websites, and if so, to what extent?
2. In what ways do international students from Mexico and Latin America engage with or perceive these websites, and can these practices be interpreted as reflections of neo-racism?

In this qualitative study, I will conduct a critical discourse analysis of higher education websites, examining neoliberal marketing discourse through the lens of CRT. CRT is defined as a theoretical framework “that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses” (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). I will also incorporate the concept of neo-racism, which suggests a sociologically constructed racial hierarchy based on differences in nationality, ethnicity, and phenotype differences that are used to “justify discrimination toward an alleged ‘underclass’” (Farnen, 2000, p. 243; see also Balibar, 2005, 2007; Cantwell & Lee, 2010, p. 497). In addition, this study will engage the framework of academic capitalism, which explores how colleges and universities in the United States operate within the so-called “new economy,” often aligning with market-driven priorities (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004).

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Marketization Practices

In recent decades, globalization, internationalization, market-driven competition, institutional commitments to diversity, and the pursuit of global reach have intensified competition among universities and community colleges to attract international students. International student education is increasingly shaped by what is referred to as trade discourse—a neoliberal view of international education as a commodity for exchange. This discourse conceptualizes international students as consumers seeking individual gain, rather than as participants in a transformational, truth-seeking educational process grounded in the public good. In the United States, universities are under pressure to grow and maintain international enrollment while simultaneously managing the public narrative around its implications (Ford & Cate, 2020). Saichaie et al. (2014) found that university websites frequently portray higher education as a product, emphasizing social mobility, career advancement, and increased earnings rather than the educational process itself. Their analysis revealed few references to democratic equality or social efficiency. Similarly, Rhoades et al. (2019) observed that websites from Egypt, Mexico, and South Africa (with Argentina as a notable exception) employed aspirational marketing strategies designed to attract students from the Global North, often using messages aligned with Anglo-American academic capitalism. These messages tend to emphasize lifestyle and consumer-oriented academic tourism, particularly for study-abroad students. Bamberger et al. (2020), analyzing the social media content of two Israeli universities, found that marketing narratives create expectations among international students while simultaneously constructing an idealized image of the “desirable” international student. These portrayals communicate both inclusion and exclusion. Despite the rhetorical commitment to diversity, such marketing practices reflect the underlying influence of neoliberal ideology. Hursh and Martinez noted that

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“perhaps the most important neoliberal premise is the celebration of individuals, while both the public good and the unequal circumstances faced by different groups become invisible” (Hursh, 2008; Martinez, 2015, as cited in DeTurk, 2020, p. 969). Another way universities invite international students is through their online viewbooks or digital catalogs. Hartley and Morphew (2008) analyzed college viewbooks to examine the messages institutions aim to communicate. They found that (a) universities often downplay the rigors of academic life, suggesting that students spend little time studying; (b) many institutions emphasize that faculty care about students and are committed to nurturing their intellectual and personal growth; and (c) co-curricular activities are a dominant theme. These materials devote significant attention to clubs, programs, student organizations, and residential options—though athletics often overshadows all other offerings. By incorporating elements of the university’s mission and vision into these promotional materials, the infusion of this messaging into broader neoliberal marketing discourse becomes evident (Zhang et al., 2022). Another area of analysis is the language used by universities and community colleges in their promotional materials. Marketing messaging such as “You are the future leader” or “You are the hero; you change the world,” often accompanied by upbeat music and videos, are designed to appeal to younger generations and generate institutional revenue.

Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) defined academic capitalism as the process through which colleges and universities integrate into the new economy. This integration involves various actors, including students, administrators, faculty, and academic professionals, who mobilize public resources to create new “circuits of knowledge” that connect HEIs to market-based systems. Academic capitalism also represents an “academic revolution,” wherein research is translated into products and new enterprises, and networks are formed between the public and

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private sectors. This shift includes a movement from consumers to captive markets, the implementation of intellectual property policies, the blurring of organizational boundaries, and the influence of federal funding, neoliberal legislation, and administrative policies. Academic capitalism operates within the academy is through the restructuring and stratification of higher education. Some researchers have found that universities, under pressure to appear global and diverse, alter the presentation of student demographics on their websites. According to Ford and Patterson (2019), this manipulation can be categorized into three practices: omission, aggregation, and the addition of ethno-racial categories. These strategies are examples of cosmetic diversity, which refers to efforts to enhance the appearance of diversity on campus without enacting meaningful change. A classic example is the use of photoshopped images in college brochures, where a Black student is digitally inserted into a group of white students to create the illusion of racial diversity (Leong, 2013). Other scholars have documented a relationship between a campus's actual diversity and its likelihood of overrepresenting students of color in promotional materials. For example, Pippert et al. (2013) found that less diverse institutions were more likely to disproportionately feature students of color in their advertising (as cited in Ford & Patterson, 2019, p. 100). These practices reflect an institutional strategy of pretending to have diversity in enrollment, translating performative inclusion into marketing tactics. Diversity, in this context, is often defined broadly to include "race, gender, age, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, and disability, with additional considerations of religion, education, and family/marital status" (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019, p. 42).

Marketing and Servingness at HSIs

According to García, Gina (2017), servingness should align with the mission of HSIs; however, putting servingness into action is far more complex. The way servingness is enacted

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depends on several institutional factors, including size, student population, funding levels, public or private status, and whether the institution is a 2-year or 4-year college. To effectively support students, both academically and nonacademically, servingness must be guided by intentional frameworks and assessment-based practices that evaluate the progression and impact of institutional outcomes. García (2017) also emphasized the importance of providing evidence for the effectiveness and usefulness of federal funding by demonstrating equitable outcomes in Latinx student experiences. In addition, Hurtado et al. (2012) highlighted the need to shape organizational culture and allocate resources to prevent racism, discrimination, and harassment. They argued that fostering an inclusive environment contributes to a stronger sense of belonging for students of color and, ultimately, improves graduation rates.

The indicators of servingness proposed by García (2017) include both student outcomes and the experiences of students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Academic indicators can be seen in culturally relevant curriculum, pedagogy, and leadership decision-making practices, while nonacademic indicators are reflected in cultural validation on campus. The culture of an institution can also be conveyed through its website, particularly in the section designed for international students, by revealing what is valued, which ethnicities are represented, and what languages are available in addition to English. The U.S. Department of Education defines servingness partly through the eligibility criteria for federal grants. Once an institution enrolls at least 25% Latinx undergraduate students and meets low-income enrollment thresholds, it may qualify for designation as an HSI and become eligible to apply for competitive grants under Title V. Additional funding programs, such as the HSI science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) program, authorized under Title III of the Higher Education Act, aim to increase enrollment and academic success for Latinx and low-income students in STEM fields.

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Other federal agencies, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Science Foundation, also provide grants to promote improved academic outcomes, such as increased graduation rates.

In this study, I seek to examine the following research questions:

1. Do borderland HSIs feature Mexican and Latin American students on their international recruitment websites, and if so, to what extent?
 2. In what ways do international students from Mexico and Latin America engage with or perceive these websites, and can these practices be interpreted as reflections of neo-racism?
- Hypothesis 1: Students from regions such as Asia (e.g., China, South Korea), the Middle East, and India receive greater visibility in international marketing materials than students from Mexico and Latin America.
 - HSIs located in U.S.–Mexico border states do not consistently portray students from Mexico and Latin America on their international recruitment websites

Chapter 3: **Methodology**

Research Design

This study employed a comparative qualitative analysis of public discourse to examine the international recruitment practices of universities located in U.S. border states, specifically Texas and Arizona. The sample included five universities: three in Texas—the University of Houston (UH), Texas A&M University, and the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and two in Arizona—the University of Arizona (UArizona) and Arizona State University (ASU).

Research Questions

1. Do borderland HSIs feature Mexican and Latin American students on their international recruitment websites, and if so, to what extent?
2. In what ways do international students from Mexico and Latin America engage with or perceive these websites, and can these practices be interpreted as reflections of neo-racism?

This research compared the differences and similarities among these universities through discourse analysis. Examining the language, imagery, and structure of international recruitment websites enables the identification of how universities construct and frame the “ideal” international student. I used web scraping such as manual browsing and observational analysis to gather data from international admissions websites. Conducting content analysis of university websites was a useful methodology for comparative education research (Lažetić, 2020; Rhoades et al., 2019; Tang, 2011). In addition, I collected both textual and visual materials to examine how universities engaged with international students. These materials included website content, videos, online brochures, and other media that communicated institutional narratives. I analyzed how each university presented itself, including what made it unique and how it positioned itself

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as a desirable choice for international students. Using open coding and thematic analysis, I categorized data based on emerging themes. Narrative analysis further supported the interpretation of these themes and connected them to broader discursive patterns.

Selection of Sample

This study focused on HEIs designated as HSIs located along the U.S.–Mexico border. These universities were purposefully selected due to their federal designation as HSIs and their geographic proximity to the international border with Mexico, which placed them at a unique intersection of cultural, linguistic, and geopolitical dynamics.

The institutions included in the sample are:

- The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP)
- Texas A&M University
- The University of Houston (UH)
- The University of Arizona (UArizona)
- Arizona State University (ASU)

These universities were selected not only for their HSI designation but also for their regional significance and their roles as major public research institutions serving diverse student populations. Their location in the borderlands offered a critical lens through which to examine how international students, particularly those from Latin America, are portrayed in institutional narratives.

This research focused on analyzing the representation of international student populations on the official websites of the selected institutions. This included a close examination of admissions pages, international student service centers, student life sections, and other publicly accessible web content aimed at prospective international students. Particular attention was given

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to which groups of international students were prominently featured in digital materials and which were underrepresented or entirely absent. This analysis sought to uncover patterns of selective visibility and examine how these representations aligned with, or contradicted, the institutions' stated commitments to diversity, inclusion, and global engagement.

Data Collection

I began collecting data in 2023, at the tail end of the COVID-19 pandemic—a time when institutions were once again welcoming international students, even as the United States continued to impose travel restrictions on certain countries due to both health and political concerns. My analysis focused on the international admissions websites of five universities. For undergraduate admissions, both first year and international transfer students, I examined web pages related to application requirements, resources, funding opportunities, deadlines, F-1 visa procedures, student life, FAQs, and social media links. Within the “Student Life” sections, I reviewed content on housing, campus involvement, virtual tours, and brochures available through the websites. For graduate admissions, I analyzed pages concerning transcript requirements, English language proficiency, F-1 visa information, documentation, and financial details. Notably, graduate international admissions websites tended to emphasize academic content over social integration, in contrast to the broader focus seen in undergraduate admissions pages.

Website Analysis

Today, a university's website and social media presence are often the first resources prospective international students consult when exploring potential institutions. These platforms do more than provide essential information—they also shape the university's projected identity for current and future students, staff, and external stakeholders. As Rhoades et al. (2019) noted,

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institutions use their digital presence to convey a carefully constructed image that reflects their goals, values, and priorities. In this study, I conducted a content analysis of the official websites of selected universities to examine how international students are portrayed. The aim was to understand the narratives and imagery these institutions choose to foreground, and which student populations they center—or omit. The analysis focused on three key areas:

- 1. Setting and environment:** I began by examining the settings depicted in website images where the photos were taken and what types of activities were portrayed. These included academic settings (e.g., classrooms, labs, libraries) as well as social environments (e.g., student events, residence halls, outdoor spaces). This analysis helped identify the kinds of experiences each university chose to emphasize.
- 2. Students and representation:** I then focused on the students featured in the images. What were they doing? Did they appear to reflect diverse cultural backgrounds, or did they primarily resemble local American students? Specifically, I looked for visual representations of students who appeared to be from Mexico or Latin America. This part of the analysis explored the visibility and active inclusion of international students from these regions.
- 3. Language and messaging:** Lastly, I analyzed the textual content across the sites. What messages were conveyed regarding diversity, inclusion, and international engagement? Were international students addressed directly, or mentioned only in passing? Special attention was paid to headlines, image captions, and mission statements to evaluate the tone, emphasis, and values promoted through language.

Coding

To systematically analyze the content of the university websites, I employed a qualitative coding approach. This method allowed me to break down both visual and textual materials into meaningful categories and patterns. The goal was to move beyond surface-level impressions and identify recurring themes related to how international students are portrayed, or not portrayed, across the selected institutions.

The coding process incorporated both deductive and inductive strategies:

- **Deductive coding** was guided by themes from the existing literature, including narratives of internationalization, representation in higher education marketing, and diversity discourse (e.g., Rhoades et al., 2019). These preestablished codes included categories such as “academic setting,” “social setting,” “global/international language,” and “explicit diversity messaging.”
- **Inductive coding** allowed for the emergence of new themes directly from the data during the review process. For example, while analyzing more images and text, I began to observe repeated visual tropes, such as students holding national flags or participating in culturally themed events, which led to the creation of new codes like “symbolic multiculturalism” and “token diversity.”

To maintain organization and consistency, I developed a coding sheet and focused on three primary areas:

1. Visual Content

- **Location of the photo:** Is the image set in a classroom, lab, residence hall, or at a social event?
- **Student activities:** Are the students studying, socializing, performing, or simply walking through campus?
- **Representation:** Do the students appear to come from varied cultural backgrounds, or do they mostly look local/U.S.-based? Are international students clearly identifiable or visually ambiguous?

2. Textual Content

- **Intended audience:** Are international students addressed directly, or are they included in a general message of inclusion (e.g., “everyone is welcome”)?
- **Language and tone:** Is the language warm and inclusive or more neutral and institutional? How often are terms like “global,” “diverse,” or “international” used, and in what contexts?
- **Key phrases:** I tracked buzzwords such as “cultural exchange,” “belonging,” and “global citizen,” paying attention to whether they were supported by corresponding visual content or used as standalone terms.

Each web page and its sections, including admissions, international programs, student life, and diversity and inclusion, were analyzed using this coding scheme. While the frequency of codes was noted, I also prioritized contextual interpretation, examining how images and language interacted to construct meaning.

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By integrating both visual and textual coding, I was able to develop a more nuanced understanding of the messages these institutions communicate, and what those messages reveal (or obscure) about their approach to representing international students.

Chapter 4: Results

International students' Academic Websites.

