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Graduate School Application Accessibility for International Students

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GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION ACCESSIBILITY FOR INTERNATIONAL

STUDENTS

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DEDICATION

To my mother who has always supported me and helped me succeed, gracias por todo mama.

GRADUATE SCHOOL APPLICATION ACCESSIBILITY FOR INTERNATIONAL

STUDENTS

BY

ESTEFANIA CASTILLO, B.A.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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ABSTRACT

The graduate school application is a time consuming, yet important, process that can often be complicated for students. However, this process is made even more complicated for international students who often face extra steps and other obstacles when applying to graduate programs in the US. Following my own experience of applying to a master's program as an international student, I set out to further explore how international students experienced and navigated this process. This research project explored the graduate school application process through the experiences of international students that were shared in *testimonios* through *platicas*, or open and friendly conversations. International students shared their *testimonios,* or experiences, where they discussed any struggles or difficulties during their application process. The knowledge that was shared during the testimonios was then analyzed with a User Experience and Chicana Feminist perspective. Using these two approaches helped to shine a light on the experiences of international students, who are often marginalized, to be able to learn how to make the application process a more user-friendly process that can address their needs.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The graduate school application process is a time-sensitive task that involves many different components. University websites, where graduate applications are frequently hosted, all vary, and even the requirements needed to apply to each university vary. This leads prospective students to have to hunt for information by navigating various university websites in order to successfully apply. This process is even more complicated for international students because of additional requirements that are needed in order to submit an application to graduate schools as an international applicant. On top of having to look for any additional steps and requirements, international students also have to deal with cultural and language differences between their home countries and the US. Some international students also have issues with internet availability in their home countries, which affects their ability to complete and submit online applications, complete bank transactions, and other transactions. Overall, the application process that is already difficult and time sensitive becomes even more so for this population and international students are left having to navigate these websites, which are usually their most accessible point of access to US institutions, from across the globe in order to complete this process.

In 2019, the Institute of International Education (IIE) and the US Department of State's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) reported the number of international students had reached 1,095,299, making international students 5.5 percent of the entire US higher education population (IIE, 2019). It is reported that the number of international students in the US is increasing year by year, and with the increase in students, their contributions (monetary, cultural, and intellectual) to the US also rise. The large international student population shows that the accessibility of graduate school applications is an important aspect of this process that

must be considered if the US expects these numbers to grow annually. Each year, more students around the globe look at application websites from institutions across the world and have to navigate this time sensitive task that is even more complicated for them as international applicants. It is important for US institutions to address this issue so that as students keep applying to universities across the globe, they remain interested in US institutions.

While the international student population only makes up 5% of the higher education population in the US, this group of students cannot be taken for granted. The international student population continues to increase around the world, as well as in the US, and is estimated to increase to 8 million worldwide by 2025 (Altbach, 2004). With the continued growth of international students across the globe comes the possibility for the percentage of international students in the US to rise. If the population continues to grow and US universities want to continue benefiting from students, it is vital for institutions to consider the needs of international students. International students are often overlooked and marginalized when it comes to the design of application websites, while other "mainstream" users are prioritized (Rose et al., 2018). However, certain groups of people are made the center of the design and in turn others end up being marginalized. By prioritizing those who are often overlooked and marginalized, in this case the international student population, we can begin to cater to the needs of international students and in turn all students.

In order for students to navigate, understand, and successfully access university application websites to find the information that they need, a change needs to be made. By paying closer attention to the experiences of the international student population during and after their process of applying to graduate school in the US, US-based researchers and teachers can begin to create application websites that are user friendly for not only the international student population, but for all students who are looking to apply to graduate programs. Once we focus on

international students and their experiences applying to programs in the US, we can begin to answer the question: How can graduate school application be made more accessible for international students, and in turn all students?

Bridging Fronteras: Mi Testimonio

A year before graduating as an undergraduate, I was still not sure if I was going to apply to any graduate programs. The main reason behind my indecision was the fact that I was the first person in my family to recently apply to graduate school as an international student. I had family members and close friends who had applied to graduate school, but fortunately for them, they all applied as US citizens. I quickly realized that the application process was going to look a lot different for me as a Mexican citizen, and that I was going to need help.

To try to find some guidance, I first tried to talk to my mother about her application process, because she had applied to a master's program in the US. However, her experience was a lot different than mine because she applied before universities had online websites and online applications. When I spoke with my mom, she recalled applying via mail and having to go to the university if she had any questions to talk to people in the admissions office. She explained that even though she had to do everything through mail, since there was no internet or online websites, her process was not very difficult, as she just filled out a paper and submitted it. She did not recall there being many extra steps for international students. Even though my mother had applied and attended graduate school, her experience was so far removed from mine that it was not very helpful to me. Therefore, when I made the decision to apply to graduate school, with no one to help me understand the process for international students, I knew that the only way I could do it was if I recorded my process to keep track of what I had done and what I needed to do next.

At first, I was not entirely sure how I wanted to keep track of my experience applying to graduate school. I only knew that I wanted to keep a record that was not just for myself, so that eventually other people who were in a similar situation could use me as a resource. Later, I came up with the idea of creating a blog where I could post every aspect of my journey for others to be able to follow. This is how I came up with the idea for my blog, *Bridging Fronteras: Las aventuras of an estudiante on her way to grad school.* (https://bridgingfronteras.weebly.com/). In this blog, I tried to create a space where I could show other international students what I was going through and how I was navigating the application process. I had a place where I showcased my writing samples and portfolio so that other students could get an idea of what materials to submit to programs. Apart from my portfolio, I also had a live spreadsheet, where I tracked the programs I was interested in along with all their requirements, deadlines, and other information I deemed important. The spreadsheet was meant to give other students an idea of what information to look for and how requirements differed for all the different universities I was applying for. It was also meant as an example of how other students could organize their application process in a simple way that would break down the big process into smaller components.

A main component of *Bridging Fronteras* was a blog where I would post monthly to share my progress, any difficulties, and tips that I thought could help others. I first discussed the purpose of my project and my unique experience as a *transfronteriza* living on the border. In this space, I also shared my visit to a graduate school fair and mentioned how I was forming connections with professors in different departments to try to get some guidance in the process. I shared a video blog about my frustrating experience with the GRE exam, focusing on the difficulty I had because of the way names are listed differently on legal documents in the US and in Mexico. The most significant aspect of this space was that this is where I began to realize and

mention all the extra steps and hurdles I had to go through in order to apply for the different programs. In these posts, I began to notice how difficult the application process for international students was: extra fees, earlier deadlines, lack of clearness regarding English proficiency exams, proof of bank statements for immigration paperwork, etc. I was frustrated by the lack of information regarding requirements for international students and the difficulty to simply find any information that was on the different websites. Certainly, I could have contacted the different institutions to obtain help; however, this does not take away from the fact that information should have been already available online, particularly since this was my first point of contact with prospective schools.

Bridging Fronteras is a vital part of this project, because it is the place where my own personal lived experience led me to this problem space, the accessibility of graduate school application websites for international students. Even though I have shared my own experience applying to master's programs, I believe this is not the end. *Bridging Fronteras* is an important project that must continue so that it becomes a platform where other international students can share their own experiences, tips, and advice to other international students. Hopefully, in the future, this platform will help guide other prospective students in their application process through the lived experiences of other students like them. *Bridging Fronteras* should continue as a collective space where we can all share our lived experiences, and I invite everyone who is interested to help collaborate in this safe space. My work on *Bridging Fronteras* inspired me to continue working with the application process to try to make this process easier to navigate for other international students in the future. For this project, I decided to explore the experiences of international students in order to try to understand more in depth the process they go through to find what changes can be made.

