

Spring 2018

## Latin American Students in the US: A Case Study of the Costa Rica and why does it matter?

Mariano Miranda  
Yale College, New Haven Connecticut

### Abstract:

I have worked supporting an increasing number of Costa Rican students in applying to U.S. universities for the last 4 years, I cannot pin down the driving factors that are driving this movement of students. After speaking with fellow Costa Rican international students in the U.S., there is no single reason that stands out as the driving factor. Even as I contemplate my personal motivations, I too do not fully understand these reasons. With this in mind, this research paper asks the question: what is driving Costa Rican students to increasingly seek an education in the U.S? Latin America is a big region, and it is hard to attribute the movement of students from Latin America to the U.S. to a single reason for the last 4 years. Instead, I will focus my research on a case study of students, teachers, and high schools from Costa Rica, with the hope of offering a frame of reference for future studies.

Suggested Citation: Miranda, M. (2018). *Latin American Students in the US: A Case Study of the Costa Rica and why does it matter?* (Unpublished Education Studies capstone). Yale University, New Haven, CT.

---

This capstone is a work of Yale student research. The arguments and research in the project are those of the individual student. They are not endorsed by Yale, nor are they official university positions or statements.

Latin American Students in the US:  
A Case Study of the Costa Rica and why does it matter?

A Capstone Senior Project  
By Mariano Miranda  
Mira Debs, Advisor  
Rodrigo Canales, Second Reader

April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018

## **Acknowledgements**

This project holds a special place in my heart: for the past three years I have been helping Costa Rican students apply to college in the U.S. Now, I have taken a step back to really try to understand the underlying reasons that drive so many students to seek an education in the U.S., and hopefully do a better job. I am grateful to so many people for helping me. First, Mira Debs for her mentorship and authentic guidance. Professor Rodrigo Canales for his advice. Angie, Luca, Micaela, and Grace for becoming my writing tutors and helping me create the conditions for this project. My parents, friends, and business partners that have helped me accomplish my craziest dreams. And most importantly, to all my students. To all, I thank you sincerely.

## **Introduction**

For the past three years, I have helped Costa Rican students apply to colleges in the U.S. After coming to Yale, I felt compelled to start a service that helps prospective international students successfully apply abroad. My work at EDaway—the organization I started to help these students—has defined my own Yale experience, and each time I worked with these students I felt as if I was going through the application process all over again. Each time I felt the same anxiety I felt waiting for my acceptance letter from Yale. This work has also led me to work with—or at least discover—local, Costa Rican high schools that are integrating U.S. counseling services in their infrastructures. This has led me to believe that there is an increasing interest in completing undergraduate degrees in the U.S. Why is this happening, and why has current literature not addressed this?

Latin America is an increasingly important contributor of international students to the U.S., as the number of students applying to the U.S. for an undergraduate education is quickly rising. As of 2015, Latin America has become the fastest growing region of origin for international students in the U.S. In fact, the number of students increased more than 19% from 2014 to 2015 to 86,378 (Ross, K., 2015), accounting for roughly 10% of all international students (IIE, 2015). Nonetheless, most of the research and news coverage focuses on other international students, such as Chinese and Indian students.

I have worked supporting an increasing number of Costa Rican students in applying to U.S. universities for the last 4 years, I cannot pin down the driving factors that are driving this

movement of students. After speaking with fellow Costa Rican international students in the U.S., there is no single reason that stands out as the driving factor. Even as I contemplate my personal motivations, I too do not fully understand these reasons. With this in mind, this research paper asks the question: what is driving Costa Rican students to increasingly seek an education in the U.S? Latin America is a big region, and it is hard to attribute the movement of students from Latin America to the U.S. to a single reason for the last 4 years. Instead, I will focus my research on a case study of students, teachers, and high schools from Costa Rica, with the hope of offering a frame of reference for future studies. The Costa Rican case stands out: it has a relatively good higher education system. The Central American country is investing roughly 8% of their GDP in education and has a strong system of public universities. However, students and school administrators agree that there is a growing, strong interest in studying outside Costa Rica. After speaking with these students, they still say that they are looking at these options for other reasons. I believe Costa Rica is an ideal case study—it let us study what other factors may be driving Latin American students to study in the U.S. My research will try to understand how educators and students (1) perceived the benefits of studying in the U.S., (2) what has driven Costa Rican students to pursue undergraduate U.S. degrees and carefully study their background. And (3) the challenges in place that make this experience difficult for Costa Rican students, and what the future may look like for these students.