Texas

University of Houston

One of the first visible messages on UH's main admissions page (<https://www.uh.edu/admissions/>) is "How will you influence the world?"—a prompt that encourages prospective students to envision their potential futures at the university and the impact they might have. Scrolling further, the site distinguishes between undergraduate and graduate applicants, including specific information for international students in both categories. One notable feature is the language used to address different student groups. For undergraduate applicants, the website offers two distinct categories: international freshman and international transfer students, accompanied by an introductory video (<https://www.uh.edu/undergraduate-admissions/apply/international/index>). For graduate applicants, the international admissions page (<https://www.uh.edu/graduate-school/international-students/index>) outlines key requirements such as transcript evaluation, English language proficiency, F-1 visa processes and transfer information, Form I-20 documentation, and financial requirements.

The storyline focuses on future students, using slogans such as "Real life, real experiences, real connections" and "How will you influence the world?" to appeal to their aspirations. In the international student section, the university emphasizes the value of earning a degree from an institution with a welcoming atmosphere in the heart of an international city. From academic growth to professional development, the UH Graduate School presents itself as committed to providing students with the resources needed for success. Students are told they can earn a degree recognized both nationally and internationally from a university that is a leader

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in academic advancement. The website highlights that experienced faculty will help students form meaningful connections, expand their expertise, and discover their passions. The tagline “Here, you begin your future” reinforces this message. One of the featured images includes two women who appear to be from Western Asia, contributing to the university’s visual representation of diversity.

Why Come to This University? UH presents its “population health” initiative as a pioneering, university-wide effort aimed at building healthier communities and a stronger society by addressing the full spectrum of factors that influence health. It emphasizes a journey of continuous growth: “Your life is one destination after another, each a new beginning.” At UH, students can develop their interests and apply them to real-life situations through long-standing community partnerships. UH portrays itself as a powerhouse of innovation, bolstered by the phrase “At UH, “your ambition can take you anywhere.” UH serves the city of Houston and beyond with extensive educational offerings, partnerships with local businesses, and contributions to the community. The website also mentions that UH, as one of the most diverse universities in the nation, attracts talented students from around the world who share a commitment to succeed. UH promotes its wide variety of degree programs taught by world-renowned faculty members, which can “pave the way to the future you envision—whether you want to build the physical foundations of the future as an engineer or architect, shape young minds as an educator, or study how far humanity has already come as an anthropologist.” The website also includes a YouTube video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsL8eMHGrSA>) with the slogan “We are history in the making, one student at a time. Unleash your power!”

The website portrays some examples of international student life, including ways to get involved, with “550+ student organizations. 35+ fraternities and sororities. 100+ multicultural

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organizations. 15 intercollegiate sport teams. No matter who you are, we have a lot to offer. So, between classes and making memories that'll last a lifetime, you're going to have plenty to do.” In addition, the university offers virtual tours and a comprehensive range of services through the International Student and Scholar Services Office (ISSSO), which is dedicated to supporting the academic and administrative needs of international students and exchange visitors holding nonimmigrant status in the United States. The ISSSO plays a pivotal role in facilitating the campus check-in process, conducting orientation sessions, and providing guidance on maintaining visa status and ensuring compliance with U.S. immigration regulations—services that are standard for supporting international students. The office also offers academic counseling, advocacy, and additional resources to help students navigate their academic journeys and succeed within the U.S. higher education system.

How Academic Capitalism Is Portrayed for Undergraduates.

Figure 1. The UH Undergraduate Admissions

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The Image 1. shows the ideal daily lifestyle of an undergraduate student. Students are pictured relaxing by the lake after classes or during the weekend, suggesting a balanced life between academics and social engagement. The image of the lake evokes a sense of relaxation, while the bicycle gives the impression that students will live near campus. Of course, living closer to campus often requires more financial resources, as proximity can increase housing costs.

Another image portrays student housing and residential life, showing the various living options available for undergraduate students (<https://uh.edu/undergraduate-admissions/apply/international/international-freshman/#student-life>). These options are organized by year—first-year students and sophomores and above. The college offers resources like “Cougar Move-In Day,” which includes a guide, a residence hall and parking map, and even a university-branded T-shirt to foster a sense of belonging and school pride. The website also outlines the benefits of living on campus.

Figure 2. *UH Housing website*

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idence Halls
Sheet

First-Year Living

- Cougar Village I
- Cougar Village II
- Moody Towers

Sophomore + Up Living

- Cougar Place
- Moody Towers
- The Quad

Loft Living

- University Lofts

Apartment Living

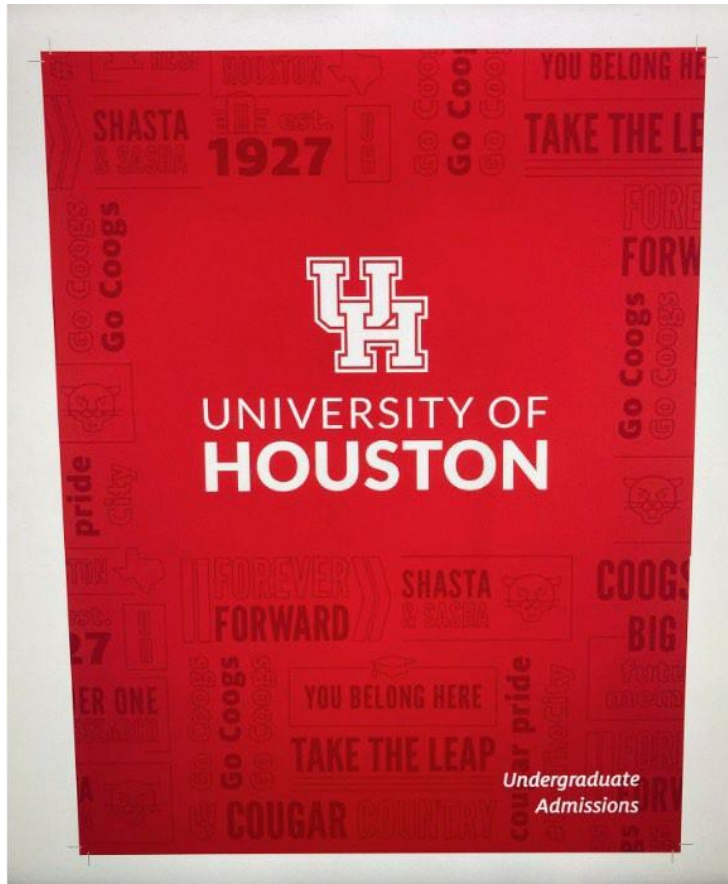
- Bayou Oaks
- Cambridge Oaks
- Cullen Oaks

The university emphasizes the idea of “Your new home away from home,” stating: [HYPERLINK "https://uh.edu/housing/"](https://uh.edu/housing/)“Living on campus is a great option. Figure 2 shows multiple housing options to accommodate your campus experience; we can’t wait to welcome you home!” The message aims to reassure students that they will feel at ease and comfortable, even when they are far from home. By clicking on each village or housing option, students can view the requirements for residence and meet the staff, which includes residential life coordinators, supervisors, residential desk operations staff, community services staff, assistant directors, faculty-in-residence, and graduate assistants. The site includes maps and details about amenities. At Level 2, students can find information for current and returning residents, future residents, calendars, conference housing, and more. At Level 3, the university offers an online

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catalog Figure 3 with detailed information, including housing costs and other basic necessities for incoming students.

Figure 3. *UH online catalog on website*



“Where to Begin” is the title on the main web page for graduate students. The message emphasizes academic growth and professional development: “From academic growth to professional development, the UH Graduate School is committed to providing you with the resources required for success”. Here, you can earn a degree, recognized both nationally and internationally, from an institution that has established itself as a leader in promoting academic advancement. Experienced faculty within each program will allow you to form meaningful connections, broaden your expertise, and discover your passion. Here, you begin your future.”

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Prospective graduate students can explore programs, degrees, and international student information. One image highlight two female students wearing hijabs, Figure 4. reflecting the university's professed commitment to diversity. The website states that UH is proud of "its strong and growing community of students from around the world" and notes that last year, the university received applications from international students representing more than 100 countries.

Figure 4. UH Graduate Website for International Students



Prospective students can also find information on transcript requirements, English language proficiency, F-1 visa details, F-1 visa transfer forms, and, once admitted, required documents such as a passport and financial records. The graduate international admissions website focuses more on institutional prestige and academic offerings than on student lifestyle.

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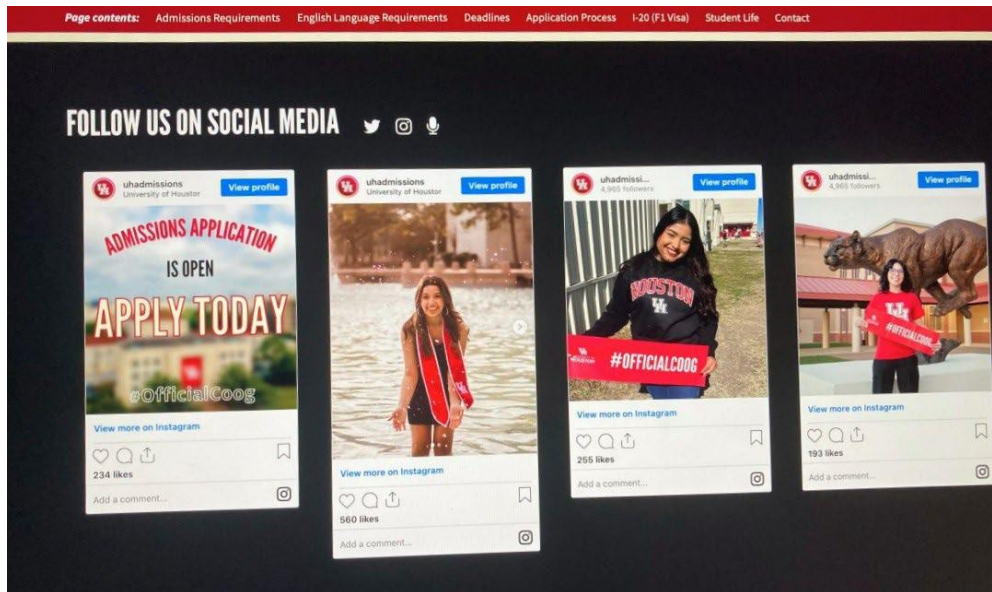


Figure 5. UH Social Media Platforms: Instagram, X, YouTube, and Reddit.

UH uses platforms such as Instagram to show prospective students the academic lifestyle they can enjoy while pursuing their studies. Social media platforms have gained popularity in recent years and serve as an effective way to engage both future and current students.

Texas A&M University

At first glance, the Texas A&M University admissions website displays a top navigation menu with the following options: Why Texas A&M, Why You Belong, Connect, Visit, Resources, and Apply. After clicking Connect, at level 2 users are directed to choose from three categories: Figure 5. “I am a Texas student,” “I am an out-of-state student,” and “I am an international student.” This is the first time I observed a space specifically designated for local students, either on the main page or after a second click

(<https://admissions.tamu.edu/apply/international/international-freshman>).

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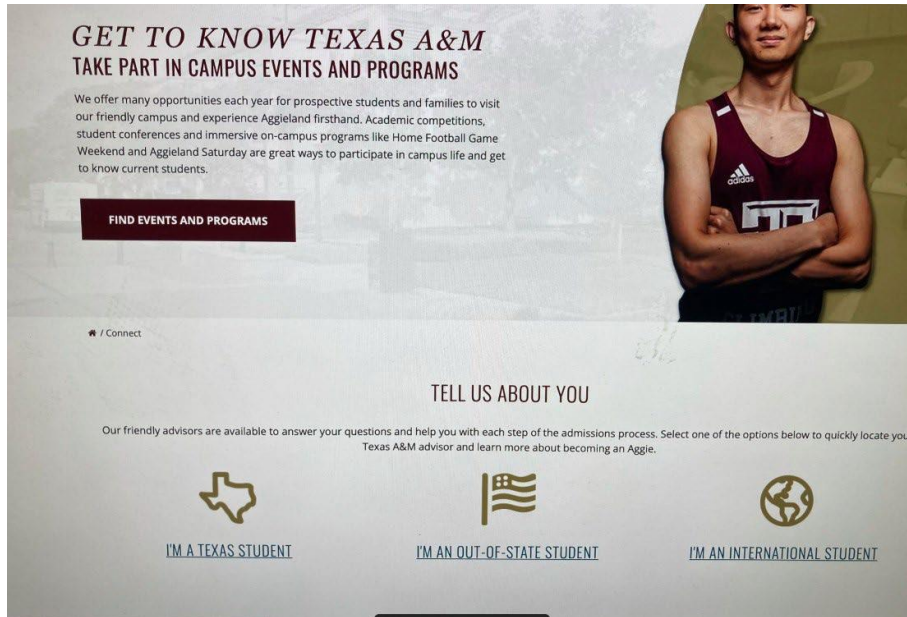


Figure 5. *Texas A & M “Tell us about you”*

After clicking “I am an international student,” two options appear: Connect with an Advisor in Texas or Connect with Advisors for Out-of-State and International Students (Level 3). The next click leads to a list of advisors, two of whom speak Spanish figure 6. At Level 4, the international admissions web page appears. This page immediately presents resources for international students and prominently highlights the message: “Texas A&M University is home to over 5,000 students from around the globe,” emphasizing the university’s commitment to a diverse and inclusive educational community.

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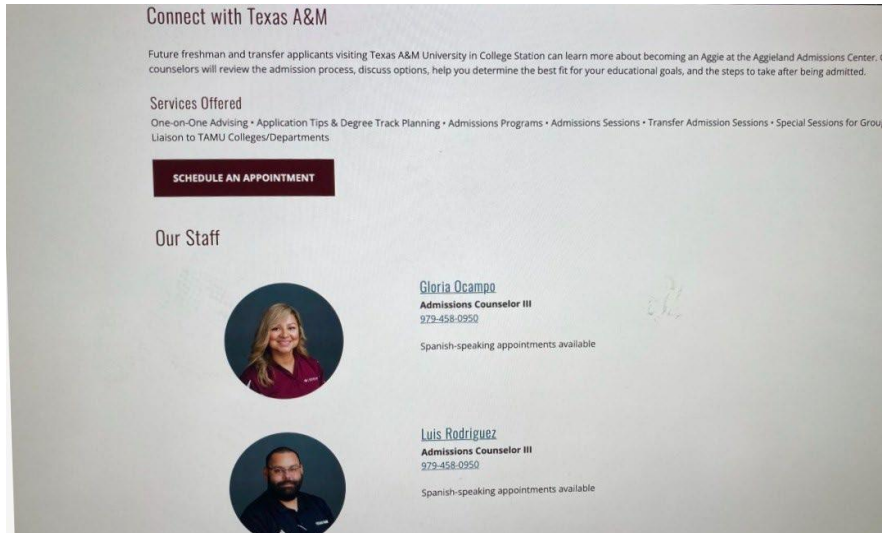


Figure 6. *Texas A & M Advisors Who Speak Spanish at website*

The Texas A&M Storyline: Live the Full Aggie Experience. Texas A&M University promotes the slogan “Live the Full Aggie Experience” and emphasizes its commitment to hosting a vibrant international student community. The university claims to host more than 6,000 international students from countries around the world, with programs that encourage diverse perspectives from students of all backgrounds. Notably, there is some inconsistency in reported numbers across different sections of the website: one page mentions 5,000 international students, while another lists more than 5,600 (<https://admissions.tamu.edu/resources/future> <https://admissions.tamu.edu/apply/international>)

Why Come to This University? “Why Texas A&M” Maybe you’ve wanted to be a veterinarian since you got your first dog, or your childhood Legos inspired you to become an architect. Whether you want to explore the stars and the far corners of the universe, find a cure for a disease threatening humankind, or bring your digital art to life at a major animation studio, you can make it happen at Texas A&M.