In this thesis, I will begin with a literature review that outlines statistical data and general information about the journey of international students in the US. Next, I will share the two methodologies I have chosen, social justice in User Experience (UX) and Chicana Feminism, explaining why these are useful approaches to examine this issue. I will continue to discuss the research methods I applied during this project to collect data regarding the experiences of international students. From the methods section, I will then share my results from both the surveys and interviews I conducted with international students at different institutions in the US. Finally, I will discuss my findings and share any limitations I encountered as well as suggestions for further work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

International Students in the US

There is an ongoing conversation about the fluctuating number of international students in the US. The Institute of International Education (IIE) and the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) released their annual *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange* stating that in 2018, the number of international students in the country had passed one million, increasing 1.5 percent from the previous year to reach a total of 1.9 million. In 2019, the IIE and ECA released the report stating that the international student population reached a new high, increasing .05 percent from the previous year, making this population 5.5 percent of the total US higher education population (IIE, 2019). It is important to note that the report takes into account students who are on Optional Practical Training (OPT), meaning they have received an extension after graduation to obtain field training in their area of study (Anderson, 2019). However, even though the *Open Doors Report* reports an "all time high," there is a big concern about the number of international students declining in the US, which can be seen when students on OPT are not counted in the total.

When OPT students are not included in the total number, data shows that between the 2015-2019 academic years, enrollment of international students in US universities actually declined by more than 10 percent (Anderson, 2019). The decline of international students enrolling in US universities was smaller between the academic years of 2017-2018 and 2018-2019, with only a one percent decrease, than in the previous academic years starting in 2015, with three to seven percent declines (Anderson, 2019; Kennedy, 2019). In 2019, the number of undergraduate international students declined by 2.4 percent, graduate international students declined by 1.3 percent, and non-degree seeking international students declined by 5 percent (Kennedy, 2019; Anderson, 2019; IIE, 2019). While the number of international students has

declined at these three academic levels, there has been a 9.6 percent increase in OPT programs (Kennedy, 2019). The increasing number of students in OPT after graduating is the reason the total number of international students is counted at an all-time high in the *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*. However, because of the slowing down of the decline, the expectation is that the continuing decline of international student enrollment in the US will stabilize soon with the help of OPT programs (Quilantan, 2019). Regardless of the fluctuation, international students surpass 1 million and make up 5.5 percent of the entire student population in the US, making them an important population in the country.

Even though there is a concern about the number of international student enrollment in the US, there is no denying that these students have become an important economic asset. International students contributed 44.7 billion to the US economy in 2018, increasing 5.5 percent from 2017 (Kennedy 2019; IIE, 2018). However, since 2016, the fall of international student enrollment has reportedly cost the US 11.8 billion dollars as well as thousands of jobs (Nedlund, 2019). The loss of international student enrollment is not just hurting the US economy, but universities and their cultures are impacted as well. This population is a vital component of institution budgets, since oftentimes international students pay higher tuition. With the decline of international student employment and the subsequent decline of tuition money, universities have seen increases in revenue loss and have had to cut positions and suspend programs (Nedlund, 2019; Kavilanz, 2018). People who work in higher education are not the only ones affected, as accommodations, dining, retail, and transportation are also being affected by the loss of international students (Nedlund, 2019). This means that international students do not just play a role in the university's economy, but rather the US economy as a whole. If international student enrollment continues to decline, the US economy will continue to be impacted negatively. In addition, with the decline of international student enrollment, universities risk losing diversity in

terms of perspective, cultural competency, and language abilities – all of which are non-monetary contributions that international make to US institutions.

Due to the importance that international students have in the US economy, researchers are investigating the reasons behind the decline of international student enrollment in US institutions. There is speculation about the different factors behind the recent decline of international student enrollment. The first of these is that international students feel less welcome because of the xenophobic rhetoric of the current administration and the second is having to do with funding issues and the continuing cost of US institutions. The Trump administration has proposed and implemented different policies that will make it more difficult for international students to study in the US, which in turn makes international students feel less welcome. The different policies that the administration is proposing will affect visa applications and the possibility to work after the completion of the program.

The proposed policies include tougher stances on H-1B work visas, such as denying visa petitions at higher rates and removing rules that allow spouses of work visa holders to work, which make it more difficult for students to remain in the US after they graduate (Kavilanz, 2019; Anderson, 2019). The state department has also provided consulates with guidelines that urge the refusal of visas to applicants whose intent is to try to remain in the US after they graduate, as well as establishing maximum periods of authorized stay requiring students to sometimes have to apply for special permission when there is a transition in their academic career (Kavilanz, 2019; Barros, 2020). By having to obtain new visas at every transition or change, students will probably end up spending more money on visas and other processes. Students will also be affected by possibly being delayed in their studies because of the delays with US "administrative processing" (Leone, 2020). The administration is also trying to place a rule to restrict and possibly remove the ability for students to apply for OPT (Anderson, 2019).

US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) have issued a policy memo to ban international students from the US for ten years if they unknowingly violate their immigration status (Anderson, 2019). All of these proposed policies, and any more that are brought up for debate, will make it more difficult for international students to obtain a visa to study in the US. The proposed policies would specially affect international students from lower economic backgrounds, since the different visa applications entail fees that some students might not be able to afford and since students have to provide evidence of economic solvency by providing documentation of their bank account.

Even though the administration keeps proposing policies that limit international students, the Trump administration is adamant that the cost of education in the US is the main reason behind the decline, since they have made "more efforts than ever" to increase international student enrollment (Nedlund, 2019). However, it is important to note that the Trump administration has been limiting and restricting the information that is presented to the public. Many agencies have received gag orders and are not allowed to provide the public with certain information, leaving the public with incomplete or lacking information about multiple things, including accurate enrollment data (Schoenberger, 2018). Even more alarming than the lack of information is the fact that the public might not realize that they do not have access to all the information. They may begin to believe that the information available is accurate and complete meaning that there is not a full understanding of current issues by the public (Schoenberger, 2018). Once the government begins to restrict information to the public, it is difficult to discern how accurate and credible the information that is actually being shared is. With this in mind, we cannot be certain that the Trump administration's claim that rise of tuition is the main reason behind the decline of international students is true. We must also be critical of the data that is provided in reports funded by the US government during this time, such as the *Open Doors*

Report on International Educational Exchange that claims an all-time high while data shows a decline in international students.

International Student Data

International students in the US come from all around the world, but there are certain countries that have more representation in this population. China is the leading country of origin, with 33.7 percent of the total number of international students (IIE, 2019; Nedlund, 2019; Kennedy 2019). India (18.4 percent), South Korea (4.8 percent), Saudi Arabia (3.4 percent) and Canada (2.4 percent) are the other countries that made the top five places of origin for international students in the US; however South Korea's and Saudi Arabia's percentages dropped from the previous academic year (IIE, 2019; Kennedy, 2019). Saudi Arabia has the biggest drop with a 16.5 percent, which is thought to be due to the reduction of financial support from their government for students studying abroad (Kenney, 2019; IIE, 2019). However, there were also emerging countries that had the greatest increase of international students in the US, these include Bangladesh, Brazil, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Taiwan (Kennedy, 2019; IIE, 2019). The percentage of international students from each country keeps changing every academic year, and there is still speculation about how new immigration and visa policies will affect these numbers.

Not only do international students travel to the US from different countries to study, but they also enroll in different programs in different fields. A big majority of international students, 230,780 students, enrolled in Engineering, with Math and Computer Science being the second most popular area of study, hosting 203, 461 students (IIE, 2019). The third most popular field of study in the 2018-2019 academic year was Business and Management, with 182,170 students (IIE, 2019). Other, less popular fields include Social Sciences, Physical and Life Sciences, Fine and Applied Arts, Health Professions, Intensive English, and Communications and Journalism

(IIE, 2019). Even though there is information regarding popular fields of study, there is no information regarding the academic level within each field, meaning how many students are enrolled in undergraduate, graduate, or OPT programs in each field of study. Essentially, more information needs to be gathered about the number of international students at each academic level for the different fields that international students are enrolling in.