This research lies at the intersection of an ongoing phenomenon in Latin America—the increasing number of Latin America, international students studying in the U.S., and hopes to offer pioneering research that could lead to policy solutions to make the process more accessible to other students.

## **Literature Review**

### **A. Latin American higher education system**

Public universities are important houses of learning in Latin America. Most of them are part of the region's colonial past, such as Universidad San Marcos (1551), Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (1553), Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (1578), Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (1613), among others. While England and Portugal did not found universities in their colonies, Spain did pursue a large-scale institutionalization of Catholic universities. It was in Spain's best interest to replicate its universities across the continent to facilitate the religious training and education of *criollos* in the New World (Tünnermann 1995). This led to a public-private education system.

This led to a rather homogenous system defined by the synergy between public universities and Catholic universities. However, it has evolved to the point that it is hard to define one Latin American education system (De Wit. et Al. 2005), and it is impossible to define the structure as a whole. It is now made up of public and private universities that aim to address different needs. It is important to highlight the interactions between these two types of institutions. In fact, most of the existing literature addressed the effects of these interactions.

Public universities in Latin America are financially accessible, selective, fully autonomous institutions that boast academic freedom and take an anti-imperialistic stand (Tünnermann 2003). Private universities have complemented these universities and have come in two waves: (1) the founding of Catholic Universities, and (2) the rise of much more recent independent

universities. Large, well-funded public universities and traditional Catholic universities remain among the elite colleges in the region. Levy (1987) goes further and claims that these universities heavily emphasize social sciences and take powerful political stands even though they do not properly interact with the market and society itself, usually taking left-leaning stands. However, working papers by the World Bank (De Wit. et Al 2005) and the Institute for International Education (Open Doors 2016), say that since the 90s these universities have failed to both meet the increasing demand for higher education, and catch up with the advancement of technology, which has led to a new phenomenon: the fast growth of private universities to fill in the gap

I classify these private universities into two broad areas; (1) secular universities that offer a more updated curriculum, heavily focusing on STEM, and (2) private universities that are just trying to fill the gap as a reaction to public universities. While the former does bring a differentiated curriculum that focuses on STEM and practical training and responds to the market, the latter usually just fills in the gaps, lowering the academic quality threshold, with much shorter and lighter academic curriculums. There is a consensus that they offer a very-low quality education, perpetuating the lack of competent professionals in the region (Levy 1987) (Altbach 1999) (Sutz 2000) (Huber et al. 2007). There is an ongoing symbiosis between the two types of private universities: the development of elite private higher education institutions responds to business interests, and the development of other private higher education institutions responds to the lack of supply. In other words, “private institutions serve some important societal needs—both for the elites and for the emerging middle classes” (Altbach 1987) and make up 40% of the education market (2005). Evidence suggests that private

universities will keep growing at staggering rates (Guadagni, 2012). It seems that older, public universities have not been able to keep up with student demands and have not successfully included modern STEM curricula. On the other hand, most private universities do not offer good quality education.

I define Latin American universities as European institutions that have partially evolved to meet the demand for the labor market. This means that Latin America has never had an indigenous education system but instead a combination of arrangements that makes it difficult to balance the needs of the region with the already existing education structures. Tünnerman defines the orthodox education system as elitist, simple, strict<sup>1</sup>, disorganized, independent, student-led (partly), and politically-involved. This leads to many institutional flaws, such as constant lack of funds, a paradoxical deep-seated concern for social issues whilst not connecting with the reality of the country or the market, rudimentary teaching instruction, little emphasis on practical knowledge and research, and classroom-based education.

I want to underscore the fact that the existing literature believes many of these problems can be attributed to the rigidity of the system. Moura Castro and Levy (2000) say that this is due to two debilitating tendencies: (1) a common, continental perspective within the universities minimizes the deficiencies and the need for major change, and (2) the lack of alien influence in the education system. This leads to an underlying problem: Latin American universities have not been able to evolve and match other educational systems, and fail to offer competitive technological, and research opportunities, leading to a mismatch between the majors offered

---

<sup>1</sup> In Latin America there's a predominantly tubular education system, which means that students can't easily transfer to other majors, and that the curriculums themselves are very strict, which leads to unnecessary duplication of faculty.