Figure 7. *Texas A& M Website on academic support.*

On the main admissions web page, Texas A&M highlights student support resources, academics, aid and affordability, and professional success. Figure 8. portrays a welcoming and inclusive environment, suggesting that everyone will get along and that the university can become a “vibrant local community,” implying that diversity is valued. Image 1 shows students enjoying themselves at a campus game, cheering for their team. In contrast, Figure 9 emphasizes the university’s commitment to tradition, suggesting a sense of continuity across generations and pride in its long-standing values.

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Figure 8. *Texas A & M Website*

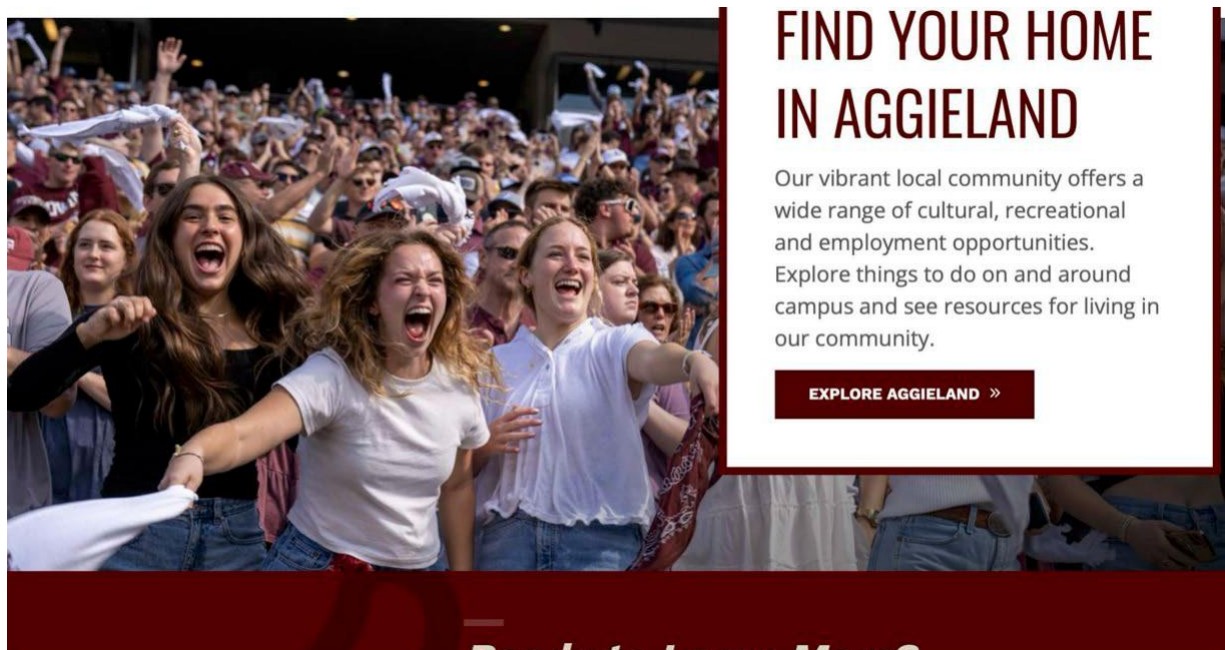
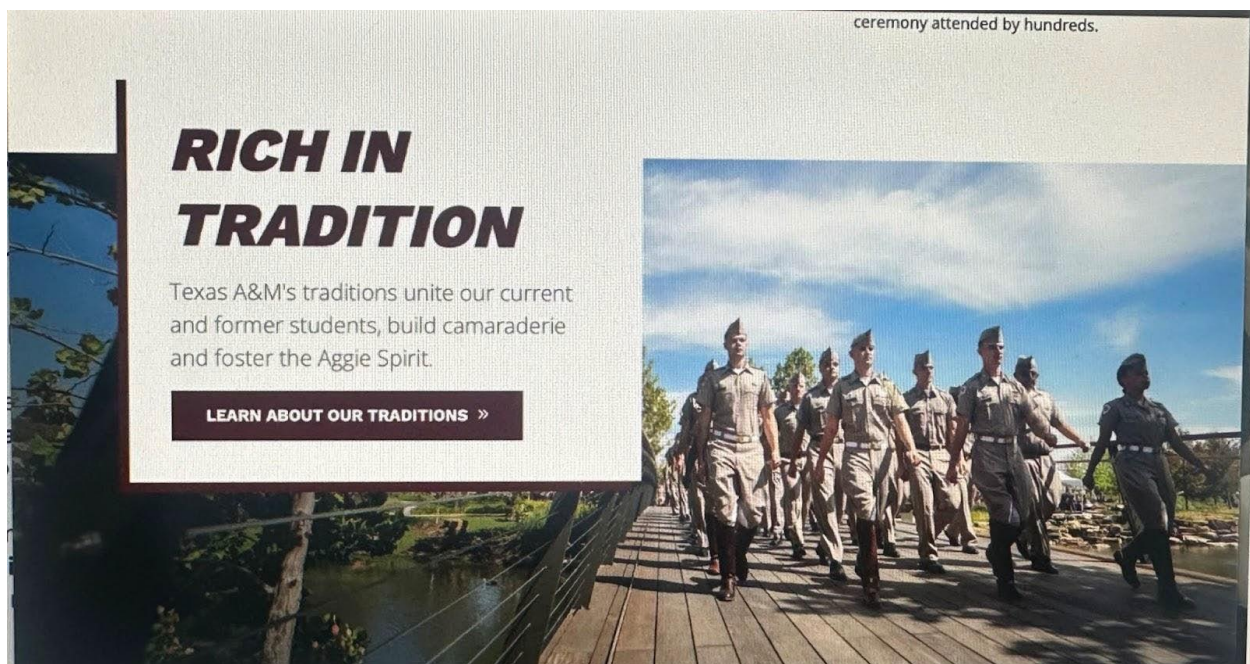


Figure 9. *Texas A & M shows part of the tradition in t heir website.*



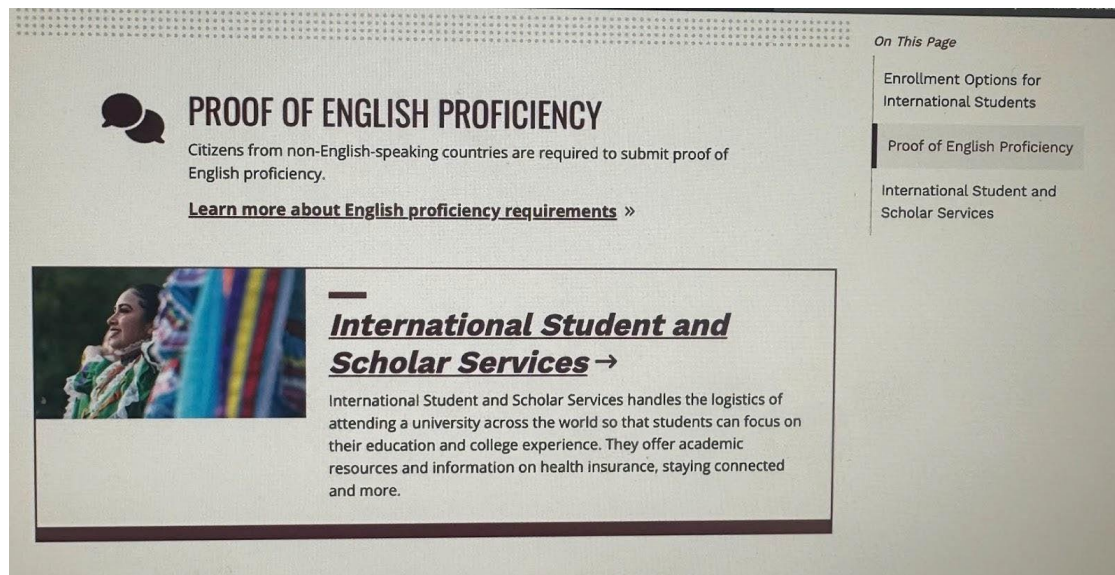


Figure 10. *Proof of English Proficiency on Texas A & M Website*

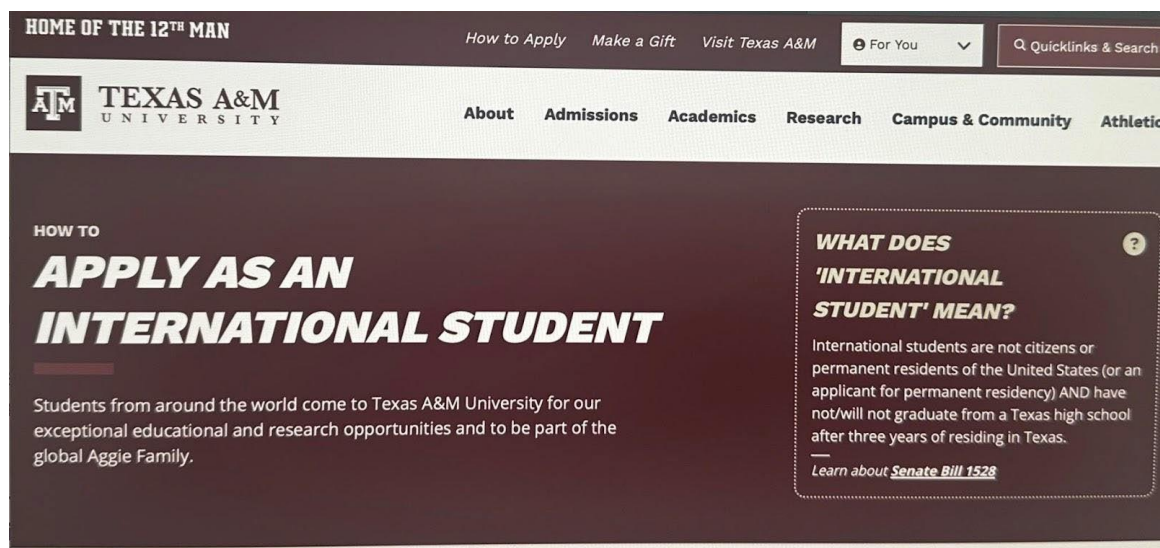
On the Texas A&M University admissions homepage, users can find application pathways for freshmen, transfer, graduate, and international students, along with sections on costs, tuition, and financial aid. Clicking on “International Students” leads to a second-level page where the first requirement listed is proof of English proficiency Figure 10. The website also highlights the availability of various academic resources. Notably, this was the first instance in my research where the country of Mexico was visually represented on an international student admissions page, featuring an image of a female dancer wearing traditional Mexican folkloric dress, specifically from the state of Jalisco.

How Capitalism Is Portrayed. Among the universities analyzed, Texas A&M University has the fewest student images on its international admissions web pages—only two. The visuals primarily emphasize tradition, including military-style representations. One image shows two white, Caucasian—possibly Irish—students speaking with an advisor. The site also lists available academic and campus resources. Texas A&M appears to emphasize academic

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seriousness while also attempting to use language to appeal to prospective students. Figure 11. Demonstrates an example, one caption reads: “Students from around the world come to Texas A&M for our exceptional educational and research opportunities and to be part of the global Aggie Family.”

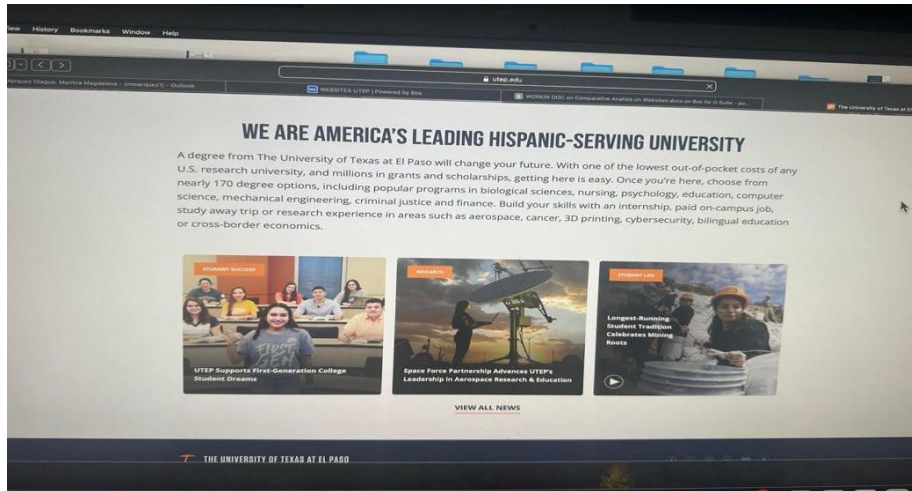
Figure 11. *Texas A & M Application Website for International Students.*



University of Texas at El Paso

On its main admissions page, UTEP presents itself as America’s leading HSI. Figure 12. Located at the westernmost tip of Texas, where three states and two countries converge along the Rio Grande, UTEP reports that 94% of its more than 24,000 students are from minority backgrounds, and half are the first in their families to attend college. UTEP offers 169 bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degree programs and identifies itself as the only open-access, top-tier research university in the United States. For prospective students, the university provides three options: undergraduate, graduate, and online. Both the images and video content on the site depict a visibly diverse student population, prominently featuring Hispanic and Latino students.