It cannot be denied that the international student population continues to increase around the world, as well as in the United States, and is estimated to increase to 8 million worldwide by 2025 (Altbach, 2004). This means that international students will only continue to increase worldwide, creating the possibility for the percentage of international students that make up the entire US higher education population to continue to rise. With the international student population increasing every year around the globe, it is important that institutions take into consideration the needs of international students if they wish to keep benefiting from international students economic and cultural contributions to US education.

International Student Journey: Recruitment to Arrival

The number of international students is increasing worldwide and because the importance of this population there has been extensive research regarding their experiences. Existing research mostly focuses on the reasons why international students decide to leave their country of origin and their experiences once they arrive at their destination. Their experiences mostly involve the way that they navigate new cultures and languages as well as their mental health. The information follows students as they decide to leave their home and then fast forwards to their experiences after their arrival, often leaving the application process out of the equation.

There are various reasons why students decide to leave their home countries and study in a different country. Limited education in home countries as well as opportunity-seeking to raise

social and economic status are some of the reasons people decide to leave their home and study somewhere else (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). There are different factors that "push" students out of their home countries, and there are "pull" factors that attract students to certain countries, mostly in Europe, North America, and Australia. These different factors are found in the home country, the host country, and in the students themselves, and include seeing opportunities overseas as better, lack of opportunities at home, accessibility to certain countries, quality of education, the opportunity to make new friends, and the chance to gain cross-cultural knowledge (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2009). Lee (2008) looked into the different reasons why international students decide to apply to US universities. In 2004, the number of international students applying to US universities began to decline for various reasons (Lee, 2008). As Lee (2008) explains, some of these reasons include, aggressive advertising from universities in other countries, change in host countries' policies about visas, and perception of discrimination in the US. Money is also a great factor for people applying less to US universities. New opportunities emerging in other countries are also creating more "pull" factors, such as lower tuition costs and easier access to visas, that are attracting students to other countries other than the United States (Altbach, 2004; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

The journey of international students does not end once they finish applying to different institutions and enroll as students. Once students go through the process of becoming an international student, there are new barriers that these students face when they begin their studies. Research has been done regarding the experience of international students and their mental health while the students apply, enroll, and study in the US. Lee and Rice (2007) explain that cultural discrimination creates hostile environments at United States institutions, which also have an impact on the student's decision to apply and enroll and on their wellbeing once they become students at an institution. This means that there are students who feel that their

acceptance, both in social life and to the academic institution, is influenced by their country of origin and culture, leaving some students to suffer unpleasant experiences (Lee & Rice, 2007). International students have to deal with social and cultural adjustments that can become a problem when trying to adjust to life in the United States. Several studies have seen that the culture of US institutions leads to stress, depression, frustration, fear, and pessimism among students (Hayes & Lin, 1994). The struggle that these students endure can often manifest itself in the inability to sleep well, academic problems, loss of self-esteem, and loneliness (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). All of these experiences that lead to negative feelings can have an impact on how the students perform academically while they are enrolled and their decision about whether or not they wish to stay to finish their education.

Due to the fact that international students often have to deal with negative experiences during the application process, enrollment, and eventually during their time studying, there has been a need to help students cope and to provide students with support. Data shows that after students are recruited, institutions pay very little attention to supporting students once they arrive to study on campus (Lee, 2010). Andrade (2006) states that in order for the United States to keep benefitting from the economic contributions of international students, institutions need to become knowledgeable about the issues students face to provide appropriate support services. This means that universities should help students with language issues that affect listening, reading, and oral communication (Andrade, 2006; Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2009).

International students also struggle with cultural differences that they face while studying abroad, and language barriers make it difficult for students to conduct their academic and social life making them a vulnerable population (Lee, 2010; Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2009). Therefore, it is important to provide appropriate social support for students to lower negative experiences (Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992). By providing international students with the necessary support,

14

they will perform better and would most likely want to continue their studies in the United States.

The Application Process

While the recruitment process for international students and mental health factors are two areas discussed at length in research, there is little attention being paid to the actual application process that international students have to go through or the interaction that students have with university application websites. This aspect must also be addressed in order to provide appropriate support for international students throughout the entire process, meaning that support should be provided to international students not only after they arrive to the US, but also during the application process through online websites.

Even though research regarding university websites and international students in higher education exists, there does not seem to be much focus on the application process itself for this population. A recent study focused on usability in relation to university websites in their entirety, not focusing on the application process or international student users specifically. Sauro (2018) has investigated the usability of university websites due to the need for these websites to be accessible for the diverse users. As Sauro (2018) explained, University informational websites often make it difficult for users to find important information. This study focused on university websites in their entirety and took students, parents, and faculty as the main users. The main users of the university websites were then divided into two categories, people who are familiar with the website and those who had not visited the website before and were not familiar. Sauro (2018) found that having to account for multiple audiences affected the findability of information on the website.

Even though this research has been conducted, there was not a specific focus on the graduate application website itself. All of these factors regarding students' reasons to apply to institutions in the United States and their struggles in recruitment, enrollment, and social life as a student all stem from the application process. If the US wishes to continue to benefit from international students, it's necessary to pay attention to the experiences of international students so that the application process can be made accessible to international students. If the application process is made more accessible and international students are given the correct support, from the moment they apply to the moment they become students continuing throughout their academic and possible OPT careers, international students are more likely to continue to apply to institutions in the US and in turn continue to contribute to the US economy. This means that it is vital to put the experiences and needs of international students in the forefront and to give the correct support to this student population.

METHODOLOGY

In order to study the usability of graduate school applications for international students, I am going to bring together User experience (UX) and Chicana Feminism. I chose to combine these two methodologies because I believe that the only way we can make sure that application websites are understandable and usable is if we listen and learn from the students using these websites. Both of these approaches look to make underrepresented and marginalized populations the center of projects in order to learn first-hand about their needs.

User Experience

The process that international students go through to apply to graduate programs can be better understood through a UX approach. There are still multiple definitions of the term user experience because there has not been a consensus on what the term should encompass. Usability is the extent to which a product can be used by a specific user to achieve certain tasks while looking at effectiveness, efficiency, and satisfaction (Petrie & Bevan, 2009). Accessibility is often used in relation to people with disabilities, but it is the usability of a product by people with the widest set of capabilities (Petrie & Bevan, 2009). UX is defined as "every user's interaction with a product, service, or company that make up the user's perceptions of the whole" (Baxter, Courage, & Caine, 2015). UX focuses on how to improve the quality of experiences that a user has with a product, rather than just focusing on prevention of problems during the use of a product (Hassenzahl & Tractinsky, 2006). This means that UX is a lot more than just the absence of errors while using a product instead it focuses on a user's interactions and reactions to a product that go beyond the efficiency, effectiveness, and conventional idea of satisfaction (Petrie & Bevan, 2009).

As more work has been conducted with UX, three main perspectives in UX have started to be used in usability research. These three perspectives include: human needs beyond the instrumental, emotional and affective aspects of an interaction, and the nature of the experience (Hassenzahl & Tractinsky, 2006). These three perspectives together look beyond the tasks that a product has to achieve in order to take into consideration the emotions a user has before using a product and the emotions elicited by it within a specific context. UX then takes away the attention from the product itself and puts a focus on humans and their feelings and experiences (Hassenzahl, 2008). This means that UX is subjective and human centered, leading to localized design which is an approach used to take the user's input throughout the process (Baxter, Courage, & Caine, 2015). This is why I found UX helpful for this project, because I wanted to make sure that the attention was put on international students so that their feelings and experiences were taken into consideration in the application process.