and the needs of the labor market (Holm-Nielson et al. 2005). They have not only failed to strengthen their weaknesses but have also lost their positive features. Moreover, this failure has led to an inefficiency cycle touched on by several papers—top researchers and graduate students leave the country for better opportunities and thus are not able to become local professors, leading to a gap in human resources (García Guadilla, 1998) (Holm-Nielson et al. 2005) (Gacel-Ávila, J. et Al 2005). Latin American universities, however, do seem to agree on the need to improve their education platforms, but fail to secure sufficient funding. Most of the existing literature focuses on these systems' flaws and how they are partly responsible for the region's slow economic growth. Authors agree that the system transfers knowledge but does not incentivize entrepreneurship, research, or technology. I hypothesize that these are important factors that drive students to seek opportunities abroad, but I do not believe that it is the sole cause for student movement. Even with the current, steady rise of elite, technical colleges, which according to most authors' theories would suggest a decline in the number of international students, Latin American students are going to other countries to study and high schools are pushing for better institutional support to send students abroad. It can be inferred that Latin American students studying in the U.S. are very competitive, and that they probably could have had access to good, very competitive, educational opportunities at home. Thus, it is important to identify which other factors are driving students to increasingly study outside Latin America. To do so, I will do a case study looking at Costa Rican students. The literature offers insight into some of the underlying mechanisms that drive Latin American students to study in the U.S. But it also sheds light on the significant existing gaps in the current understanding of such movements.

## **B. Movement of Latin American International Students**

There is consistent evidence from the World Bank, and IIE that the movement of international students to other countries is increasing. Research shows that there are consistent and strong long-term trends, and while they have historically been affected by shocks, it is predicted that the number will continue to grow (Altbach, Knight (2007). The OECD report *Education at a Glance* draws from existing literature to reaffirm this trend for the past 10 years: the number of international students has increased by 50% between 2005 and 2012. It is expected to grow past 5 million students this year. I want to highlight that global enrollment for new international students in the U.S. took a 3.3% dip. Most reports agree that it will continue growing but student safety (amidst the multiple school shootings) and President Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric have had a powerful impact on the movement of prospective international students (Schulman, 2017).

Latin American students' motivations to study in the United States are less understood. Regarding the growth itself, the literature agrees that Asian students have been the "engine of growth" in global student mobility. China and India are still the two largest markets for international educational services. In fact, up to 53% of the total body of international students comes from Asia. Thus, there is a consensus regarding the underlying factors that drive Asian students to study abroad, including parents' influence, applaud for Western education, and a belief that an international education can be a differentiating factor for their children. The

literature heavily focuses on the study of Asian students. It lies at a crossroads between the supply of American colleges that cater to Asian prospective students more extensively than they do to Latin American students.

However, Latin America is becoming an important player; it has become the fastest-growing region of origin for international students (Ross, K., 2015). In 2015, the number of Latin American students grew to reach 86,378 students in 2015 and now account for roughly 11% of the total share—a significant increase from its shy 5% in 2005 (Institute for International Education, 2015). It is also expected to grow—as more students go into the education system, Latin America will become the third largest region in terms of higher education enrollment by 2013 (ICEF Monitor, 2014). Much of this growth seems to have been driven by large institutional support from governments to professionalize the labor force; comparative results between 2012 and 2017 show that these awards have driven much of the growth.

I will focus on the general challenges that students face, and how they relate to the movement of Latin American students. Evidence suggests that because tuition cost is a major hurdle for these students, governmental scholarships act as paramount incentives. Data from Brazil shows the effects of these policies. For instance, as of 2014, the Brazilian flagship scholarship program, The Brazil's Scientific Mobility Program (BSMP), placed 27,710 grantees in the U.S.—a program that aims to put 100,000 Brazilian students in U.S. universities.

Even though it is true that there are better financial aid programs, data show that international students largely go to places with relatively poor financial aid policies—or none at all. This, along with high costs for college prep services, suggests that an undergraduate education in the U.S. is still very limited to either privileged students that can both afford a local

bilingual, elite education and U.S. tuition, and extremely talented students that can get either a scholarship, or financial aid in a top U.S. program.

NAFSA and other organizations have tried to address this by pushing for more integration between Latin American students and the American higher education system. They have been pushing for a two-way reform in the form of collaboration between colleges and federal reforms—both in the U.S. and abroad—to improve access to these opportunities that have been key to the growth of Latin American students in the U.S, such as the BSMP program. In fact, Brazil had largely accounted for the regional and global growth of student migration to the U.S. over the last five years, quickly becoming the second largest source of international students in Latin America after Mexico.