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Main Page. The promotional video on UTEP’s main page features a variety of ways in how they attract students; including students on convocation day, accompanied by the message: “Pick your future. Build it at UTEP.” It shows students in a lab, hiking, attending sports events, playing games, or working out at the gym. The video emphasizes a balance between academic achievement and a vibrant lifestyle, highlighting the university’s appeal to well-rounded students.

Navigating the site involves several levels. At the second level, users select either undergraduate or graduate studies. At the third level, the “Admissions” section appears, which includes information about majors, affordability, how to apply, and enrollment. At the fourth level, clicking “Apply” leads to a fifth-level option for international students. The placement of international admissions at such a deep level is surprising, given UTEP’s location in a border city. Figure 13. *UTEP Website of admissions for undergraduate students.*

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The screenshot shows the top navigation bar of the University of Texas at El Paso website. The header includes the UTEP logo and the text "THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO". Below the header is a navigation menu with links for ABOUT, ACADEMICS, ADMISSIONS, DIVISIONS, COLLEGES & SCHOOLS, STUDENT LIFE, EVENTS, ATHLETICS, GIVING, MY UTEP, RESOURCES FOR, and QUICK LINKS. The main content area features a large heading "APPLY TO THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO" followed by a sub-heading "UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS". Under this sub-heading are three columns, each with an image and a "How To Apply" button. The first column is for "FRESHMAN STUDENTS" with an image of four students sitting on a stone wall. The second column is for "TRANSFER STUDENTS" with an image of four students in orange UTEP shirts. The third column is for "INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS" with an image of a large group of students in orange shirts on a lawn in front of a building.

UTEP differentiates itself from other Texas universities by prominently featuring Latino students in most of the images across its website, not just on admissions pages. The overarching message conveyed by UTEP’s website is one of empowerment and success—you can succeed; we are your future—a narrative that aligns with those of other universities while being more visibly representative.

The website for international graduate students Figure 14. portrays a diverse student body, featuring individuals from regions such as Asia, Europe, and Latin America. This contrasts with the undergraduate admissions section, which places greater emphasis on Latino and American students. Beneath the images on both sections, prospective students can find a list of academic programs offered and available student resources.

Are We in the Picture? To What Extent, If at All?

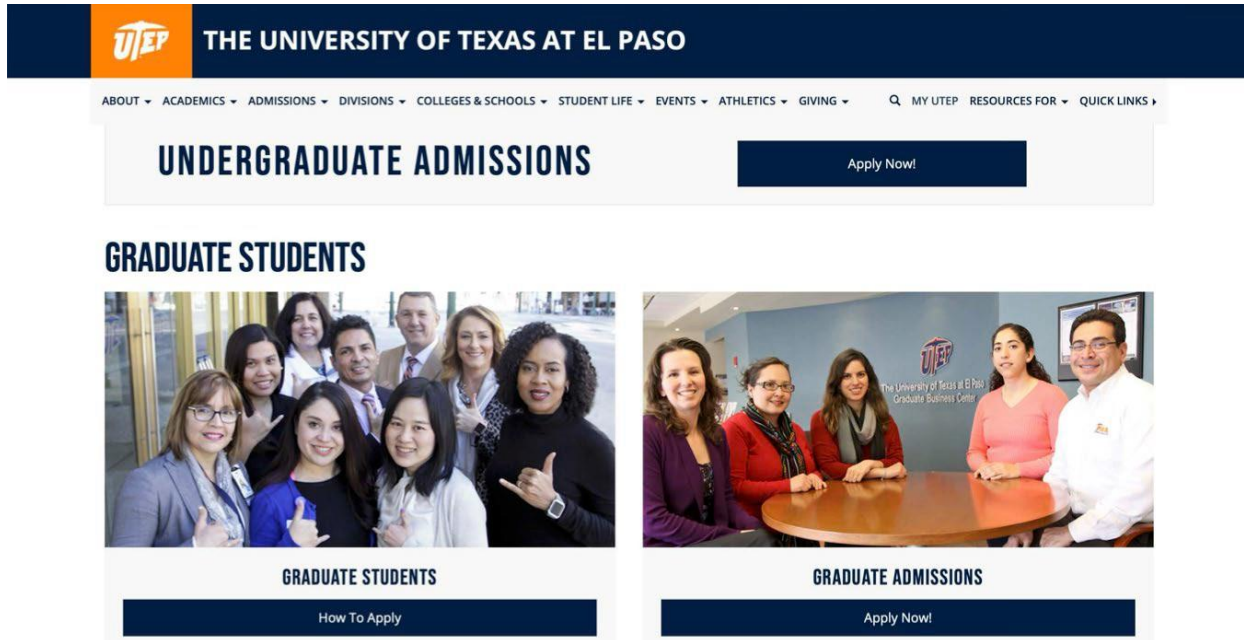
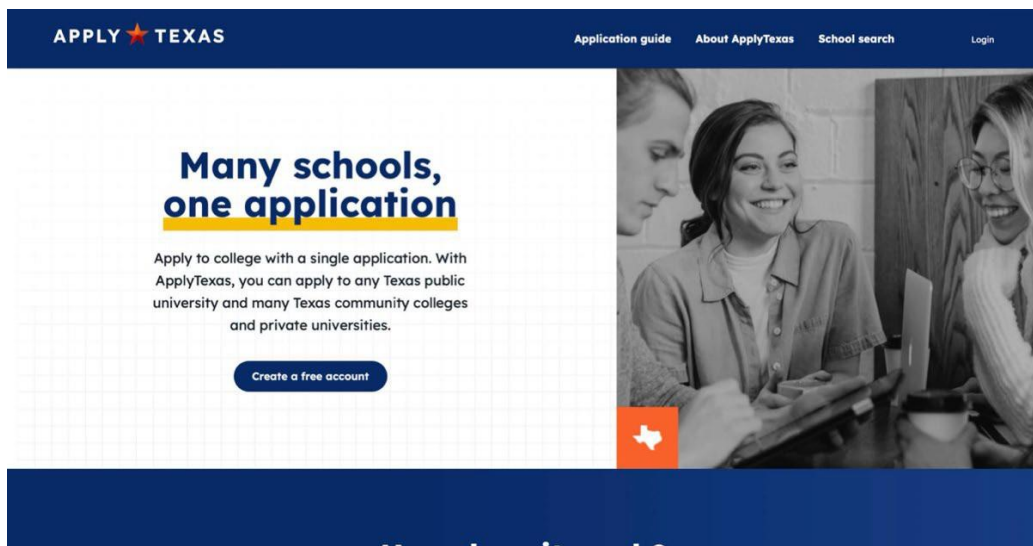


Figure 14. UTEP Graduate admissions

One way the state of Texas differs from Arizona is in its enrollment platform. When prospective students click “Enroll Now,” they are redirected to Apply Texas, a centralized application platform that lists all participating universities in the state Figure 15. Students complete a single application, which can then be submitted to any college or university in Texas.



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Figure 15. *UTEP Apply Texas under admissions website.*

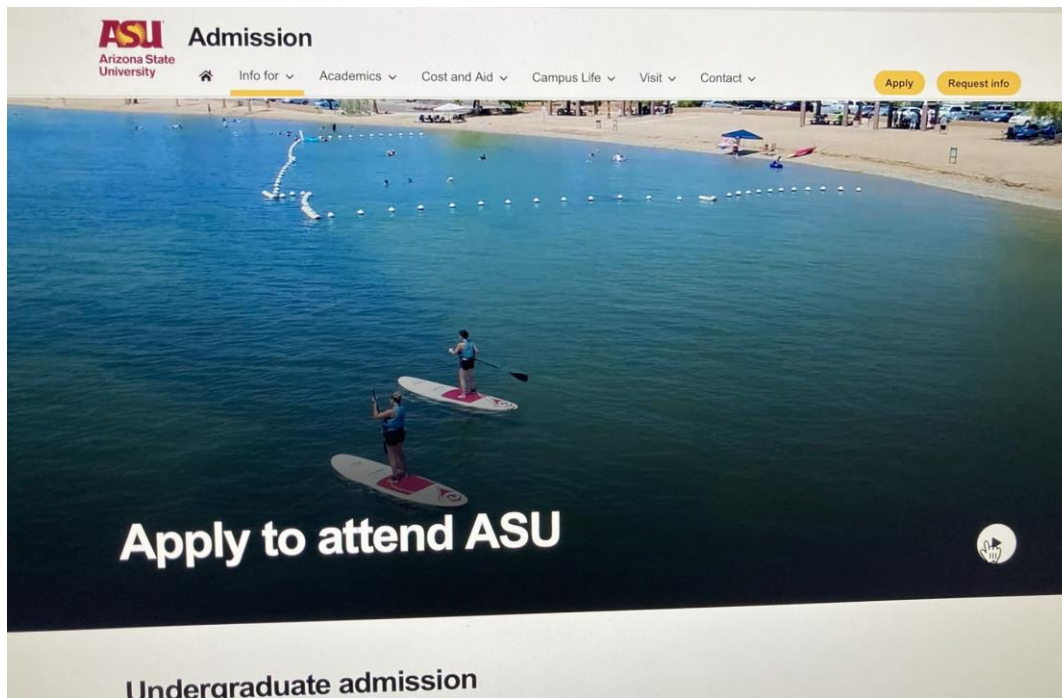
The Office of Recruitment and Enrollment may have adopted this system as a way to streamline the application process, serve as a filter, or maintain a more efficient database of prospective and current students.

Arizona

Arizona State University

ASU's main admissions web page features a promotional video depicting five students exiting a building, two women paddleboarding, a student in a graduation gown, an apartment building, and a cityscape. This video presents an idealized depiction of student life at ASU

Figure 16. Below is the Image on ASU's Main Admissions Website.



Are We in the Picture? To What Extent, If at All?

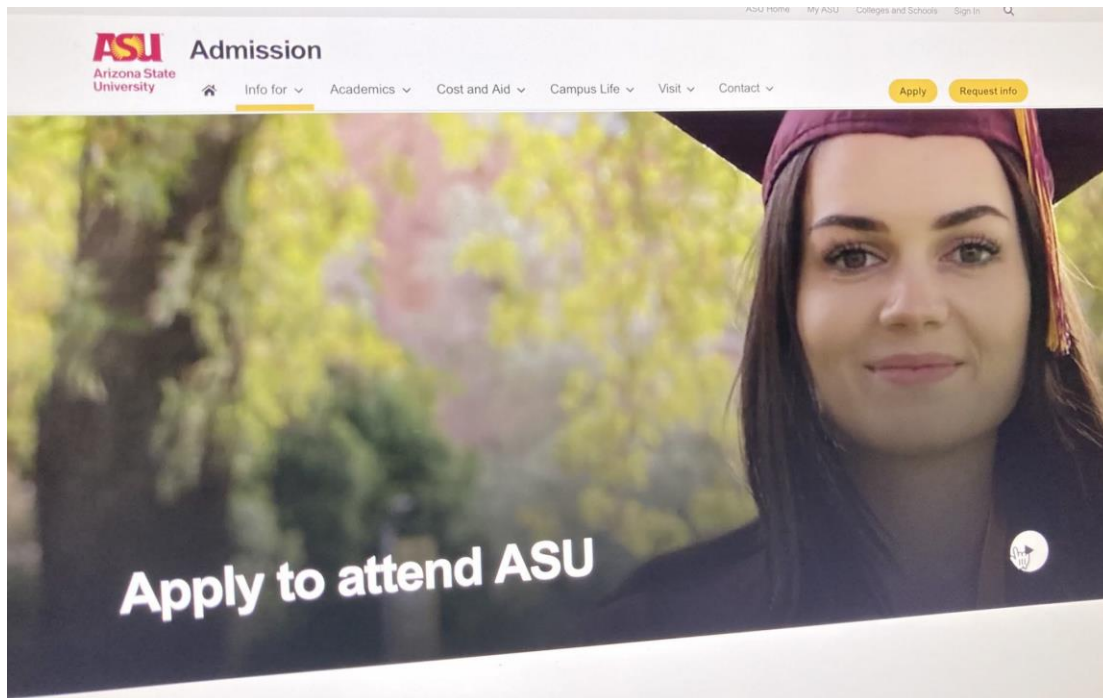
From this page, visitors can access information for international undergraduate students (<https://admission.asu.edu/international/undergrad-student>), which then provides two options: first-year students (<https://admission.asu.edu/international/first-year-apply>) and transfer students (<https://admission.asu.edu/international/transfer-apply>). Each option leads to a page with specific application information. Additionally, ASU has a separate international admissions homepage (<https://admission.asu.edu/international>), which appears to consolidate information across at least three distinct web portals: international experience, international first-year admission, international transfer admission, international graduate admission, international student visas, and support for admitted students.

The Storyline or Script. The ASU website emphasizes student diversity, but certain ethnic patterns emerge. Most of the men shown appear to be from Asia, South Korea, India, or Arab countries. Female students are shown as Indian or Arab, or presented in ways that obscure their identity as well as other websites from the other universities in this research. (e.g., photographed from behind or wearing masks). The university's central slogan, "The ASU Difference," is tied to its institutional mission: "We are measured not by whom we exclude, but by whom we include and how they succeed" (ASU Charter, <https://www.asu.edu>). ASU also highlights what makes the university stand out from others. For example, it emphasizes the value of earning a degree at ASU by showcasing national rankings on its main page—an example of academic capitalism. The site also promotes reasons to attend the university, such as its commitment to inclusivity and diversity, with over 9,000 international students, representation from 230 tribal nations, and students from 136 countries. ASU outlines a range of support services available to enrolled international students, including exchange programs, Mastercard Foundation, intensive English programs, the International Students and Scholars Center, ASU-UA Pathways, Thunderbird

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School of Global Management, and Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law. Moreover, ASU provides a brochure for undergraduate transfer students and maintains a social media presence across a variety of platforms, both Western and international, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter (X), Weibo, WeChat, BiliBili, and YouTube. Some of these social platforms are American, while others—such as Weibo, a Chinese microblogging site; WeChat, a Chinese instant messaging app; and BiliBili, a Chinese video-sharing website—cater specifically to international audiences, particularly those in Asia.

On the undergraduate admissions website, one image displays a student in graduation regalia on convocation day. Other images predominantly feature male students who appear to be from Asia—particularly South Korea, India, or Arab countries. Female students appear to be from India or Arab regions, or their identities are obscured, either shown from behind, wearing masks, or in ways that do not clearly indicate geographic or ethnic background. Versus graduate students' images that appear to be clearer their background.