Due to the emphasis on the subjective and the user's experience, the three perspectives look to pay attention to the way products are designed in order to create more positive experiences from interactions (Hassenzahl & Tractinsky, 2006). However, Battarbee and Koskinen (2005) argue that while UX is subjective, meaning that experiences tend to belong to an individual, UX should also consider co-experience. While we should look at a person's individual experience, experiences with products can also change in social interactions. This is because individuals often elaborate and evaluate experiences with others, in other words social interactions shape experiences (Battarbee & Koskinen, 2005). Experiences that people have with a product are subjective and belong to an individual, but experiences can also change and evolve through social interactions. Therefore, we should not overlook co-experience as we pay close attention to experiences users have with products, as these could be valuable places where new ideas are created and shaped. Co-experience is an important aspect to consider since international

students often rely on other students, family, or faculty in order to navigate this process, meaning that their experiences are also influenced by those around them in the application process.

UX tries to consider a full range of potential users from the beginning of the product creation process in order to try to achieve a universal design. The goal to create a product that can be used by multiple users is called universal design in North America, but it is also called design for all, barrier free design, and inclusive design around the world (Petrie & Bevan, 2009). Universal design calls for product developers to consider users that are not just from the mainstream and instead to try to accommodate all the different users that could potentially use the product. In this case, I considered an often-underrepresented group, international students, in order to accommodate these users. This is why product design should be an iterative, user centered process that incorporates the user throughout the development process from the beginning in order to address any issues or difficulties that arise as soon as possible so that the end product can create a positive experience for the user (Petrie & Bevan, 2009). This is what is known as localized design, because it takes into consideration the user's input throughout the process (Baxter, Courage, & Caine, 2015). It is important to note that through this process of universal design, product creators should consider accessibility by keeping in mind users so that their needs are taken into consideration.

Even though UX work is human-centered, certain groups of people are made the center of the design and in turn others end up being marginalized. This means that when projects are being created, it is common for certain users to be prioritized, leaving other populations without being properly represented (Rose et al., 2018). Accessibility then becomes a big issue because of the need for consideration of individuals outside the mainstream idea of a typical user (Petrie & Bevan, 2009). Taking into consideration accessibility to people outside the mainstream is important because product design cannot remain local since product consumption happens on a

global level (Getto & Sun, 2017). Graduate school applications are a great example because even though the institutions are located in the US, the application websites are accessed around the world. Products have an economic growth and bigger impact on a global scale, when these products take into consideration different users. This is why social justice in UX is important, because it focuses on populations who are often underrepresented and marginalized so that they can be prioritized and that projects can be designed for them. Therefore, it is important to make those who are vulnerable, overlooked, and marginalized a part of human-centered design, making them the center. Including marginalized groups and focusing on them in UX projects emphasizes the importance of multilingual users and users of color to make products accessible to more than one audience and user (Rose et al., 2018). With UX, I was able to incorporate international students across the world, considering overlooked users with different backgrounds and needs, such as language, internet access, etc. Products and services have to reach global audiences while still taking into consideration how these products can be used successfully by all the different users (Getto & Sun, 2017). Making international students, who are often marginalized, the center of the design for graduate applications can lead to more accessible websites while making sure all users are taken into consideration. While 5% of the population may seem like a low number, as universities continue honoring their commitment to inclusion and diversity, addressing issues that marginalized students face will continue to gain importance.

This is where user localization becomes an important part of product design and user experience. Sun (2006) explains that user localization theory is where the user becomes a designer because they are actively redesigning, or localizing, the technology so that it will fit their specific cultural needs. Localization is important because while products need to have a global reach for distinct users, it should still allow users to localize the product to fit their cultures (Getto & Sun, 2017). All products are both global and local because they two are

connected, meaning that local, cultural interests are influenced by the global flow of products. This is why it is vital to pay attention to the user to see how the user adapts products to make them culturally usable (Sun, 2006), and why the concept of user localization can be useful when analyzing the usability and accessibility of international graduate program applications. We must aim to create products that can be used and understood locally and this will be done through the advocacy of social justice in UX to include marginalized and underrepresented users (Getto & Sun, 2017). Through social justice we can hopefully create culturally sensitive designs. Social Justice in UX is important because it will put focus on the user for the project and use their knowledge, also paying attention to their cultural knowledge, when they become the designer to create a more user-friendly website. In order to create products that take into consideration marginalized users, it is important to first listen to the needs of these users and their experiences.

Practical empathy, explained by Young (2015), illustrates the difference between different types of listening and puts an emphasis on listening with empathy. Listening with empathy calls the researcher to try to understand where the user is coming from in order to understand what struggles they are going through, if the researcher fails to do so they will never truly understand the needs of the participant (Young, 2015). This is important because in order to understand the needs of international students for graduate school applications, it is important to first listen with empathy. This allows researchers to come up with a solution together with the users. Through this type of listening, we can understand how users localize products to make them culturally sensitive, and therefore user friendly for broader audiences.

Chicana Feminism

Considering myself a Chicana, I have witnessed first-hand the way that my community shares knowledge through testimonios and I have learned the importance of listening. Taking the

time to actually listen to other international students with practical empathy in order to really understand where they are coming from and what their needs are is exactly what Chicana Feminism is about. Chicana feminism offers a space, *platicas*, for underrepresented populations to share knowledge, or *testimonios*, while we listen with empathy in order to learn from them and the way that they use and localize websites. This is why I will incorporate an connect UX and Chicana feminist approaches in this study to incorporate the participant as the knower through their lived experiences and *testimonios*.

The Chicana Movement started during the late 1960s, sharing some characteristics with the Women's Movement, but developed within Chicano Movement organizations (Segura & Pesquera, 1992). Chicanas formed their own movement because they felt that their experiences were unique from the traditional Anglo culture since they were facing oppression not only as women, but because they belonged to an oppressed minority group and class. Chicanas felt that the Anglo feminist movement did not take into consideration the intersection of class, race, ethnicity, and gender (Segura & Pesquera, 1992). Within the Chicana Movement, there are several branches of feminism: Chicana Liberal Feminism, Chicana Nationalist Feminism, and Chicana Insurgent Feminism. The first two focus on women within the Chicano movement trying to promote the status of women in this movement while promoting the Chicano culture. Chicana Insurgent Feminism looks to engage in restructuring society by creating alternative theories, empowering women and taking social action (Segura & Pesquera, 1992). It is through this movement that Chicanas look to create new knowledge that takes into consideration the experiences of individuals who face racial, ethnic, gender, and class oppression.

Chicana feminism challenges our traditional ideals regarding knowledge by urging us to look for knowledge in our everyday lives. Historically, research has been used to "other" people of color (Perez Huber 2009). Oftentimes, people of color are not allowed to enter discourse, they

become excluded and disqualified becoming the "other" (Anzaldua, 1990). This means that "traditional data" or knowledge to only include a single perspective, often that of elite white male academics, that offer narrow perspectives that can be used to justify and maintain superiority by dominant groups (Peres Huber, 2009). A Chicana Feminist approach is vital in UX if we want to make sure that we are getting the perspectives and knowledge of people of color. This is why we need to question knowledge, where it comes from and who controls it, meaning who gets to say that something is considered knowledge (DeRocher, 2018). This can be achieved by focusing on the knower rather than on the known to be able to understand how knowledge is being created, by who, and when (Mignolo, 2009). We have to be aware of the way that research is traditionally constructed and how knowledge is developed and accepted because oftentimes academia marginalizes personal experiences as proper knowledge and leaves this type of knowledge inadequately theorized (DeRocher, 2018). By combining Chicana Feminism with UX, researchers can change our research by centering marginalized populations in our projects and help emphasize that people's experiences are knowledge and that their experiences are important.

This is why Anzaldúa (1990) claims that it is vital for people of color to occupy theorizing space by creating our own methodologies and approaches to inventing knowledge. Close attention must be paid to the lives of people who are often underrepresented, not from abstract and far away perspectives, but rather by centering these marginalized people in our work (Saavedra & Nymark, 2008). We need to be concerned about how we invent knowledge because it should not come from written text, it should come from the collective experience of the oppressed, of those who are not fully represented (Hurtado, 2003). This is where UX co-experiences becomes important, because our experiences are not just individual, but are instead affected by our interactions with others and influenced by structural oppression and colonialism.