---

### **Driving Factors:**

There are large-scale, regional institutional efforts to send students to the U.S. However, across Latin America, and certainly in Costa Rica, there are bilateral and corporate agreements that are also contributing to the sending of more students to the U.S, such Proyecto 1000, BSMP, and Zona Franca Training. Research shows that these programs are largely responsible for increasing number of Latin American students in the U.S. The goal of these programs is to compensate for the lack of technical professionals in the Latin American region. Authors agree that technology has become fundamental for the overall growth of the economy. Consistent with Cubillo et al's (2006) research, countries in Latin America are failing to catch up with the

market economy. This touches on my previous argument: Latin American colleges have not been able to cope with development (Mollis, 2014).

While authors agree that Latin American governments, students, and institutions are starting to emphasize the role of research and diverse STEM opportunities, data show that Latin American colleges fall short of U.S. investment in these areas, for instance Johns Hopkins spends more than \$2.4 billion in research every year (HUB, 2016). In fact, the list is mostly made up by American colleges, including University of Pennsylvania, University of Michigan, University of California, SF, and University of Washington, Seattle. In contrast, studies confirm that Latin America keeps lagging behind in this area (CEPAL, 2004).

This seems to be a consensus in the region. For instance, Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto's educational plan *Proyecta 100,000* (Project 100,000): *Towards a Knowledge Economy* aims to send 100,000 students to U.S. colleges by 2018. Similarly, Brazilian Former President Dilma Rousseff inaugurated the Brazil Scientific Mobility Program (BSMP). It is part of a larger initiative that aims to grant 100,000 Brazilian university students scholarships to go to the U.S. (IEE, 2018). These are extremely ambitious plans and they all respond to today's race for competitiveness. Is no surprise then, that a large share of students in many science and engineering-related programs is made up of international students. (Redden, 2017). Both Mexico and Brazil had pledged to send 100,000 students each over the next years (by 2018/2020) to U.S. colleges with the institutional and financial support of the government.

Latin Americans seem to choose a major and a country based largely on (1) future career prospects, (2) improvement of language skills, (3) international contacts, (4) program recognition, and (5) institution prestige, among other factors. Survey data also show that

another significant evaluation attribute for going to college in the U.S. stems from personal preferences. This is consistent with previous research from Bourke (2000), Hooley and Lynch (1981), and Hilden. In fact, according to the former, improving language skills, making international contacts, and enhancing future career prospects top the list (Hilden, 35). This adds to the existing literature, arguing that even though lack of local options is an important decisive factor, there are other factors that drive international students as well.

### **C. The Case of Costa Rican Education**

As I mentioned, there is no research on the individual motivations that drive students to study in the U.S., the demographics behind the students that are studying abroad (and if they are changing at all), the limitations these students face, and what are these students like in school. This is a significant gap in the literature and makes it hard to tailor solutions for these students. I believe that by studying Costa Rica, which boasts of a competitive and strong higher education system, we can identify that even though there may exist great local options for higher education, there is a strong interest to study abroad.

The OCDE's Education Report for Costa Rica classifies Costa Rica as an educated country, with a strong and remarkable education system. The report—which highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the system—concluded that the system partly fosters the skills required for a growing economy and knowledge-intensive economy, but it also underscores the uncontrolled proliferation of private institutions and suggests that strict quality controls should be urgently implemented (OECD, 2017). The OCDE also underscores the fact that there is little to no information regarding report data and key indicators of institutional performance.

**The** literature does show that local universities have international reputation, participation and graduation rates are high, and it has a relatively strong accreditation system. The education report confirms that 90% of the students are enrolled in 4-year (or longer) undergraduate programs. It touches on the fact that only 12% of the student body pursues STEM fields. Costa Rica spends 1.5% of its GDP on tertiary education—much more than most OCDE and Latin American countries (UNESCO-UIS, 2016). In fact, Costa Rica “is one of the countries with the highest levels of public expenditure per tertiary (university) student across OCDE and comparator in Latin America” (OCDE, 2017), which has led to an increase of graduates in the last years. The number has increased over four times faster than the general population.

The report agrees with most research, holding that “Costa Rica stands apart from in Latin America, and internationally, in terms of its commitment [to education]” (OCDE, 2017) (CINDE 2012) (Macaya-Trejos and Forastelli-Román 2011). Even though there are many intrinsic flaws in the system, Costa Rica does indeed have a good system with good quality education. I am thus curious to learn why students are still leaving.