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Figure 17. *ASU Admissions Website.*

University of Arizona The first thing visitors notice about UArizona’s admissions website is the phrase “Become a Wildcat” at the top, alongside the university’s “A” logo Figure 18. The messaging includes slogans such as “Discover your full potential.” The university emphasizes its legacy, stating that it has helped students achieve their academic goals since 1985. Further down the page, the site outlines different ways to attend—on the main campus, online, near your network, or internationally.

On the “Admissions” page (<https://www.arizona.edu/admissions>), the main image features a Black woman celebrating her graduation day, wearing academic regalia. This image reinforces the website’s message of student success and academic achievement.

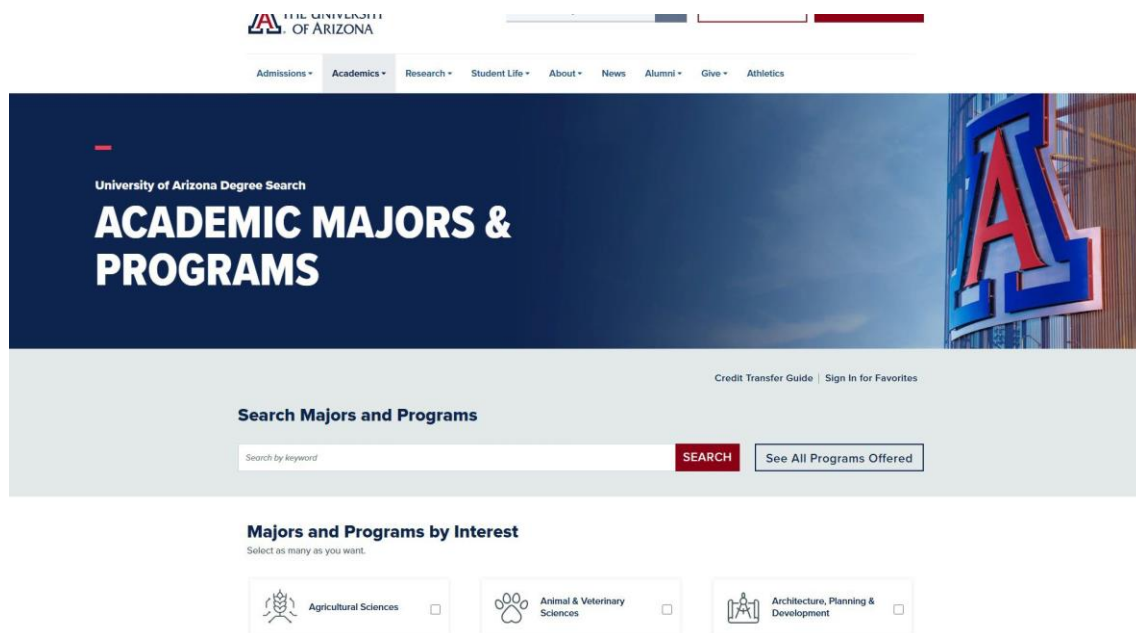
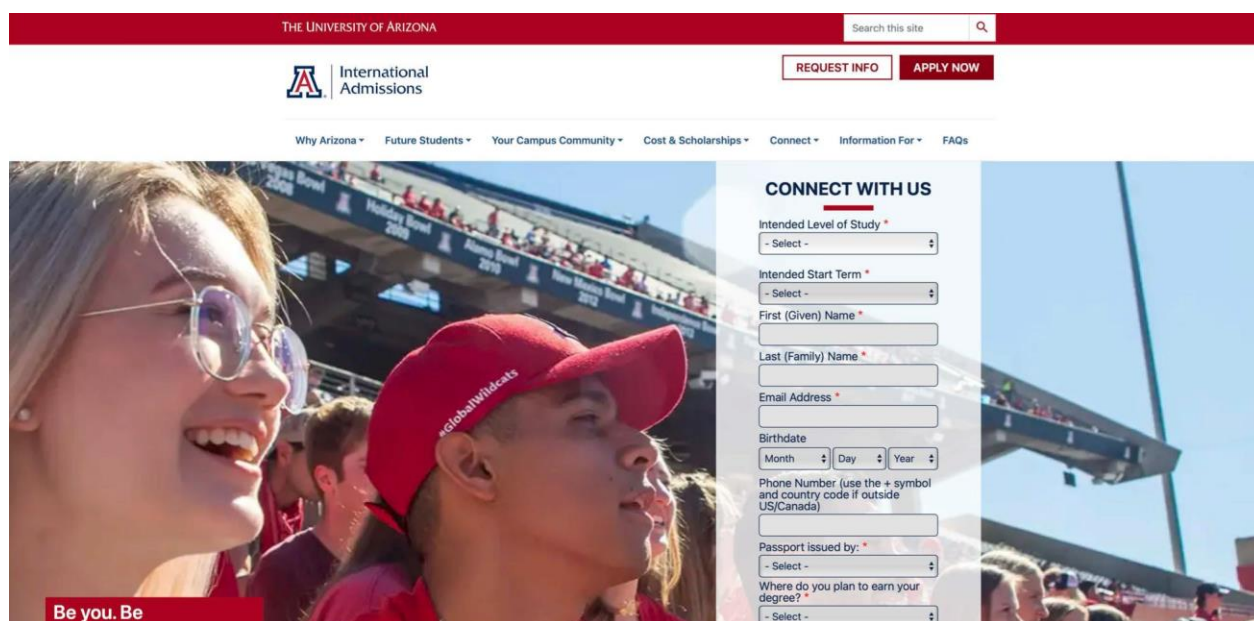


Figure 18. *UArizona Admission Academic majors & Programs*

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Other images present the options for prospective students, depending on their status: first-year, transfer, online, international, graduate, returning, non-degree seeking, counselor, or certificate program applicants.

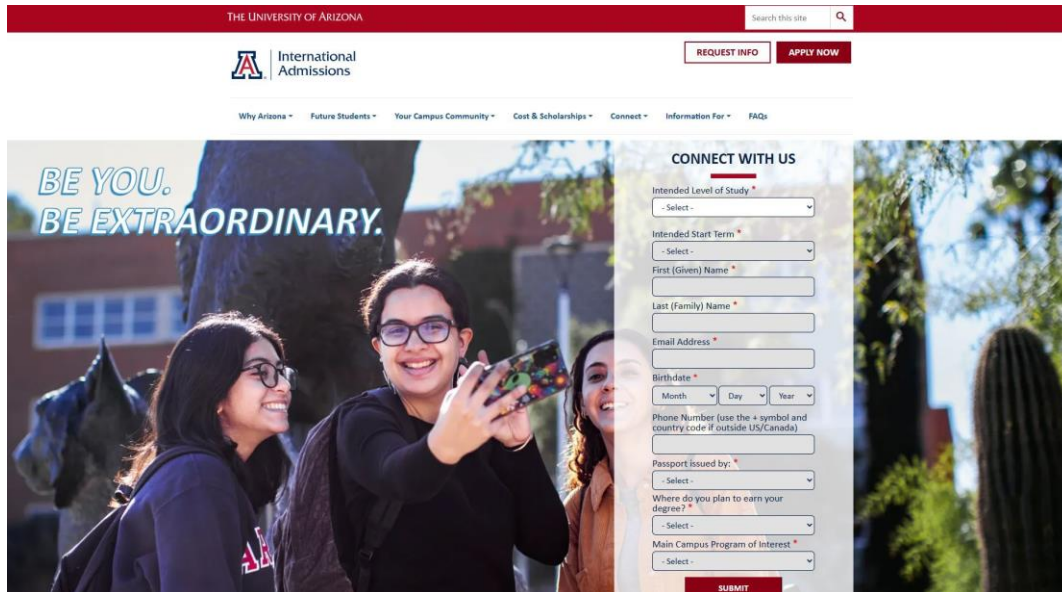
Figure 19. *UArizona International Admissions Website.*



International Admissions. At the top of this page (<https://everywhere.arizona.edu/>), categories include “Why Arizona?,” “Future Students,” “Your Campus Community,” “Cost & Scholarships,” “Connect,” “Information For,” and “FAQs.” The main headline reads “Be Your Extraordinary,” and the site encourages prospective students to fill out a contact form with details such as level and start date of study, full name, email, date of birth, phone number, country of passport, and intended degree location. The website also strongly emphasizes academic rankings and reputation. For instance, it states that UArizona is a leading destination for international students, ranked in the top 1% of colleges and universities worldwide by the Center for World University Rankings. Additionally, it is ranked in the top 4% for research among all U.S. institutions and is a national leader in astronomy and astrophysics.

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Figure 20. UArizona International Admissions Website.



Furthermore, the university highlights that more than 85% of undergraduate international students in fall 2022 received Global Wildcat Scholarships on Figure 21. Below (<https://financialaid.arizona.edu/types-of-aid/scholarships/incoming-first-year-transfer>).



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The website also promotes academic majors and programs prominently. Students can click to explore a list of offerings, including details about each program, faculty, and transfer credit policies.

All the public universities included in this study use bifurcated marketing strategies on their websites. Messaging differs between audiences—undergraduates versus graduate students. Undergraduate sites tend to highlight lifestyle and campus experience, while graduate sites emphasize academic rigor and professional development.

Chapter 5: **Analysis of Marketing**

In recent decades, North America and Western Europe have become global centers for prestigious and high-quality higher education. To maintain and elevate their reputations, universities in these regions compete to attract not only international students but also those from areas with greater access to educational and financial resources. As part of their recruitment strategies, many institutions craft idealized portrayals of academic life on their official websites—frequently depicting students enjoying vibrant campus experiences while downplaying the demands of academic rigor. As Saichae (2011) observed, “academic websites represent one of the most public faces institutions have since they control all the information that is displayed,” underscoring the intentional and selective nature of these representations. In addition, social media is now a key communication tool for both current and prospective students, likely because of its immediacy and capacity for ongoing engagement.

A recurring trend among the universities examined in this study is the use of virtual campus tours. These interactive features are designed to simulate the on-campus experience and create a sense of familiarity and connection for prospective students. For example, UH provides

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a video specifically aimed at international transfer students, highlighting key campus locations and presenting a welcoming, engaging academic environment.

In contrast, Texas A&M University's website places a stronger emphasis on academics. It offers prospective students detailed information, including a list of academic advisors, available resources, and clearly defined admission requirements. Similarly, UH offers comprehensive guidance for prospective graduate students, particularly international applicants. Its website prominently features essential information such as English language proficiency requirements, F-1 visa procedures, and the issuance of Form I-20. It also provides thorough explanations of tuition, living expenses, and other related costs.

Texas A&M also dedicates a section of its website to admissions requirements, ensuring that applicants have access to all necessary procedural and academic information. A distinctive feature of UTEP is its use of the Apply Texas platform—a centralized application system that allows students to apply to multiple public universities in Texas with a single application. This system functions both as a recruitment tool and a data management platform, streamlining the application process for students and institutions alike.

ASU takes a multifaceted approach to student recruitment. In addition to maintaining a comprehensive academic website, ASU distributes printed brochures for undergraduate students and maintains a strong presence across a wide range of social media platforms, including both Western and Chinese platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Weibo, WeChat, BiliBili, and YouTube. While Facebook and Instagram are widely used in the United States, platforms like WeChat and BiliBili cater specifically to Chinese audiences. WeChat serves as an instant messaging app and all-in-one digital platform, while BiliBili is a video-sharing site popular for its multimedia content and youth-focused engagement strategies.

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When visiting UArizona’s admissions website, the viewer is immediately greeted by the phrase “Become a Wildcat,” displayed alongside the university’s iconic logo. This prominently placed slogan functions as a branding tool, designed to cultivate a sense of identity and belonging among prospective students. It reflects how institutions strategically use emotional appeal and school pride to support their recruitment efforts.

Beyond the initial branding, UArizona’s website features a user-friendly interface that guides visitors through the admissions process. Clear navigation tabs lead users to information on application requirements, financial aid opportunities, international student services, and academic program offerings. Notably, the site includes tailored sections for different applicant categories, such as first-year, transfer, and international students, providing relevant and accessible content for each group. Both the structure and design reflect an effort to simplify the application process while reinforcing the university’s commitment to inclusivity and student support.

In summary, across the institutions examined in this study—including UH, Texas A&M, UTEP, ASU, and UArizona—there is a clear trend toward strategic digital engagement. These universities employ a combination of idealized imagery, interactive tools, centralized application systems, and broad social media networks to attract a diverse, global student population. Their websites are not merely informational platforms, but carefully curated digital experiences designed to shape perceptions, foster institutional loyalty, and streamline the path to enrollment.

Who Is Portrayed, and Who Is Missing?

Visual representation is a powerful form of messaging in higher education marketing, particularly within the context of academic capitalism, where universities must appeal to broad, international audiences. The students featured on university websites and social media platforms

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symbolize not only diversity but also the institution's values, priorities, and target demographics. However, a closer look reveals consistent patterns of inclusion—and notable omissions.

On UH's social media platforms (Instagram, X, YouTube, and Reddit), for example, recent posts show three individual images, each featuring a single female student. One shows a student by a lake; the others are on campus, accompanied by tags such as #officialcoog. These posts received 560, 255, and 193 likes, respectively, suggesting that the content may emphasize lifestyle and aesthetics more than diversity or academic rigor. Although female students are visible, the imagery lacks broader representation in terms of gender diversity, group interaction, or cultural background.

Texas A&M presents a contrasting image. Photos depict students enjoying what appears to be a football game or pep rally—faces painted, smiling, and evoking a “summer camp” or traditional college experience. Other images show military students marching in uniform, highlighting Texas A&M's historical ties to military education. While these visuals convey community and school spirit, they reflect a largely domestic, patriotic narrative that may resonate less with international students or audiences seeking a more globally inclusive environment.

In contrast, UTEP offers imagery that more authentically reflects Latin American and Hispanic/Latino communities. On its international student web pages, most students depicted appear to be of Latino or Asian backgrounds, with one female student who may be European. This more representative visual strategy aligns with UTEP's geographic location and demographic profile. It suggests a regionally grounded and culturally attuned approach to diversity, rather than one focused solely on global branding.

ASU, by comparison, features many students who appear to be from Asia, particularly South Korea, India, and Arab countries. Female representation includes women from these

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regions, some shown wearing masks or photographed from behind. While this suggests ASU is actively engaging with high-recruitment international markets, the portrayal lacks breadth. Students from Africa, Latin America, and underrepresented European regions are largely absent. The inconsistent and sometimes anonymized visibility of female students may unintentionally weaken the university's message of inclusion and belonging.