23

Chicana feminists use their own narratives and experiences to create knowledge that represents and resonates within their culture because our experiences are powerful sources and sites of knowledge and identity (Flores, 2000; Saavedra & Nymark, 2008). Using personal experiences will allow us to create new knowledge that reflects marginalized groups' understanding of the world that can critically transform everyday practices. If we use people's experiences and knowledge with UX, we can then begin to center these experiences to create better products that can be used by these marginalized groups.

Therefore, it is important to look at nontraditional places for knowledge, such as an individual's own lived experiences, or theories of the flesh (Moranga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Calafell, 2012; Saldivar-Hull, 1991). *Testimonios* are a way that people document their lived experiences and typically denounce injustices that they have encountered (Perez Huber, 2009). *Testimonios* reveal injustices caused by oppression, challenge dominant ideas of knowledge, validate experiences, acknowledge the power of human collectivity, and commit to racial and social justice (Perez Huber, 2009). *Testimonio* involves a participant, *testimonialista*, to share a reflection of their own personal experiences, breaking silence representing the other while reclaiming authority (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). In UX, the *testimonialista* is the user that is sharing their experiences with a product. It is a way that knowledge can be created through personal lived experiences to create social change as well as the transformation of the self and society. Even though *testimonios* are used to share personal experiences, *testimonios* bring attention to collective experiences, calling for people to look at how their lives fit into a larger social landscape (DeRocher, 2018).Taking a closer look into these personal lived experiences can help us produce knowledge that incorporates marginalized groups into the center of the process, that in turn will help us create better products in UX.

One important aspect of *testimonios* is the fact that the *testimonialista* becomes the holder of knowledge, the user. This means that the *testimonialista* is the creator of knowledge that looks to build a bridge between the experiences of the oppressed and academia (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). *Testimonialistas* can share their knowledge through *platicas* that help weave the personal and academic, bridging these two together (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). *Platicas*, or conversations, are a common practice that helped share cultural knowledge in nonacademic settings. *Platicas* serve as a great setting to share *testimonios* because they take away the formality of interviews and set a more friendly environment (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). *Platicas* build relationships and honor participants, or the *testimonialistas*, as co-constructors of knowledge while also allowing them to share their lived experiences, or *testimonios*, in a mutually beneficial, friendly environment (Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016). I will be using *platicas* as a way to create a safe space for international students, the *testimonialista* or user, to share their *testimonios*. Users will use *platicas* to share their experiences with a product and through their *testimonios* discuss any problems that they have face that need to be addressed in order for them to successfully use a product.

These two approaches, Social justice in UX and Chicana feminism complement each other because international students' needs are the center of this project. A Chicana feminist approach calls for researchers to look for knowledge in the collective experience of oppressed and marginalized groups. Social justice in UX also calls for making those who are often vulnerable and marginalized to be put at the center of a product design. From the beginning, the *testimonialistas* will be people who belong to a marginalized group in academia, international students. Involving them in the project as co-creators of knowledge will make sure that any knowledge that is gained comes from their own experiences and will help come up with an outcome that will help them succeed. Through the *testimonios* of the participants shared in

platicas, I will be able to listen to their own lived experiences with empathy. This means that I will be trying to understand where their experiences and knowledge come from so that together we can work to create solutions.

METHODS

Drawing on the methodologies of social justice in UX and Chicana Feminism, this qualitative study uses mixed methods: a survey and interviews with international students throughout the country who are applying or have applied to a graduate program. Surveys were chosen because I wanted to obtain a more general idea of the application process and get opinions from more international students before I conducted interviews. I also incorporated interviews because I wanted to allow my participants to share their *testimonios*. Through these two methods, I was able to first obtain general information that I later asked my *testimonialistas* to elaborate on during our *platicas*.

The survey was sent out to international students to try to understand what information they deemed important in applications and to understand their experiences with the application. Survey results were assessed using a social justice in UX framework. This means that the experiences and opinions of students who are often overlooked, in this case international students, was centered in this project so that their needs are prioritized and that in the future they are positioned to succeed (Rose et al., 2018, Getto & Sun, 2017). The survey was sent to participants from all around the world, with the hope to understand their needs and to be able to understand how websites could become culturally sensitive. Due to this framework, it was important to remember that participants have various discursive repertoires, especially because of their different countries of origin (Teston, Gonzales, Bivens & Whitney, 2019). The design of the survey had to consider the different users it had, taking into consideration user localization, in order for it to be user friendly and accessible to all the participants (Rose et al., 2018, Sun, 2006).

The survey looked broadly at the experiences that students had during the application process trying to pinpoint any difficulties that international students encountered as they tried to

27

apply for graduate programs. The survey helped determine points of interest from the application

for students. This helped create a list of important information for international students that was

later used during the interviews during the usability test portion (see appendix A for a copy of

the survey). Interviews were conducted after the survey was completed in order to have a more

in depth understanding of how an international student engages with the application in regard to

the specific parts identified by the survey results (see appendix B for a copy of the interview).

The interviews were a vital part of the project because they served as *platicas* where students

shared their *testimonios*, their own personal experiences, about the application process, helping

create knowledge from these experiences (Perez Huber, 2009; Fierros & Delgado Bernal, 2016).

During these *testimonios*, practical empathy was employed in order to listen carefully to the

stories of the students to try to understand their experiences (Young, 2015). Interviews were

audio and video recorded for data analysis purposes. Data collected in the survey and interviews

was analyzed to understand what aspects of the application needed to be looked at more closely

through the same social justice in UX framework. This means that I tried to assess how the

design of the application websites positions certain users to not succeed and how these websites

are not being fully culturally sensitive by lacking localization opportunities (Rose et al., 2018,

Getto & Sun, 2017). Here, user errors were taken into consideration because errors come from

the lack of thought about the needs of international students. However, since UX is more than

just the lack of errors, I also payed attention to the overall satisfaction of the user experience,

since products should allow users to have a pleasant positive experience (Hassenzahl &

Tractinsky, 2006).

For the project, sampling was based on my relationship to other international students

across the US as well as snowball sampling, meaning that participants recruit acquaintances who

fit the criteria for the survey. I recruited participants via email through professional open access

listservs, through word of mouth, and the rest through snowball sampling. All participants had to be international students who were going to apply or had applied to graduate programs in the United States. For this project, I set out to recruit 100 participants for the survey portion to be able to obtain a general knowledge. After the survey, I set out to recruit 10 students for the interviews to further explore the application process in more detail because in UX, it is estimated that having between 4 and 28 participants allows researchers to find 90% of the usability problems (Petrie & Bevan, 2009). However, using five participants in a study lets the researcher find the same amount of usability problems as there would be using more test participants (Usability.gov, 2013). I recruited international graduate students from The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) and other institutions; however, all students were living in the United States, not internationally.

The first part of the project consisted of a survey that took approximately ten minutes to complete. The survey consisted of background questions regarding where students applied to or were looking to apply to graduate programs. After background questions, the survey asked students to rank importance of information and ease of use. Participants were also asked if they received any helped throughout the application process. The survey also allowed participants to share any suggestions they had to make these types of websites more accessible and easier to use for them. At the end of the survey, there was a question asking participants if they were interested in being contacted for interviews. If participants wished to participate for a follow up interview, they were asked to provide an email where they could be contacted if they were selected.

Once survey results were in, I randomly selected 10 participants using a randomizer. The sixty-minute interviews were conducted in person or via zoom, in case students were in other parts of the country. Interviews conducted in person took place at UTEP. The interview asked

29

participants to elaborate what they said in the survey regarding the information they deemed important in the application process and their experience with the use of the graduate school application website. Participants were asked to go in depth on their experiences applying to graduate school, focusing specifically on where they applied, any differences they noticed in different applications, any challenges they faced with the online interface of the application system, and any suggestions they may have had. Even though there was emphasis on their experiences with the application websites themselves, participants were also asked about their overall experiences applying to programs in the US, in order to obtain a more comprehensive look at the entire process.