## **Methodology**

My goal is to identify why Costa Rican students choose to study in the U.S. I also analyze the perceived benefits of a U.S. education for students and school administrators, as well as what support systems are in place to help these students apply to the U.S. I engaged with Costa Rican students either studying in the U.S. or in the process of applying to U.S. universities, and with the school administrators who work with these students. I believe that because of my personal experience applying, studying and supporting students in their U.S. school applications, I have a good understanding of the current situation. However, I avoided interviewing students that I had helped through EDaway. as I know my students too well and wanted to eliminate any possible personal bias in the survey responses. Thus, while I did draft some of my questions based off of my own experience, I did not talk to students in the EDaway program.

I conducted 11 interviews via phone and Skype, with both students and administrators in Costa Rica. Through these interviews, I evaluated the students' reasons to studying in the U.S., and whether school administrators have come up with a suitable support system to help them—or if the students largely do this on their own. Most of the questions were open-ended and allowed the interviewees to share as much as they wanted about their own experiences. I asked the students about their own motives for applying to U.S. schools, and their motivations throughout the process. I spoke with them about their experience applying to the U.S. and if they had found good institutional support from Costa Rica, or their high schools. Separately, I

asked the school administrators about their own understanding of the process of applying to college in the U.S., and if they had actually seen an increase in student interest. I also asked them about the institutional support in place to help the students apply abroad, and if the students thought it was adequate.

I recruited all my participants via snowball sampling. Costa Rica is a small country, and most international students already in the U.S. know other students in other parts of the country. These students also directed me to their former counselors or school administrators. Interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes. In the student interviews, I asked demographic questions, about their process applying to the U.S., the reasons they decided to do so, whether it was challenging or simple, and about their current experience in the U.S. In the counselor interviews, I asked about their experiences helping the kids, whether they thought they had the tools to help these students, the proportion of students that decided to apply abroad and the proportion of students that did not complete the process, their own views on why these students were applying to the U.S., and their view on local Costa Rican colleges. I believe that the students do in fact represent the broader student body that is interested in applying to U.S. colleges. Nonetheless, I do not believe they represent the broader Costa Rican population as a whole. I could not really represent the public education system in the study. I discuss the results in the Findings section.

## **Findings**

### **A. Academics and Professional Placement**

School administrators and students alike agree that there is a growing interest in studying in the U.S., citing a significant growth in the last five years. Students and administrators believe that the U.S. offers better, more flexible academic opportunities, and more interesting majors. Students believe that a U.S. degree is more valuable than a Costa Rican one, as it offers international recognition and ensures better job placements, and most of them want to stay in the U.S. after college. However, students also indicate that they have realized that it is harder to secure a long-term job position in the U.S. than what they initially thought. They agree that they were not well-informed about U.S. job and immigration policies. However, they say that even if that information had been provided, they would have still have come.

Students and more experienced school administrators believe that in Costa Rica and Latin America in general, educational opportunities are rigid and restrict creative thinking. Students believe that local universities offer traditional majors, with conservative practices that emphasize theoretical learning and undermine practical learning. The literature touches on this aspect and confirms that Costa Rican universities have fallen behind and have not been able to catch up with more modern practices. For instance, the administrators mention that most students want to study in the U.S. to pursue majors in STEM and design. They say that the students benefit from more modern laboratories, up-to-date practices, and hands on

experience. An experienced administrator says that a lot of her students are going to schools like the New School and Pratt Institute, which focus primarily on hands-on, practical training.

The more experienced administrators also show strong knowledge in the enrollment differences between American and Costa Rican schools. In fact, two of the interviewees are American and are certified college counselors in the U.S. as well as in Costa Rica. They argue that students like U.S. programs because enrollment is more flexible, as undergraduate students in the U.S. do not have to necessarily choose a major before enrolling in college. Experienced school administrators argue that high school seniors usually do not know what they want to study, and they could benefit from a looser system that delays selecting a major until later in their academic career. As I mentioned before, students in Costa Rica must apply to a major upon college enrollment, and it is very challenging once in school, to transfer to another – sometimes being held back a year or two to make up for the late decision. Students seem to agree with this. Most of them mention this flexibility as a driving factor for them. They did not know what they wanted to study and did not feel mature enough to commit to one major, and the U.S. liberal arts system offered a good alternative.

## **B. Personal Motivation**

Students seem to largely base their decisions on personal motives. Interestingly, school administrators tend to undermine the extent of these personal motives in the students' decisions. This is important because current research does not explicitly address this. However, most students say that even if they had the opportunity to attend a good, local university, they would have chosen to study abroad. They believe that studying in the U.S. offers an opportunity

to live in a “fun”, “interesting”, or “larger” city. They also want to experience living alone<sup>2</sup>. They believe that in the U.S. they are exposed to more experiences, people from different countries, and that they can be more independent. Students agree that they can experience new things and be part of an interesting, diverse community.