In short, while all universities in this study attempt to promote inclusivity through visual media, the deeper reality of who is shown, and how, is more complex. Representation is not merely about including students from diverse backgrounds. It is also about how they are portrayed: whether they are centered or peripheral, active or passive, celebrated or anonymous. In a competitive and globalized higher education landscape, authentic and balanced representation is not just good marketing—it is essential to maintaining genuine commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

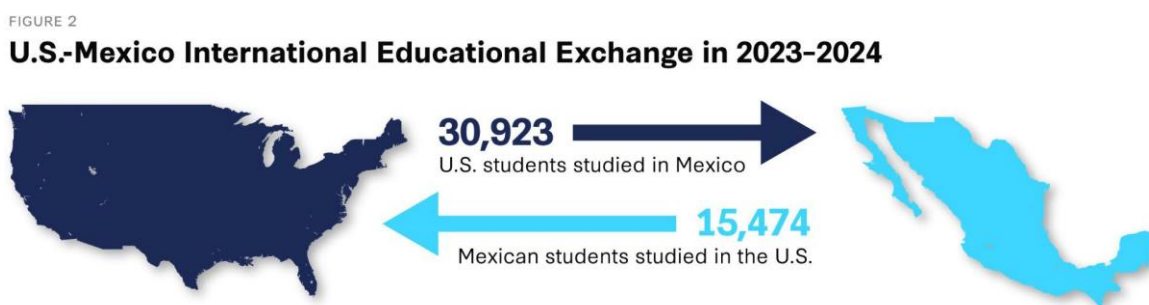
Where Are the International Students from Mexico and Latin America? Are They Going to HSIs?

In recent years, HSIs have become significant destinations for both domestic and international students from Latin America—especially from Mexico—pursuing higher education in the United States. While HSIs are officially defined by the U.S. Department of Education as colleges and universities where at least 25% of full-time undergraduates are Hispanic, their impact extends well beyond that numerical threshold. For many international students from Latin America, HSIs offer a more familiar, welcoming, and culturally responsive environment than other institutions. Mexican and Latin American students studying in the United States often gravitate toward colleges and universities located near the U.S.–Mexico border. Geography certainly plays a role in this trend, but it is not the only factor. These institutions frequently have

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deeper cultural ties and stronger community connections that make them particularly attractive to students from the region. According to the Institute of International Education (2024), Figure 22. Mexico consistently ranks among the top 10 countries sending students to the United States, with approximately 14,000 Mexican students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities during the 2022–2023 academic year.

Figure 22. U-S Mexico International Educational Exchange in 2023-2024.



Many of these students are choosing HSIs located in Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico—states with long-standing ties to Mexico and large Latinx populations. These institutions often provide support systems that reflect the needs of both Latinx and international students, including bilingual advisors, culturally relevant student organizations, and academic programs focused on Latin American studies or border-related issues. For Latin American students, particularly those who speak Spanish, who are navigating U.S. systems for the first time or are the first in their families to study abroad, HSIs can feel more accessible and inclusive. Faculty and staff at HSIs are often more familiar with the cultural backgrounds of these students and may even share similar lived experiences. This familiarity matters: students are more likely to feel comfortable asking questions, participating in campus life, and seeking academic or emotional support when needed.

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Furthermore, some HSIs are located directly on or near the U.S.–Mexico border and have evolved into binational educational hubs. For example, institutions like UTEP and UArizona enroll significant numbers of Mexican students, many of whom cross the border daily or maintain strong family and community ties on both sides. These universities often offer academic programs focused on the U.S.–Mexico borderlands, bilingual course offerings, and research initiatives that address pressing cross-border issues such as migration, environmental sustainability, and public health.

This close connection to both sides of the border creates an educational experience that is not only academic but also deeply personal and community driven.

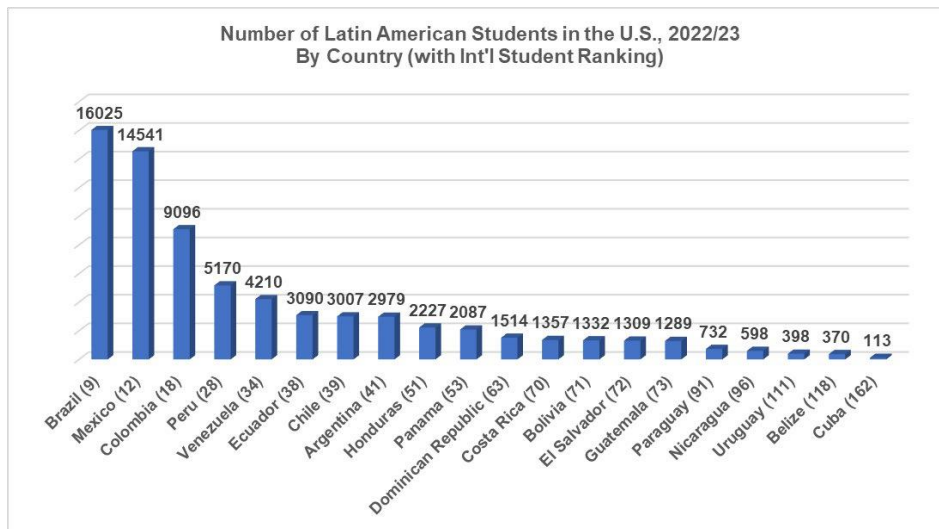


Figure 23. *Institute of International Education*

Other Latin American Countries

Beyond Mexico, several other Latin American countries have demonstrated notable student mobility patterns:

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- **Brazil:** A leader in Latin American outbound mobility, Brazilian student enrollment peaked during the Brazil Scientific Mobility Program (2011–2016), a government-sponsored initiative that sent thousands of students abroad. Although the program has ended, Brazilian student numbers remain significant due to continued interest in STEM fields and English language training.
- **Colombia and Venezuela:** These countries have shown increased outbound mobility, often driven by political instability and economic crises. Students from these nations frequently seek stability and long-term opportunities through higher education abroad.
- **Chile, Peru, and Ecuador:** These countries represent smaller but growing cohorts, particularly in graduate and research programs, often supported by national fellowships or Fulbright initiatives.

While Latin American students are underrepresented compared to their Asian counterparts, they contribute important dimensions to U.S. campus diversity, bilingualism, and global engagement. Regional recruitment has been enhanced through virtual fairs, Latin America-focused education consortia, and partnerships such as the 100,000 Strong in the Americas initiative, which supports hemispheric mobility. Notably, institutions near the U.S.–Mexico border have played a pivotal role in attracting, retaining, and supporting Mexican and Latin American students. Many of these institutions offer culturally responsive services, Spanish-language advising, and targeted financial aid, which contribute to improved access and retention.

If We Are Here, Why Are We Not Visible Enough? Mexican and Latino Visibility in University Marketing

One noticeable trend across university websites is the limited and often anonymous representation of Mexican and Latino students in international recruitment materials. Despite the significant presence of students from Latin America, particularly Mexico, within U.S. higher education, their visibility remains understated or tokenistic. In many cases, when Latino students are shown, it is through a single image, often lacking context or a clear narrative about their academic journey or contributions to campus life.

A particularly telling example is when the only visibly Mexican student is positioned next to information about English language proficiency requirements. This placement is not accidental; it reflects deeper issues regarding how Mexican and Latino students are framed within international student marketing. On one hand, it may be seen as a well-intentioned effort to showcase diversity. On the other hand, it unintentionally reinforces linguistic stereotypes, suggesting that Latin American students, even when enrolled at U.S. universities, are primarily defined by their need to meet English standards. This framing implies deficiency rather than celebrating their multilingualism, bicultural identity, or academic potential.

This type of visual and rhetorical positioning reflects broader dynamics of academic capitalism, where marketing decisions are guided more by institutional branding priorities than by genuine community representation. In the race to attract global talent, universities often spotlight students from countries perceived to hold stronger economic capital, such as China, India, and South Korea, while marginalizing students from the Global South. When students

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from these underrepresented regions are included, it is often in a superficial way, serving primarily to signal diversity rather than to reflect authentic inclusion or engagement.

Moreover, Latino students in the United States often occupy a gray area in international marketing. Many are U.S.-born or hold permanent residency, particularly in border states like Texas and Arizona. As a result, they are frequently excluded from the “international” student category, even when they maintain strong transnational ties to Latin America. This creates a representational gap: Mexican and Latino students are neither fully included in domestic marketing narratives nor prominently featured in materials aimed at international audiences.

There is also a broader issue of institutional identity and regional politics. Institutions designated as HSIs often fail to reflect this status in marketing aimed at prospective international students. Despite their official designation and high Latino enrollment, these universities’ websites frequently favor generic, globalized aesthetics—featuring multiracial students smiling on sunny lawns, drone footage of campuses, and slogans like “Unleash Your Potential”—without directly acknowledging or celebrating Latinx cultures, Spanish-speaking students, or the rich cross-border histories that define these institutions.

In short, Mexican and Latino students remain underrepresented and are not positioned as central to universities’ international identities. Their visibility is often framed through language requirements, compliance messaging, or generic diversity branding rather than through narratives of empowerment or authenticity. To move beyond this, universities, especially those in the Southwest and along the U.S.–Mexico border, should rethink their marketing strategies to recognize Mexican students not as exceptions or language learners, but as transnational agents, bilingual scholars, and cultural connectors. Their stories should not be relegated to a photo

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beside a TOEFL score but instead elevated as a vital part of what makes a university genuinely global and inclusive.

Neoliberal Framing and the Invisibility of Latin American Students in the Borderlands

Despite being located in regions with strong transnational ties and large Latino populations, institutions such as UH, Texas A&M, and ASU, all officially designated HSIs, tend to depict international students using generic, globalized imagery that obscures the specific cultural and linguistic presence of Latin American communities.

Even universities like UTEP and UArizona—both HSIs located directly on the U.S.–Mexico border with substantial Mexican student populations—offer only limited visual representation of Latino or Mexican students on their web pages targeted at international audiences. This omission is especially striking given their geographic proximity to Mexico and their deeply binational student bodies. These institutions are uniquely positioned to model inclusive, regionally grounded internationalization, yet the lack of representation undermines that potential.

This absence reflects broader institutional priorities shaped by neoliberalism and academic capitalism, in which international students are primarily viewed as tuition-paying consumers and diversity is repackaged as a marketable asset. Within this framework, international recruitment tends to emphasize aspirational branding “global opportunities,” “innovation,” and “excellence”—while centering students from economically dominant countries (e.g., China, India, South Korea) and marginalizing students from Latin America and the Global South.

When Mexican or Latino students do appear in international recruitment materials, they are often placed near compliance-oriented content, such as English language proficiency

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requirements—subtly reinforcing a deficit-based narrative. This framing implies that Latin American students require remediation, rather than recognizing and celebrating their bilingualism, biculturalism, and transnational strengths. Their presence becomes functional—used to signal diversity or illustrate language-related policies—rather than central to the university’s vision of global engagement.

These patterns are especially concerning given these institutions’ designation as HSIs, which implies a commitment to serving Latino students, not just demographically but also structurally and culturally. Yet, in their international-facing branding, this commitment is often missing. At Texas A&M, ASU, and UH, for instance, international student web pages focus on generalized global identities while overlooking the institutions’ regional and cultural ties to Latin America and their responsibility, as HSIs, to reflect the communities they are intended to serve.

Likewise, UTEP and UArizona, despite their strong binational histories, offer only surface-level engagement with Latinx representation in their international marketing. The imagery is sparse, often lacks context, and fails to capture the depth of student experiences or the vibrancy of bilingual and borderland life. This creates a striking contradiction: although these institutions are designated HSIs, enroll thousands of Mexican and Latin American students, and are situated in communities shaped by cross-border exchange, their global-facing materials do not reflect this reality.

In these cases, diversity becomes an institutional product, strategically curated to appeal to global markets rather than to authentically represent the student body. This reflects the broader neoliberal shift in higher education, where students are positioned as consumers and education is marketed as a polished, aspirational experience rather than a transformative and inclusive process.

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The invisibility of Latin American students, then, is not merely a representational gap; it reveals how neoliberal market logic shapes which student narratives are considered valuable in the global education marketplace. Even HSIs, federally recognized for their commitment to serving Hispanic students, are not immune to this contradiction. In many cases, the HSI designation is treated as a domestic label—disconnected from how the institution presents itself to international audiences.

Ultimately, this finding underscores a deeper paradox: borderland HSIs, which are deeply embedded in Latinx culture and transnational realities, often reproduce the invisibility of the very populations they are meant to serve. By conforming to global marketing norms, these institutions risk erasing their local identities, reducing rich cultural presence to an afterthought and flattening diversity into a superficial branding tool rather than embracing it as a core institutional value.

Representation Versus Reality in HSI International Branding

The dissonance between what HSIs claim to be and how they market themselves globally reveals a fundamental contradiction in higher education's relationship to Latinx communities, particularly in the context of international student recruitment. While HSI designation signals federal recognition of an institution's Latinx enrollment, it does not guarantee meaningful integration of that identity into institutional practices or branding. As Gina Ann Garcia (2019) argued, being an HSI is not just about numbers—it is about servingness: a multidimensional and intentional commitment to affirming, empowering, and supporting Latinx students both inside and outside the classroom.

Yet, when examining the international recruitment materials of HSIs, especially those in borderland states like Arizona, Texas, and New Mexico, there is often a striking absence of this “servingness” in global-facing narratives. Large HSIs such as ASU, Texas A&M, and UH

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emphasize international branding that foregrounds prestige, innovation, and cosmopolitan appeal while minimizing or omitting Latinx cultural identities. This symbolic erasure becomes even more pronounced when Mexican or Latin American students are portrayed only in isolated or stereotypical contexts, such as adjacent to English language proficiency requirements, rather than as bilingual scholars or cross-border leaders.

This branding contradiction is what Gina Garcia describes as the difference between “enrolling Latinx students” and “serving” them, is especially troubling for institutions located in the U.S.–Mexico borderlands. Schools like UTEP and UA Arizona, despite their proximity to Mexico and deeply bicultural student populations, often rely on generic marketing language and visuals that flatten regional identity in favor of a sanitized, globalized image. Their HSI status is rarely highlighted as a strength in international recruitment, even though their cross-border positioning could uniquely appeal to Latin American families seeking familiarity, cultural resonance, and transnational opportunity.