The interview also incorporated a usability study of a graduate school sample application. The usability study conducted for this project was a cognitive walkthrough. Walkthroughs help to identify problems while the user is attempting to achieve certain tasks, making the user the expert who can help gain knowledge on issues that need to be addressed (Petrie & Bevan, 2009). Though there are variations of walkthroughs, cognitive walkthroughs help evaluate whether or not the user can achieve a certain task on a product through a series of supported steps. The UTEP graduate school application was used for this usability test in order to assess the different experiences all the participants had with the same website. I chose the UTEP graduate school application website for this study because I was familiar with this website and to develop a sample usability study protocol that can later be applied to other websites. By having all participants use the same website, it was easier to assess if certain tasks could be achieved as all the participants completed different steps. Interviews were approximately one hour each. Both in person and online interviews were audio and video recorded pending the participant's consent. The computer screen was recorded during interviews to allow for the analysis of the participants navigation of the UTEP graduate school website.

RESULTS

Through the survey and the interviews that I conducted, I explored the experiences of international students more in depth. This section will first take a look at the results gathered from the survey that was sent out to international students. It is important to note that while the intention was to recruit 100 participants for the survey, the full amount of intended participants was not reached. This was due to both the limited population of international students and the limited amount of time available to continue to distribute the survey to try to reach students. However, the results of the survey still helped me gather important suggestions to increase the accessibility of international student graduate application websites. The second section will focus on the experiences of the international students that were interviewed, going more in depth into their own experiences while also participating in a usability test. From the information gathered from the international student's *testimonios*, four main aspects of the application process stood out. The four themes include application requirements, information access, help and collaboration, and international student concerns.

Surveys

The surveys distributed to international students helped to get a broad picture of the experiences of students during their application process. Due to time constraints and the limit of access to the international student population, 32 participants answered the survey. Even with this amount of participants, valuable information was still gathered about the general application process for international students.

In the survey, students were first asked to identify in what states they applied to graduate school within the US. Texas was the state with the most results, with 20 students. However, this is not surprising due to the fact that I am located in Texas and the international students I had

more access to were in the state. In addition to Texas, California, Illinois, Michigan, New

Mexico and New York were the states where students applied the most. Overall, students applied

to institutions in 32 out of 51 states across the US. Even with a relatively low sample size of

international students, it is clear that international students are applying to different institutions in

different states. With the interest and presence of international students in different states, one

cannot deny that this is a valuable population across the US, and we need to pay attention to their

needs. Map 1 shows the states where students applied with the states getting darker with the

number of applications.

Map 1
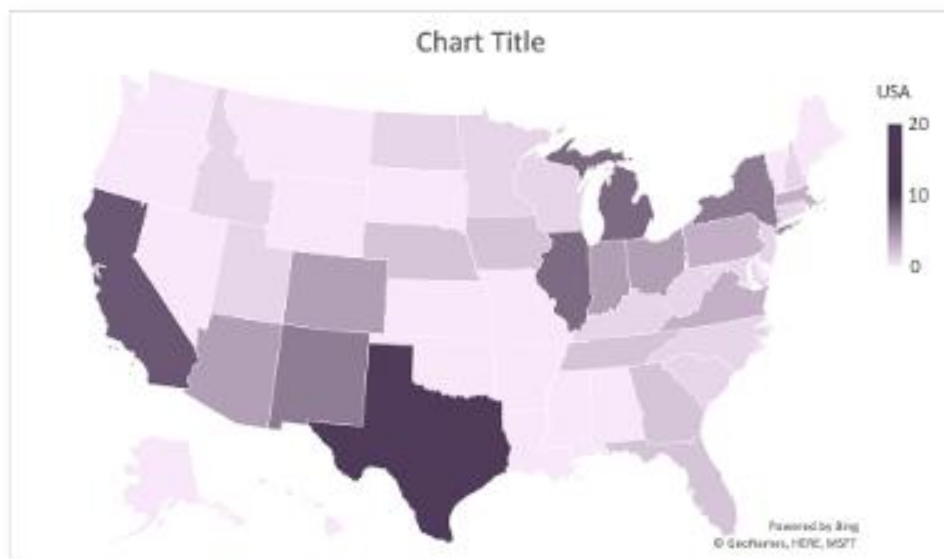
Map 1 shows a map of the US displaying the number of student
applications per state. The states get darker according to the
number of applications on a scale from 0 to 20.

The survey also helped to indicate points of interest for international students in the

application process. First, the survey asked students to identify what aspects of the application

process they deemed most important. Results were ranked from a scale of one to six and were

given an average rank. Requirements for application were considered the most important for

students (with a ranking of 4.29% out of 6), followed by information regarding the exams needed for admissions (3.77% out of 6) and fees and funding information (3.68% out of 6). Admission deadlines (3.52% out of 6) and information specific to international students were ranked last (3.32% out of 6). Students also suggested that "information about faculty" in the program of interest, "housing help," and "study timeline, schedule, and study plan," along with courses offered were important for them as they navigated through the application process. After students evaluated the ease of finding the different components of the application process, on a scale of one to six with six being the most difficult, the application requirements were voted the easiest to find on the application website (4.5% out of 6)). Information about deadlines (4.30% out of 6) and exams required (3.23% out of 6) were also seen as information that was easy to find. However, information regarding international students specifically (3.17% out of 6) and information regarding fees and funding (3.10% out of 6) were not as easy to find in the application websites. Someone suggested "information about housing or visa requirements if accepted into the institution" was also difficult to find.

While discussing the actual process itself, students were asked to identify what they thought was the most difficult part of the process, from one to six with six being the most difficult, and if they had received help during this process. Students believe that actually finding information related to international students is the most difficult part of the process (4.13 % out of 6). Apart from finding information about international students, finding relevant information about the process itself is also difficult (3.84% out of 6). Students also think that a difficult part of applying is trying to understand the application process itself (3.71% out of 6). Students ranked the ease of navigation of the website (3.42% out of 6) and understanding the language that was used in the application (2.41% out of 6) last. They also mentioned that finding information about the financial aspect is difficult. A participant explained, "usually the least

transparent aspect is how awards and scholarships are awarded, to whom and what the process to obtain them or apply is." A student also mentioned that it is difficult to know whether or not it is okay to negotiate admission conditions, "especially for international students, since our graduate programs usually work differently back home." Even though students identified difficult aspects of this process, 18 students shared that they had completed the application process without receiving any help. Those who had received help said they received it from friends (n=8), other students in the program (n=3), professors or university staff (n=5).

At the end of the survey, students were asked to give their own suggestions about what could be done to make the application process easier to navigate for international students. While international students had many very useful suggestions, they were mostly regarding four main categories. First, students stressed the importance of being upfront about tuition and fees that they would have to pay. One student mentioned, "as an international student, the first thing I want to know is whether I'm going to be able to pay for the program." Apart from fees, students mentioned that they would appreciate institutions being upfront about their funding opportunities. A participant wrote, "include information about funding possibilities (or a least being upfront of the lack thereof) for international students." Students want to be able to find information about financial help they would be able to receive as well as to learn about health insurance and other living expenses. It was clear that the financial aspect of the application process was very important for these students.

Apart from money, students explained that they would like universities to compile a step by step process that they must complete in order to apply. By creating a step by step process, information would be able to be organized by topics. One student suggested having a "complete process specifying what needs to be done and where, step by step process." Having information organized in this way would mean that all the information would be together, therefore students

would not have to go looking for information. This would also involve information to be updated constantly and to have working hyperlinks that students could use to navigate other relevant websites. A suggestion stated, "sometimes there are broken hyperlinks, which should be fixed promptly." Third, students suggested to keep in mind the information gap that is created through the lack of consistency of information between university webpages. To fix this, students suggest that the university needs to collaborate between offices in order to fix any inconsistencies of information across university department websites.