Even though only a handful of students visited their schools before enrollment, all of them agreed that they had a good understanding of the social structures at play in American universities. While they consider college portals reliable sources, they agree that before applying most of their knowledge came from T.V shows, movies, and books. When I pressed on this issue, most students highlighted the influence of T.V. shows, such as Gossip Girl and Gilmore Girls, on their decision to apply to a U.S. school. I mentioned this before in my research, but it is important to highlight the influence of American popular culture in the students’ individual decisions—for most students, these experiences represent their first contact with American college culture.

Most students believe that their parents had little to no understanding of the college application process. However, most of them felt supported throughout the process. They say that their parents trust the local university system, but also believe that there are many advantages associated with an undergraduate degree in the U.S. Only two students reported having parents that had an American education. These students believe that their parents’ positive experience was fundamental in their own process. These students stand out because they had a better understanding of the process, had better resources, and started preparing for

---

<sup>2</sup> I want to emphasize that most Costa Rican students live with their parents. First, Costa Rica is a small country with relatively, densely populated cities. Unlike the U.S., most students can go to school and live with their parents.

the process earlier. The literature does not address the effect of the students' parents own experiences, but the students categorize it as fundamental.

Administrators believe that international prospective students prefer colleges in, or close to, major cities. Students seem to agree with this; they all took into consideration the closest city to make their final decision. In fact, students overwhelmingly applied to colleges in medium-sized and large cities. Moreover, students did not really consider demographic factors, such as religious affiliation, the diversity of the student body or the faculty, or proximity to home. However, they did consider nearby airports.

Administrators and students believe that a U.S. education is a good investment. School administrators argue that most of their students in the U.S. have been able to secure high-paying jobs in the U.S. or in Costa Rica. Even though all of the students that I interviewed are either freshmen (first year) or sophomores (second year), they echo the belief that an American education is a good investment. Some of them have already secured high-paying internships. Remarkably, most of these students have received at least some financial aid. Most students consider that they would have not been able to attend school in the U.S. without such support. Most students reported having a financial aid package covering 50% to 30% of total expenses.

School administrators believe this is the single, most important issue for parents. They say most parents are willing to invest in a U.S. education if the student is able to secure at least a partial scholarship. Nonetheless, only the more experienced counselors knew about the available opportunities for international prospective students. On the other hand, other administrators were not even aware of the concept of financial aid, and still encouraged students to apply for more competitive, merit-based scholarships. Most students discovered

these opportunities through college portals. Students believe that other prospective students could benefit from more information regarding the available financing opportunities American colleges offer. They believe this is one of the biggest hurdles for students and that a lot more students would apply if they know about these opportunities.

### **C. Support Systems**

One of the most remarkable findings of this research is that students overwhelmingly believe that there are no support systems in place to help them apply to school in the U.S. This is consistent with current research. Even students at international schools believe their school's support systems fall short. They believe their counselor did not inform them about "cool" and "interesting" opportunities both at the time of applying to college and during the subsequent summers. Students in non-international schools also believe their high schools were not helpful, and they had to coordinate the uploading and submission of the necessary documentation themselves.

As the number of students interested in studying in the U.S. increases, high schools are rushing to bring in institutional support systems. However, most school administrators in charge of these processes lack proper training, technology, and information about the U.S. admission process. Nonetheless, some of them argue that the process is relatively simple and that they can do it—they believe that because they have helped some students successfully apply abroad, they can replicate the same process and help all others as well.

It is clear however, that the students do not agree with this. Students claimed that there are few opportunities to improve their English, participate in extracurricular activities, and enhance their resume at school. They also claimed that their teachers did not know how to help

them, and they questioned their teachers' ability to write proper recommendation letters and good student evaluations. Two students, who did not apply through the CommonApp, said that their school administrators sent their information late, compromising their admission chances.

Schools and students do agree that there is no governmental or corporate institutional support. This is a remarkable finding: research shows that these programs are very effective in the sending of students abroad. However, companies and the Costa Rican government have not yet implemented any scholarship programs. I believe that this stems from the fact that the Costa Rican government trusts and favors its education system and is currently investing heavily in updating it. However, data shows that there is limited human capital in Latin America and Costa Rica. This leads to a paradox: even though the Costa Rican government is investing heavily in the education sector, it is not addressing the lack of trained professors, lack of quality, and lack of international practices. Some school administrators believe there are institutional, national scholarships such as *La Casa Amarilla* and Universidad de Costa Rica's informal scholarship program. However, students and more experienced counselors believe that these programs do not offer realistic opportunities, and limit students' options.