This misalignment between representation and reality not only dilutes the significance of being an HSI but also illustrates what Garcia critiques as the commodification of diversity within neoliberal academic frameworks. Institutions may adopt the HSI designation to boost funding and institutional prestige, yet their outward-facing narratives often continue to reflect dominant, Eurocentric notions of what constitutes a “global” university. As a result, Latinx students, particularly those from neighboring Mexico, are rendered invisible in international marketing, even though they are central to the institution’s demographic makeup and regional identity.

In practical terms, this failure to center Latinx identity in global messaging can lead to disillusionment among students who arrive expecting culturally responsive support, bilingual infrastructure, or community-based learning models. Instead, they often find that the institution’s

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marketing promises do not align with the on-campus reality. This disconnect not only undermines student trust but also contradicts the ethic of servingness that HSIs are supposed to embody.

As Garcia (2020) emphasized, truly serving Latinx students requires “transforming the institution at its core,” including how it defines success, community, and global engagement. In the context of international recruitment, this means moving beyond aesthetic diversity or tokenistic inclusion and instead embracing the full spectrum of Latinx experience as integral to the university’s global identity. Institutions that authentically center Mexican and Latin American students in their marketing—through language, imagery, partnerships, and storytelling—can move toward a model of international engagement that is both inclusive and rooted in regional realities.

Academic Capitalism and Higher Education Marketing

In recent years, universities, especially in North America and Western Europe, have increasingly begun to operate more like businesses than traditional educational institutions. This shift is often described as academic capitalism, a term that refers to how universities compete in global markets for students, funding, prestige, and influence (Rhoades & Slaughter, 2004). Rather than focusing solely on teaching and research for the public good, many institutions now act like corporations—marketing themselves aggressively, seeking new revenue streams, and cultivating strong institutional brands. A central aspect of this transformation involves how universities present themselves online. Websites, social media, brochures, and virtual tours are no longer just informational tools; they are vehicles for selling a lifestyle and an experience. The primary goal is to attract prospective students, particularly those who can pay high tuition fees, such as international students. These marketing materials often emphasize the full “college

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experience”: picturesque campuses, diverse and welcoming communities, vibrant social lives, and world-class facilities. While academic rigor is still part of the narrative, it often takes a back seat to imagery of students lounging on green lawns, studying in stylish coffee shops, or enjoying scenic views.

This approach to marketing reflects a competitive mindset. In today’s globalized education landscape, universities are no longer competing solely at the local or national level. Instead, they are competing internationally for top students, major research funding, and higher rankings. That is why slogans like “Become a Wildcat” (UArizona) or immersive campus videos (UH) are crafted to generate emotional appeal rather than simply convey information. These marketing tools invite prospective students to imagine themselves not just as learners but as part of a lifestyle and branded identity—members of a vibrant and aspirational community.

International recruitment is a clear example of this trend. Universities such as ASU invest heavily in reaching students around the world, not only through a single website but also through multiple, tailored platforms. ASU’s presence on international social media networks like WeChat and Bilibili reflects a sophisticated understanding of global markets. This approach is not simply about providing access to information; it is about shaping a narrative that aligns with the cultural expectations of different audiences.

However, not all universities participate in this system to the same extent. For example, UTEP appears to focus more on regional and cross-border recruitment, particularly from Mexico. Its international student page is less prominent, and the number of non-Mexican international students is relatively low. This indicates that academic capitalism does not affect all institutions equally; some have greater resources, reputational capital, and geographic advantages that allow them to compete more effectively on a global scale.

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There is also a deeper question about what is lost in this market-driven approach. When universities place heavy emphasis on image and branding, the reality of academic life can become distorted. Prospective students may buy into a vision that does not align with their actual experience, especially when marketing focuses more on lifestyle than learning. When institutions are guided primarily by market incentives, decisions about curriculum, student support, and admissions may be influenced more by profitability than by educational values.

In short, academic capitalism has reshaped how universities view themselves and how they present that image to others. Marketing in higher education is no longer just about conveying the institution's identity; it is about strategically crafting a brand that stands out in an increasingly crowded and competitive global market. This shift reflects a broader evolution in higher education—one that carries significant consequences.

The Power of Language in University Websites

A key feature of higher education marketing within the context of academic capitalism is the strategic use of motivational and inclusive language. Slogans, taglines, and mission statements are carefully crafted to resonate with prospective students' aspirations, values, and sense of identity. These phrases are designed not only to inspire but also to position the university as a partner in personal growth and global impact.

For example, UArizona uses empowering phrases like “Your ambitions can take you anywhere” and “Unleash your power,” followed by the reflective question, “How would you influence the world?” This language frames the university experience as a launchpad for global leadership and personal growth. The branding also invokes legacy, referencing a tradition of academic excellence dating back to 1855. Slogans like “Be Your Extraordinary” and “Discover

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Your Full Potential” are crafted to appeal to students’ aspirations not only to succeed, but to stand out.

Similarly, UTEP employs forward-looking language that highlights student agency and self-determination. Phrases like “Pick your future” and “Build it at UTEP” convey that students are in control of their paths and that the university serves as a supportive foundation. This emphasis on practical empowerment aligns with UTEP’s mission to serve a diverse, often first-generation student population by promoting access and opportunity.

ASU’s branding, by contrast, emphasizes its inclusive philosophy and innovative identity. The phrase “The ASU Difference” signals a departure from traditional models of higher education, while the university’s guiding motto, “We are measured not by whom we exclude, but by whom we include and how they succeed,” positions ASU as a progressive, access-driven institution. Its language, including slogans like “Discover Your Full Potential,” reflects broader marketing trends but with a distinctive focus on social impact and success through diversity.

These examples demonstrate how language functions as a central tool in higher education branding, used to convey institutional values, forge emotional connections, and distinguish one university from another. The language is not accidental; it is strategic, crafted to appeal to students who view education not merely as a path to a degree, but as a vehicle for achieving their personal and professional aspirations.

In this way, language becomes a central instrument of academic capitalism. Universities are no longer competing solely for rankings and resources; they are also vying for identity, narrative control, and emotional resonance. As a result, marketing messages increasingly mirror the values of a consumer-driven education system: empowerment, inclusion, transformation, and success. On UH’s admissions web page, the language is carefully tailored to attract prospective

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students who seek not only academic rigor but also real-world application and meaningful engagement. The slogan “Real life, real experiences, real connections” serves as more than a tagline—it embodies a deliberate branding strategy focused on authenticity and employability. For international graduate students, it signals a commitment to practical outcomes and professional integration, which are often key considerations when choosing to study abroad.

Moreover, UH emphasizes its location “in the heart of an international city with a friendly attitude,” a phrase that underscores both its urban advantage and its welcoming atmosphere. Houston is portrayed not merely as a setting but as a strategic asset, offering international students access to cultural diversity, professional networks, and a sense of belonging. This regional framing is particularly appealing to graduate students who are looking for more than academic growth; it suggests opportunities for career development, internships, and engagement within a vibrant, multicultural community.

The university also presents its degree as “recognized both nationally and internationally,” reinforcing its credibility and global relevance. This type of messaging is particularly important for graduate students who may be evaluating the portability and reputation of their credentials across borders. By highlighting this recognition, UH positions itself as an institution that expands professional opportunities, whether students plan to remain in the United States or return to their home countries after graduation.

Furthermore, UH’s claim that it has “established itself as a leader in promoting academic achievement and advancement” aligns with broader narratives of institutional excellence. References to advanced degree offerings, partnerships with local businesses, and community engagement further position the university as embedded in both academic and socioeconomic spheres. This dual emphasis on scholarly depth and community relevance may particularly

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appeal to international students seeking to connect their education with meaningful societal contributions.

Finally, the phrase “Here you begin your future” encapsulates the university’s forward-looking messaging. It speaks directly to the ambitions of prospective graduate students, positioning UH as a launchpad for both academic and professional success. This message aligns with broader trends in higher education marketing, in which universities present themselves not merely as sites of learning but as transformational institutions that prepare students to navigate and shape the global landscape.

Positionality and Prestige

In addition to lifestyle branding and motivational language, universities strategically market their positionality—their standing and reputation within national and global academic landscapes—as a core element of their appeal. Graduating from a well-ranked, globally recognized university is presented as a gateway to enhanced career prospects and upward mobility. This is a powerful motivator for prospective students, especially international ones, who often place significant weight on institutional prestige when making enrollment decisions.

To reinforce their appeal, universities highlight their community size, diversity, and cultural vibrancy, framing themselves not only as centers of academic excellence but also as rich, inclusive ecosystems. For example, UArizona describes itself as a leading destination for international students, proudly citing its place in the top 1% of global institutions according to the Center for World University Rankings. Additional distinctions, such as being ranked in the top 4% of U.S. research institutions and achieving particular excellence in fields like astronomy and astrophysics, are used to bolster academic credibility and emphasize specialized strengths.

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These rankings function both as indicators of quality and as persuasive marketing tools to position the university competitively in the international higher education market.

Financial accessibility is another key component of institutional positionality. UArizona emphasizes that more than 85% of its international undergraduate students in fall 2022 received Global Wildcat Scholarships. This statistic reinforces the university's image as both prestigious and accessible—an appealing combination for high-achieving, cost-conscious international applicants.

ASU takes a similar approach, using its home page to spotlight rankings and statistics that highlight diversity and inclusion. The university notes that it hosts over 9,000 international students, representing 136 countries and 230 tribal nations. This expansive diversity is framed as a strength, reinforcing ASU's identity as a global and inclusive institution. The presence of rankings on the home page, along with references to innovation and scale, positions ASU as a major player in the competitive field of international education.

Texas A&M University, while more traditional in its presentation, also emphasizes community and diversity. It reports a student body that includes over 6,000 international students from around the world and promotes the university as a vibrant local community. The phrase “your new home away from home” underscores the idea that A&M offers not only academic value but also a welcoming environment—an important factor for students relocating from abroad. The mention of 550+ student organizations, including multicultural and Greek life options, further conveys a socially rich and integrative student experience.

Together, these institutions use a combination of rankings, scholarship data, diversity statistics, and inclusive messaging to construct a form of prestige that goes beyond academics. They present themselves as globally connected, socially inclusive, and economically supportive

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qualities that align closely with the aspirations of many international students seeking both a high-quality education and a meaningful university experience. UH strategically uses language and storytelling on its admissions website to craft a compelling institutional identity, particularly aimed at international graduate students. The slogan “real life, real experiences, real connections” captures the university’s effort to position itself not just as an academic institution, but as a gateway to practical, meaningful, and socially embedded opportunities. This language emphasizes authenticity and relevance, appealing to students who are seeking more than theoretical learning and want to be part of dynamic, real-world environments.

UH also anchors its identity in both urban and global positionality. Located in Houston, a major international city, the university emphasizes its geographic and cultural context, branding itself as a place where students can thrive within a diverse, inclusive, and globally connected community. The phrase “in the heart of an international city with a friendly attitude” reinforces the message that students will find both professional and social opportunities, helping reduce the sense of isolation international students might experience in more homogeneous or rural environments.

In terms of prestige and outcomes, UH notes that “earning a degree from this university is recognized both nationally and internationally,” reassuring prospective students that their credentials will be valued across borders. UH also highlights its commitment to academic achievement and advancement, along with its partnerships with local businesses and contributions to the broader community. These elements present a model of graduate education that blends academic rigor with industry engagement and civic relevance—an especially appealing message for career-oriented students or those considering postgraduate employment in the United States.

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Finally, the phrase “Here you begin your future” is both direct and motivational, encouraging students to view UH not merely as an academic institution but as a launchpad for long-term success. This kind of language reflects the broader logic of academic capitalism, where universities are marketed as strategic investments in personal and professional growth.

In sum, UH uses inclusive, future-oriented language to position itself as a globally connected, community-focused institution. For international graduate students, this narrative offers a compelling blend of prestige, diversity, and practical opportunity—key factors in deciding where to study abroad.

UTEP offers a powerful example of how regional context can serve as a strategic asset. Located at a unique geopolitical crossroads where three U.S. states and two countries meet along the Rio Grande, UTEP’s borderland setting positions it as a naturally transnational institution. This location involves more than just geography; it symbolizes cultural exchange, linguistic diversity, and cross-border collaboration. These characteristics are especially appealing to international graduate students seeking universities that embrace both global perspectives and regional relevance.

UTEP reinforces this identity through demographic statistics. The university serves more than 24,000 students, the majority of whom identify as minorities, with nearly half being first-generation college students. This creates a narrative grounded in access, opportunity, and social mobility—values that resonate with many international graduate students, particularly those from underrepresented or marginalized backgrounds. Rather than relying solely on prestige or rankings, UTEP emphasizes an inclusive, mission-driven approach to graduate education.

For international graduate students, this institutional positioning may offer a stronger sense of belonging than what is typically found at larger or more elite universities. UTEP’s

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messaging suggests an understanding of the challenges faced by students navigating unfamiliar academic and social systems, presenting itself as a supportive environment where diversity is the norm rather than the exception. This contrasts with institutions that primarily emphasize traditional markers of excellence, such as global rankings or research output.

In short, UTEP's graduate recruitment strategy reflects a localized, inclusive model of academic identity. By highlighting its borderland context and student demographics, UTEP frames graduate education as a means of contributing to a broader community rooted in equity, diversity, and regional impact. For many international graduate students, this kind of narrative can be as influential as institutional prestige—especially when they are seeking not just a degree, but a meaningful academic and social experience.

Reflecting on the International Undergraduate Experience

As competition for international undergraduate students intensifies, universities across North America are increasingly relying on sophisticated marketing strategies to attract diverse applicants from around the world. Through websites, social media, virtual tours, and curated messaging, institutions craft narratives that emphasize opportunity, inclusion, academic excellence, and vibrant campus life. However, beneath these polished presentations lies a more complex reality, one that raises important questions about authenticity, representation, and access.

International students are often drawn by promises of global prestige, vibrant student life, and inclusive academic environments. Universities highlight rankings, scholarship opportunities, and cultural diversity as key selling points, constructing an image of higher education as both transformative and accessible. Yet, as reflected in the visual and linguistic strategies of institutions like ASU, Texas A&M, UH, UTEP, and UArizona, the portrayal of international

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students is not always as comprehensive or representative as it could be. Certain regions and identities receive more visibility than others, and these portrayals often rely more on aspirational branding than on genuine academic or cultural engagement.

For undergraduate international students, this creates a paradox. On one hand, they are actively recruited as valuable contributors to campus diversity and institutional success. On the other hand, marketing materials often present a narrow, idealized version of student life that may not fully align with their lived experiences. This tension underscores the importance of critical engagement with university messaging, as well as the need for institutions to adopt more authentic and inclusive strategies that genuinely reflect their student populations and core values.