Lastly, students mentioned the need for clarity and guidance regarding issues for international students. Students mention the need for there to be a collaboration between the university application website and the institution's office for international students. By having more collaboration, there would be clear information regarding students' visas, the process of obtaining a student visa as well as having access to outside resources for the visa application process. A student explained, "connect the sites to resources related to immigration and visa requirements. Navigating these issues on top of admissions is difficult." A student suggested having videos or other documents to help explain the visa application process. There could also be more information specific to different countries, since some have different access to resources in their home country as well as different requirements depending on the home country of the student. International students want to have access to specific information that is easy to find, and they want to have a place that they can approach with any questions during their application processes. One students explained, "there is one thing I would recommend having on the websites and that is clear information about contact person or desk that an international student can contact without feeling any sort of hesitations that not having 'sufficient' knowledge regarding these processes would hamper the impression they are making and the selection process."

The survey was helpful in pinpointing what general information international students deemed most important and what part of the application process they seemed to be having more difficulties with. I believe that the suggestions that students gave in order to help make the process easier to navigate for them and future students was extremely valuable. From these suggestions I was able to find points of interest for the application process. These points of interest were application requirements, a step by step process or "one stop shop", consistency of information, and international student needs. These categories were then used in the interview process by having students go more in depth about their own views and experiences about these different areas referenced in their surveys.

Interviews

After conducting the surveys, I had the opportunity to sit down with ten different international students for *platicas. Platicas* are the conversations that create a safe space for students to share their *testimonios*. The students that shared their testimonios were from different countries around the word which translated to their experiences applying to institutions in the US. In Table 1, the students (using pseudonyms) their home countries, academic level, and program are listed. It is important to note that most students in this study, both in my survey and platicas, are from Rhetoric and Composition. I was able to recruit most directly from this field because it is the field that I am a part of, but in future studies I would like to expand participant backgrounds to include other fields.

Table 1: Participant Backgrounds

Name	Home Country	Academic level	Program
Beatriz	Nepal	PhD	Rhetoric and Composition

Mateo	Ghana	PhD	Rhetoric and Composition
Andres	Mexico	Masters	Physics
Martha	India	PhD	Rhetoric and Composition
Sergio	Nepal	PhD	Rhetoric and Composition
Rosa	Ghana	PhD	Rhetoric and Composition
Ana	Mexico	Undergraduate	Journalism
Cesar	Mexico	PhD	Rhetoric and Composition
Helena	Mexico	Undergraduate	Engineering
Carmen	China	PhD	Rhetoric and Composition

During these *platicas*, students were able to share their testimonios and discuss their experiences more in depth, both about their applications to other institutions and about the usability of the UTEP graduate school website. Students also participated in a usability test of the UTEP graduate school website: https://www.utep.edu/graduate/. During the usability test, students accessed the graduate school and program webpages and were asked to look for different points of interest, such as deadlines, requirements, funding, etc. using a usability testing method called user scenarios. The students navigated the webpages looking for different information and spoke out loud while they navigated the website. The students shared what they

were doing as well as voicing their opinions, problems, or concerns as they completed the usability test. Using the points of interest that were gathered from the surveys, four main key components of the application process emerged from the student's *testimonios*. Through the use of *testimonios* shared in the *platicas* and the UTEP usability test, students were able to reflect about their own experiences applying to various institutions across the US. Therefore, the experiences were discussed in a more general sense, since the points addressed pertain to all institutions, not just UTEP.

Application Requirements

Students were able to share their *testimonios* where they discussed more in depth the points of interest gathered from the survey. One big subject that students talked with me about was the different application requirements and how these were presented on university websites as well as on individual program pages within their broader university sites. The requirements that we focused on when looking at program pages and university websites included: programs and areas of research, exams needed, and funding.

When students were sharing what information was important to them as they were looking at programs to apply to, the program's area of research as well as the professor's interests of research were mentioned. Andres was interested in schools that had a medical physics degree, so the first thing he searched were the accreditations that each university had because he was interested in certain areas of the field. He explained, "*Después, me fije en las áreas de investigación que ofrecían cada una de las universidades, y ya basadas en las que me interesaban aplicaba a esas* (After, I looked at the areas of interest that each university offered, based on the ones that interested me I applied)." This shows that it is important to have clear and detailed information about graduate programs online, because students base their decisions on

the information that they find about a program. Carmen also mentioned that during her application process, she looked at the program and the way that it was structured as well as researching the faculty and their areas of focus to get a good idea of what her PhD program would look like. Helena was another student that mentioned that looking at the different engineering programs was important because she wanted to see what program was the best fit for her interests, and that is how she ended up in metallurgy. Sergio also mentioned that his area of interest, ecocriticism, was the first thing he looked for in PhD programs in the US. However, he had a difficult time finding programs so he "was just trying to get the environmental type of things that are present in the university catalogs and I was searching professors who are working on these things. And I was again searching for the journals or the articles that are published from the university." These examples show the need for universities to provide students with detailed descriptions of their different programs, the faculty, and the areas of study, because they can be the deciding factors for whether or not a student will be interested in applying.

Another area of interest for students were the exams that they needed to take in order to apply and the exams they would be able to be exempt from. As students looked for exam requirements, they were mostly looking to see where they would be exempt, or where the exams were not required at all. Mateo remembers that "some schools were willing to waive the English language requirements for international students because I am from Ghana and English is our official language and I was getting my masters in the US." However, even though he did not have to take the exam to be accepted, he shared that there were cases where if he wanted to teach he had to take a 20 minute oral exam that cost about 70 dollars. Carmen also shared that for her PhD program, she had already gotten a master's degree in the US and "some of the programs still required a TOEFL score for international applicants even if you had had a degree in the country, so there were several programs that I did not apply to because of that reason." She mentioned her

frustration thinking about why universities still required an expensive test even if she had a degree from the US. The two examples demonstrate how important it is for universities to take the time to understand where international students come from, what their academic background is. The university needs to stop generalizing the experiences of international students and make a more flexible system in order to exempt students from English proficiency exams. Students can feel frustrated and even end up spending big amounts of money taking exams that prove their English proficiency. Making a one size fits all approach to exams and exemption criteria is not very helpful, as many students have different circumstances that will lead them to have to contact someone at the university to ask how to proceed.

Just like Carmen who avoided applying to programs that asked her to take an English proficiency exam again, other students mentioned looking for programs and applying to them specifically because they did not require the GRE exam. Andres mentioned that as he looked for medical physics programs, he noticed that most programs required the GRE exam and the physics GRE exam. He explained, "*es una desventaja porque te piden ciertos puntajes, en matemáticas no es un problema, pero en escritura y lo verbal si es desventaja por que mi primera lengua es el Español* (It is a disadvantage that a certain score is required, math is not a problem, but in writing and verbal there is a disadvantage because Spanish is my first language)." Andres was adamant on finding programs that did not require the GRE so he mostly applied to universities in Canada in order to avoid taking the exam. Cesar had similar ideas about the GRE exam; he looked for universities that did not require this exam because "*tengo una aversión a los exámenes estandarizados y además mis matemáticas son malas* (I have an aversion to standardized tests and apart from that my mathematics are not so great)." Again, Cesar explained that he realized institutions in Canada do not require GRE exams and only two institutions in the US did not require the exam. We can see that Andres was worried about the

verbal and written scores because he is in physics, while Cesar was worried about math since he is in Rhetoric, but their experiences help show a bigger problem with these types of tests. Their concerns speak to a bigger issue that does not just concern international students, but rather all students who worry about not achieving a certain level of scores in the area that they are not studying and may end up not applying to programs. Universities should take into consideration the concerns students have about standardized tests and hopefully, these institutions can come up with different ways to evaluate student's knowledge and abilities.