## **Conclusion**

This project is aimed at understanding why Latin American students are increasingly completing their undergraduate degrees in the U.S. through a case study of Costa Rica. I chose Costa Rica because its higher education system stands out, as it offers good quality education to a large percentage of the population at a relatively accessible price. It also represents the broader Latin American higher education system as a whole: long-standing, public institutions are failing to meet student demand and to implement newer pedagogical and research practices. This has led to the large-scale institutionalization of private colleges, which either reflect corporate interests and target a small percentage of the student body, or lower the quality threshold, with a limited and weak academic offer. It is a good case study because most of the literature suggests that students seek better academic opportunities abroad, but Costa Rica offers a relatively good quality education and has high retention and graduation rates. By studying this case, I was able to identify other factors that drove students to study in the U.S.

My investigation confirms that Costa Rican students seek better academic opportunities. Both students and high school administrators overwhelmingly agree that Costa Rican colleges have failed to diversify their academic offer, driving students away. These students seek better STEM and creative opportunities, including architecture, design, fashion, and the arts. Moreover, they believe that a U.S. degree leads to better job placements and improves their chances of staying in the U.S.—or at least their chance of emigrating to another

country. The study reveals that students go into the process without really understanding U.S. federal job placement policies for international students. They say that even if they had known them, they would have applied to the U.S. While it is true that American degrees are more recognized, nothing in my investigation allows me to conclude that they are inherently better than Latin American degrees.

A remarkable, yet expected finding shows that students are personally motivated in pursuing a degree in the U.S. Students say that the possibility of living in the U.S., living on campus, sharing experiences with students from different parts of the world, and the possibility of living alone are powerful driving factors to seek an education outside Costa Rica. Students are influenced by American cult movies, T.V. shows, books, and other people's, especially family members', experiences in the U.S. I found that school administrators do not really take these personal motivations into consideration—they believe students apply mainly for academic reasons.

Other important conclusions are that even though the cost of attending college in the U.S. is a major hurdle for most Costa Rican students, most of them have secured partial financial aid packages. These students argue that counselors and administrators do not know about these opportunities. This touches on another important finding: most schools are struggling to implement institutional support systems to help students apply to the U.S. I found that even international schools are failing to offer good quality services for students interested in applying to the U.S. Moreover, there are no governmental or corporate support programs that are very effective in the training of human capital.

Given that this project is the first to address the underlying reasons that are driving Latin American students to study abroad in the context of student migration, I believe it is a cornerstone for future research. It is important thus to acknowledge some of its major limitations. There is limited access to demographic data that speaks about the individual characteristics of the students applying to the U.S. Moreover, I worked with a small sample that may very well represent the broader private education sector. I encourage the extension of this research to different countries and different socioeconomic classes to have stronger conclusions for the Latin American case. I believe that this is a good step towards the understanding of student migration from Latin America to the U.S.

## Citations

(2004, November 29), América Latina rezagada en investigación y desarrollo, *Comunicado de Prensa*, Comisión Económica para Latinoamérica y el Caribe

(2009) Comparing Education Statistics Across the World, *Global Education Digest*

(2014, March 31). Growing education participation in Latin America expected to lead to greater demand for study abroad, *ICEF Monitor*, ICEF

(2014). The 100 Best Universities in the World, *The Best Colleges*

(2015, April 21). Brazil Scientific Mobility Program, Study in the USA

(2015). 2015 QS Digital Solutions Report. *QS World University and Business Schools Rankings*

(2016, March 16). Recruiting Students from Latin America: Market Trends and Digital Tactics, *Higher Education Marketing*

(2016). Johns Hopkins leads all U.S. universities in research spending for 38<sup>th</sup> year in a row, *HUB*, Johns Hopkins University

(2017). The Importance of International Students to American Science and Engineering, *Neap Policy Brief*, National Foundation for American Policy

(2018). Best Global University Rankings, *Education*, US News: A World Report

(2018). Most International Students: National Universities. *A World Report: U.S. News*

(2018). Who Rules?, QS: World University Rankings and Elsevier

Abarca, A. and Sanchez A. (2005, September 26) La Deserción Estudiantil En la Educación Superior: El Caso de la Universidad de Costa Rica. Student Dropout in the Costa Rican Higher Education System: The Case of Universidad de Costa Rica (trans.), *Actualidades Investigativas en Educación*, Facultad de Educación, UCR