Ultimately, while university branding and recruitment strategies serve important institutional goals, they must also remain accountable to the students they seek to attract. For undergraduate international students, the decision to study abroad involves significant emotional, financial, and cultural investment. As such, universities have a responsibility not only to recruit these students but also to represent them with honesty, depth, and care.

Reflecting on the International Graduate Experience

The international graduate student experience, as constructed through university websites and promotional materials, offers insight into how institutions position themselves within an increasingly competitive global education market. At universities such as UH, UTEP, Texas A&M, ASU, and UArizona, language, imagery, and digital narratives are strategically crafted to communicate not only academic programs but also institutional values, cultural inclusivity, and professional opportunities.

These universities present themselves as globally connected, culturally diverse, and career-oriented environments where international students can thrive academically while gaining

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access to broader social and economic networks. Phrases such as “real experiences,” “discover your full potential,” and “be your extraordinary” appeal directly to students’ aspirations for personal growth, future impact, and a sense of belonging. At the same time, references to urban location, institutional rankings, and scholarship opportunities help establish credibility and reinforce the idea of higher education as a strategic investment in one’s future.

However, these portrayals also raise important questions about representation and inclusion. While the language used is inclusive and forward-looking, the visual narratives sometimes reflect limited diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, or region. Some universities, such as UTEP, stand out for highlighting a broader range of student identities, particularly Latinx and first-generation students. Others, however, rely more heavily on generalized, globalized aesthetics that may not fully capture the lived experiences of their diverse graduate populations.

Ultimately, international graduate students are not only choosing institutions based on programs or rankings but also responding to the stories universities tell about who belongs, what success looks like, and how education connects to real-world change. As universities continue to expand their global reach, these narratives must remain authentic, representative, and responsive to the diverse needs and identities of the international graduate community.

Understanding the Differences: Undergraduate vs. Graduate International Students in Marketing and Academic Capitalism

As universities compete globally to attract international students, they have increasingly adopted sophisticated marketing strategies rooted in the principles of academic capitalism, where education is framed as both a public good and a private investment. However, how institutions market to undergraduate and graduate international students reveals important differences, not only in messaging but also in how they perceive and respond to each group’s distinct priorities.

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Marketing Focus: Lifestyle vs. Professionalism

For undergraduate international students, marketing materials tend to focus on the broader experience of university life. These students are often younger, possibly leaving home for the first time, and may be more drawn to ideas of independence, social belonging, and identity formation. To attract these students, universities emphasize vibrant campus communities, student clubs, housing, and inclusive messaging such as “discover your full potential” or “your new home away from home.” Visual content often shows students socializing, attending sporting events, or relaxing on campus, building a narrative of personal growth within a supportive environment.

In contrast, marketing directed at international graduate students adopts a more professional and pragmatic tone. Graduate students are typically older, with clearer academic or career goals, and are more likely to assess options through the lens of return on investment. Accordingly, universities highlight research opportunities, academic excellence, career outcomes, and global recognition. Slogans such as “real experience, real connections” or references to “global impact” and “industry partnerships” are designed to appeal to graduate students seeking advanced credentials that lead to tangible professional opportunities.

Positionality and Value Proposition

The perceived value of a degree plays a slightly different role for each group. Undergraduate programs are often framed as life-shaping experiences, emphasizing personal development, exploration, and identity formation. In contrast, graduate programs are positioned more as strategic investments, with a focus on professional advancement and academic specialization. For undergraduates, the university is presented as a space to grow into adulthood; for graduate students, it serves as a springboard for leadership, research, or career progression.

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This distinction reflects broader trends in academic capitalism, where higher education is increasingly commodified. Undergraduate international students are recruited as long-term consumers of university services, ranging from tuition and housing to extracurricular activities. In contrast, graduate students are marketed primarily as credential-seekers, with institutions competing to offer degrees that signal upward mobility, professional status, and access to influential networks.

Representation and Messaging

Visual and linguistic representation differs notably between the two groups. Marketing for undergraduate students often highlights diversity and social inclusion in broad, inviting terms, emphasizing community, belonging, and campus life. In contrast, graduate student marketing tends to depict individuals in labs, libraries, or fieldwork settings, underscoring intellectual engagement and career readiness. To reinforce institutional credibility, universities frequently highlight rankings, research achievements, and industry partnerships when targeting graduate audiences.

Chapter 6: **Conclusions and Implications**

Ultimately, while both undergraduate and graduate international students are framed as valuable to the institution—academically, culturally, and financially—their experiences are marketed in fundamentally different ways. These strategies reflect not only the distinct goals of each group but also how universities have adapted to an increasingly global and competitive higher education landscape. Understanding these distinctions is essential to analyzing how marketing, globalization, and academic capitalism shape how students engage with higher education today.

Conclusion

This study has examined how HEIs in North America strategically use marketing tools to attract international undergraduate and graduate students. An analysis of institutional websites, social media presence, virtual tours, and promotional language revealed that universities are increasingly engaging in practices aligned with academic capitalism, framing education not solely as a public good, but as a globally competitive commodity.

The analysis of Mexican and Latino visibility in international university marketing reveals a persistent disconnect between demographic reality and institutional representation. Despite the significant presence of Latin American and Mexican international students at institutions in the U.S. Southwest, their portrayal in marketing remains limited, tokenistic, or tied to deficit narratives, such as English language remediation. Universities such as UTEP, UAronza, ASU, Texas A&M, and UH, all of which enroll large Latino populations and sit at the intersection of regional identity and global ambition, have both a responsibility and an opportunity to reframe how Mexican and Latino students are represented in domestic and international recruitment efforts.

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In short, these students are not peripheral to the international student experience in the United States—they are central to it. Yet, marketing often erases or flattens their stories. The emphasis on generalized global aesthetics over localized cultural authenticity creates a disconnect that undermines not only the institutions' missions as HSIs but also their credibility in serving transnational populations with integrity and vision.

Marketing materials from institutions such as UH, UTEP, Texas A&M, ASU, and UArizona reveal a deliberate and nuanced construction of institutional identity. These universities present themselves not only as centers of academic excellence but also as inclusive, diverse, and opportunity-rich environments. This dual positioning aims to attract a broad spectrum of international students by aligning institutional narratives with both global prestige and personal transformation.

The language used—emphasizing empowerment, belonging, and success—reflects a shift toward consumer-oriented discourse in higher education. Phrases such as “Unleash your power” and “Real life, real experiences, real connections” are carefully curated to appeal to student aspirations, positioning the institution as both a catalyst for personal growth and a gateway to global career opportunities. In addition, the strategic use of regional positionality, particularly in urban or border settings, highlights institutional relevance and integration with both local and global networks.

The differentiation in marketing approaches between undergraduate and graduate students also reflects the segmentation of target audiences within institutional branding. Undergraduate marketing typically emphasizes lifestyle, community, and social engagement, while graduate student marketing focuses on professional advancement, research opportunities,

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and institutional rankings. This contrast underscores the commodification of student experiences, framing them according to anticipated outcomes and perceived return on investment.

In sum, the promotional strategies employed by these universities illustrate the pervasive influence of market logic in contemporary higher education. As international student recruitment becomes increasingly central to institutional sustainability, marketing materials serve as powerful mediators of institutional identity and global visibility. This study contributes to the growing body of literature examining the implications of academic capitalism, particularly in relation to internationalization, branding, and the evolving role of HEIs within the global knowledge economy.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study offer several important implications for higher education practitioners, particularly those involved in international recruitment, marketing, communications, and enrollment management. As universities continue to compete globally for student enrollment, it is increasingly vital to consider not only what institutions communicate, but also how they communicate, and whom they choose to represent, in their marketing strategies.

1. Critically Evaluate Marketing Narratives and Imagery

Universities should regularly audit their international marketing materials to ensure that aspirational messaging remains grounded in the realities of student life. Overly idealized or homogenized portrayals risk creating a disconnect between image and experience. This can be especially harmful when marketing fails to reflect the cultural, linguistic, and academic diversity that students, particularly those from Latin America, actually encounter. Institutions must strive for authenticity and depth in their messaging.

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2. Recenter Border Identities in Marketing

Universities like UTEP and UArizona, situated directly along the U.S.–Mexico border, are uniquely positioned to lead a shift in how Latinx and transnational identities are represented. Their marketing should foreground bicultural and bilingual realities not as anomalies but as strengths that enhance the global learning environment. This also aligns with their identities as HSIs and with their regional demographics.

3. Feature Latin American and Mexican Student Voices Authentically

Testimonial-based campaigns, particularly video series or written narratives, can humanize the student experience and offer prospective applicants relatable role models. Highlighting Mexican international students, heritage speakers, and transnational Latinx scholars as contributors to campus life, research, and activism creates a fuller picture of who belongs on these campuses and what they can achieve.

4. Leverage HSI Status in Global Recruitment

Institutions such as ASU, Texas A&M, and UH, all with large Latinx populations and/or HSI designations, should explicitly incorporate these identities into their international recruitment strategies. Rather than relying on generic slogans like “Innovation for All,” marketing should highlight culturally relevant strengths such as community-oriented programs, Spanish-language support services, Latin American research initiatives, and family-centered academic advising.

5. Train Marketing Teams in Cultural Responsiveness

Marketing staff, particularly those outside DEI or HSI-focused units, often lack training in racialized visual politics, culturally responsive communications, and the implications of representation. Institutions should invest in professional development that builds awareness of

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how identity, language, and race intersect in global education branding. This ensures that diversity is not just visual, but substantive and aligned with institutional commitments.

6. Include Community Partners in Storytelling

To ground recruitment efforts in authentic experiences, universities should collaborate with local and transnational stakeholders such as Mexican consulates, Latinx student organizations, alumni networks, and cross-border institutions. This is especially relevant for UTEP and UH, which have deep community ties that can help enrich their storytelling. These partnerships ensure that messaging reflects real narratives, not just strategic aspirations.

7. Adopt Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Marketing Frameworks

Institutions should intentionally broaden the range of identities represented in their communications. This means going beyond visual tokenism to highlight diverse academic paths, language backgrounds, and transnational experiences. Such inclusivity not only fosters a more welcoming image but also signals that all students, regardless of nationality or linguistic background, belong and can thrive.

8. Align Marketing with Institutional Values and Student Experience

In today's competitive international landscape, universities must balance branding strategies with their educational mission. Marketing should foreground academic rigor, faculty mentorship, community engagement, and career readiness, not just rankings or campus aesthetics. This is especially important for graduate and professional students, who prioritize program quality, research opportunities, and postgraduation outcomes.

9. Foster Cross-Functional Collaboration in Recruitment

A more integrated approach is needed across units such as international programs, academic departments, student affairs, and communications offices. When marketing messages are

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coordinated with actual student support services and academic structures, institutions strengthen their credibility and build long-term trust with international audiences. This consistency between brand promise and lived experience is essential to cultivating institutional reputation and student success.

Implications for Research

This study opens several important avenues for future research at the intersection of international education, marketing, and institutional identity, particularly within HSIs located in the U.S.–Mexico borderlands. While the current analysis focused on how universities portray Mexican and Latino students in international marketing materials, further research is needed to better understand both institutional decision-making processes and the perspectives of the students themselves.

1. Student Perceptions and Marketing Influence

More empirical research is needed on how international students interpret and respond to university marketing materials. While this study analyzed institutional outputs, future research could explore how students, particularly those from Latin America, engage with these narratives during the college search process. Investigating how marketing shapes student expectations, sense of belonging, and enrollment decisions would provide valuable insights into the actual impact of promotional strategies.

2. Borderland-Specific Identity Construction

There is also a need for research examining how universities in border states (e.g., Texas, Arizona, New Mexico) conceptualize internationalism when students from neighboring countries like Mexico are both culturally embedded and institutionally marginalized. These institutions occupy a complex space, serving transnational populations while often presenting a global

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identity that erases those very connections. Future studies could investigate how regional identity and proximity to Latin America influence recruitment practices, messaging, and institutional self-representation.

3. HSI Designation and International Marketing

Another promising area for research is the relationship between HSI designation and international recruitment strategies. Although HSIs receive federal recognition based on their domestic enrollment of Hispanic students, their potential to attract students from Latin America remains underexplored. Do these institutions incorporate their mission and demographic makeup into their international marketing, or is HSI identity framed primarily as a domestic strength? Comparative studies across HSIs could reveal patterns of alignment—or disconnect—between institutional mission, public messaging, and global engagement.

4. Transnational Belonging and Recruitment Categories

More research is also needed on students with complex immigration or citizenship statuses—such as DACA recipients, members of mixed-status families, or dual nationals with strong ties to Mexico. These students often fall outside conventional domestic or international recruitment categories. Examining how they are represented in marketing materials, how they navigate the admissions process, and how they are institutionally “placed” could help expand current definitions of internationalization in higher education.

5. Comparative Visual and Discourse Analyses

Future studies could conduct comparative analyses of university websites and marketing materials, particularly across Southwestern HSIs, to examine how various racial, linguistic, and national identities are represented. This might include visual analysis (e.g., image placement, racial coding), narrative analysis (e.g., slogans, taglines), and rhetorical framing of Mexican and

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Latino students in contrast to other international groups (e.g., students from China, India, or Europe). Such research would provide empirical grounding for critiques of tokenism and invisibility.

6. Institutional Motivations Behind Messaging

Scholars could also examine how varying institutional priorities, such as tuition revenue generation, diversity initiatives, or global rankings, influence how universities frame international recruitment. This line of inquiry would help situate marketing practices within the broader context of academic capitalism and neoliberal governance in higher education.

7. Longitudinal and Crisis-Responsive Marketing Research

Longitudinal studies could examine how marketing strategies shift in response to changing political, economic, or environmental conditions. For instance, how did the COVID-19 pandemic or recent immigration debates affect the portrayal of international students, particularly those from Latin America? Such research would illuminate institutional adaptability and resilience in the face of external pressures.

8. Interdisciplinary Theoretical Approaches

Finally, interdisciplinary approaches, drawing from education, media studies, cultural studies, and CRT, can enrich our understanding of how universities construct narratives of success, belonging, and transformation. Whose voices are centered in promotional materials? Whose identities are rendered invisible? How do institutions frame the value of “diversity,” and for whom? These questions help reveal the ideological dimensions of marketing and challenge higher education to pursue more ethical and inclusive forms of communication.

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