Albatch, P. Higher Education and the State in Latin America: Private Challenges to Public Dominance by Daniel C. Levy, Journal Storage

Altbach, P. (1999) Private Prometheus: Private Higher Education and the Development in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Greenwood Publishing Group

Altbach, P. (2001) Higher Education and the WTO: Globalization Run Amok, *International Higher Education*, Boston College

Albatch, P. and Knight, J. (2007) The Internationalization of Higher Education: Motivations and Realities, *Journal of International Education*

Casallas, L., Where do Latin Americans Choose to Study. *QS World University and Business Schools Rankings*

CINDE (2010), The Value of Accrediation, *Council for Higher Education Accreditation*, CHEA

Cubillo, J.M. et al. (2006), International Students' decision-making process, *International Journal of Educational Management*, 20. 2, Emerald Insight

De Wit, H., Jamarillo, C., Gacel-Ávil C., and Knight, J. (2005) Higher Education in Latin America: The International Dimension, *Directions in Development*, The World Bank.

García Guadilla, C. (1998) Situación y principales dinámicas de transformación de la educación superior en América Latina. *CRESALC/ UNESCO*, Caracas.

Gazzola, A.L. and Didriksson, A. Trends in Higher Education in Latin American and The Caribbean, *IESALC*, UNESCO, I.

Gross, N., (2015, November 19). More Latin American Studying Abroad in the U.S., *Education Writers Association*

Guadani, A. (2012) Anuario de Estadísticas Universitarias 2012, Centro de Estudios de la Educación Argentina

Huber, E. et al. (2007) *Politics and Social Spending in Latin America, The Journal of Politics*

IEE. (2018). Brazil Scientific Mobility Program

Levy. D. (1987) Higher Education and the State in Latin America: Private Challenges to Public Dominance, *Springer, Higher Education* 16.1

Macaya-Trejos, G. and Forastelli-Roman, M. (2011). La Educación Superior en Iberoamérica 2011 –La educación Superior en Costa Rica 2005-2009, *Higher Education in Latin America 2011—Higher Education in Costa Rica 2005-2009*, Centro Interuniversitario de Desarrollo (CINDA)

Mollis, M. (2014). Administrar la crisis de la educación pública y evaluar la calidad universitaria en América Latina: dos caras de la misma reforma educative, *Revista de la Educación Superior*. 1. 169. Pp. 25-45

Moura Castro, C. and Levy, D. (2000) Myth, Reality and Reform: Higher Education Policy in Latin America, *Inter-American Development Bank*

OCDE (2017) Education in Costa Rica, *Reviews of National Policies for Education*, OCDE

OCDE (2015) Education At Glance 2015, OCDE

Open Doors Report (2015), *Institute of International Education*, I

Open Doors Report (2017), *Institute of International Education*, I

Oppenheimer, A. (2014, Feb). Mexico's study-abroad strategy is real news out of summit, *Opinion*, Dallas News

Oppenheimer, A. (2015, December 1). More Latin American students in the U.S. (trans.), *La Nacion*.

Oppenheimer, A. (2017, November 17). While Trump touts a wall, more U.S. students head for Latin America, *Miami Herald*.

Proyecta 100,000, *Asuntos Comunitarios*, Consulado de Carrera de México en Little Rock, México: Gobierno de la República

Redden, E. (2017, October 11). Foreign Students and Graduate Stem Enrollment, *Quick Takes*, Inside Higher Ed.

Ross, K.M. (2015, November 16). Study: U.S. sees increase in number of students from Latin America. *US News*, p. 5.

Schulmann, P. (2017, November 17). New Open Doors: Bracing for Changes to International Student Flows, *World Education News + Reviews*

Stanek, C. (2013). The Educational System of Brazil, *IEM Spotlight*, Volume 10, Issue I.

Strauss, K. (2017, September 2017). The World's Top Universities in 2017, *On Campus*, Forbes.

Sutz, J. (2000) The University-Industry-Government relations in Latin America. *ELSEVIER*

Tünnermann, C. (1995) Universidad y Sociedad: balance historico y perspectivas desde Latinoamerica. Universidad Central de Venezuela, Caracas.

Tünnermann, C. (2003) La Universidad Latinoamérica ante los Retos del Siglo 21, Enrique Bolaños Fundación

West, C. (2012). New Approaches to Cooperation with Latin America, *NAFSA*

Zhengrong, Lu. (2015, December 7). What can be learned from the Brazilian Scholarship Cut? *World Education News + Reviews*, I.