The application component that was mentioned by all students and seemed to be the most important was funding. Students wanted to know information about how they could fund their graduate degree as well as information about any scholarships that they could apply to. Ana mentioned that when she was looking for scholarships, she oftentimes felt discouraged because "*la mayoría de las buenas becas era para ciudadanos o residentes americanos, y yo no era ni una ni otra y ya fue cuando medio me rendí* (the best scholarships were for citizens or residents and since I was neither, I kind of gave up)." It is important for universities to give information about scholarships that they have available, and it can be discouraging to see that universities do not provide international students with resources and scholarships that they can apply to. By not providing international students with options that fit their needs, these students can feel that there is nothing they can do. Martha also mentioned that scholarships were important to her, so during the usability test she set out to find scholarships for international students on the UTEP website. She had a difficult time finding any information about scholarships both on the graduate school page and her program page, when she finally arrived at the scholarship website. However, she did not find much information since it pertained to incoming undergraduate students. In the end, she was able to find a PDF with external scholarships, but Martha stated that "I would have liked to see some internal scholarships, because that is one of my requirements for schools." Both

41

Ana's and Martha's efforts to find scholarships to fund their education led them to have to resort to outside sources rather than find support from the university. Universities should consider that funding and scholarships are important aspects for international students and raising the amount of scholarships available for international students might entice more students to apply.

Apart from looking at scholarships available, students wanted to know what other funding opportunities universities could offer. Mateo explained that the first thing he looked at was whether or not universities had "good funding." He described good funding as "a school that has a full tuition waiver for PhD students and that also there is a monthly stipend." For him, the amount of funding he would receive indicated whether or not he would apply to a school. Most of the time, funding is a critical factor for international students, because this is what determines whether or not the student can afford to enroll in that institution. This is the case for Sergio, who explained that being able to work and receive funding would determine whether or not he could afford his studies. He said, "funding is a very important question, because I am not able to pay the fees, so it is necessary that I have funding." Rosa also mentioned that she "wouldn't even start to look at anything that the program has to offer if I did not find any information about the funding." Again, we see how important funding is for students, because it is what defines whether or not they could attend an institution since funding is oftentimes the reason why students can afford to study. Without funding opportunities, students will feel that they cannot apply; therefore, it is vital for institutions to be explicit about their funding opportunities for students. Universities should be open and upfront with information about how they will provide funding and the amount of money students would receive.

As international students begin their application process, application requirements are among the first things that students look for in the different programs. The availability of information regarding areas of research, exams, and funding is crucial because they can be the

42

deciding factor between a student applying or not. Therefore, it is important for universities to make sure that they are providing clear and upfront information regarding the areas that students care about. In the case of these students, information about funding, areas or research, and exams was really important to them and in most cases these topics determined if they were interested in applying. If institutions wish to continue receiving applications from international students, they should take into consideration the areas that matter to this population so that they can make sure they are providing the relevant information.

Information Access

During the *platicas*, there seemed to be an emphasis on the need for information. Although all the students had different opinions about what information they deemed important, there seemed to be a consensus about the need for consistent, updated, readily available information.

Both during the testimonios and the usability test, students discussed the need for information to be current and updated regularly. During our *platica,* Mateo shared that the difficulty he remembers was getting updated information. He mentioned, "the information that was there was from two or three years ago, and I wasn't sure that the requirements there fit the current requirements." Mateo's concern about whether or not the outdated information was still applicable in the current school year often led him to have to go the extra step of contacting the university in order to double check the information. For example, during the usability test of the UTEP website, Mateo found an application deadline for his program from 2015. If the information had been updated in the first place, students would not have to add the extra step of calling or contacting the university to double check. Not only that, but the university would

probably receive less calls about clarifying information that should already be present and up to date on the website and this would help staff be more efficient.

He was not the only one who voiced this concern. Another participant, Cesar, also mentioned that the information had not been updated when he had applied two years prior to our interview, and that to his knowledge it still had not been updated to this day. Cesar explained, "*Incluso las fotos de los estudiantes del doctorado, son los estudiantes de hace seis generaciones.* (Even with the pictures of doctoral students, they are students from six generations ago)*"* Cesar explained that the pictures of "current" grad students on the website were of students who had been part of the program about six academic years back. For Cesar, one important aspect of a graduate program was to see current graduate students and to see where past students had been placed. This lack of updated information can be detrimental because students might not feel encouraged to apply because they cannot find the information that they deem important. When we were conducting the usability test, I asked Cesar to look through the UTEP website to see if he could find any information about cost of tuition, and he was redirected to information from 2018. He was not the only one to find outdated information. During her usability test, Rosa, another participant, was looking for application deadlines in her program at the UTEP website and found a deadline from 2016.

In addition to the importance of updated information, participants also emphasized the need to have updated and working hyperlinks. Beatriz mentioned that when she was applying, "having hyperlinks there if necessary" were a helpful and a positive part of her experience because they helped her find the information easily without having to go search around for them. Hyperlinks help direct students to relevant information without them having to search around the website. If hyperlinks are readily available, students should have less problems accessing information. Martha mentioned that hyperlinks to different information or parts of the website

should be available early. She stated that, "the landing page itself should have everything and then I should have the choice where I want to go from there, whether I want to click this or not." Universities should provide students with links to the information that is relevant and necessary for them early on, so that students have the option to click on information that they need without having them hunt for information. Even though access to hyperlinks that are working and relevant are important for some, Cesar mentioned that universities should also attempt to have the most information they can on one page so that students do not have to go from link to link in order to get information. While for some hyperlinks were helpful, and for some less hyperlinks and more information on one page would have been helpful, it cannot be denied that when links are available, they should be functional, and that if Universities are going to include hyperlinks on their application websites, they should ensure that these links are constantly live and updated.

During the usability test, Martha was looking through the exam requirements on the UTEP website, and she had some problems with hyperlinks that were available. Martha wanted to know what the criteria would be for GRE exemptions and the hyperlink available that stated more information simply led to the GRE's main website. As Martha explained, "It just keeps taking me to the desktop website when I click on 'click here for more information,' so I would have to call them or email them because they did not have that information." Again, if the hyperlink had led to relevant information, rather than just redirecting students to the exam's home page, students would not feel like they are not finding the information they need and they would not have to call. When Martha was looking at her program requirements, she also had difficulties with the hyperlinks provided. When she clicked on "online application," the link did not open to anything and when she clicked on "new students" next she was redirected to the graduate school homepage. She mentioned, "they are all taking me to the same link. I would have preferred to go to the actual part where it says it is, otherwise they should give the same

name, and if I have to find it, I'll find it, but it is a little misleading." This just shows how hyperlinks can quickly become frustrating to use when they are not directing students to the information that is being said. Students see this as misleading or irrelevant. Hyperlinks on university application sites should be updated and checked often to avoid these usability issues.

Along with updated information and hyperlinks, students also mentioned consistency during their *testimonios*. Consistency was mentioned in different contexts, with language and the actual words that are used, with the content and information provided, as well as consistency across university websites. Beatriz mentioned that one difficulty she encountered was the language that was being used, "and language not because of English language but because of inconsistency among the universities. For the same document, one would use one kind of word and another university a different one." She emphasized that this confusion is not because she is an international student, but rather because the people who know this type of specialized language are those who study this or are experts on the subject. This is a problem that must be addressed in the bigger picture of graduate applications, meaning that this issue is not resolved within a university, but rather this is an issue that must be addressed by US institutions as a whole. Having institutions come to a consensus about what language is acceptable and what language should be used would help, not only international students, but all students applying to US institutions by avoiding any ambiguity.

Consistency is also important when it comes to the information that is provided within the university website. Martha mentioned that there are times when information is a little conflicting because there are a couple of contradictory messages. As Martha explained, "Especially if you start reading everything, in one section I would find something written and then a little later about the same thing there would be a slight difference, or it wasn't clear to me." For example, during the usability test, on the graduate school website, Martha found that

46

the GRE exam was required in order to apply, however when she looked at the program website, she found that it was not required. This can become frustrating for students as they are trying to inform themselves about a program or the application process and the information that they are finding is confusing or ambiguous. It is important that institutions provide students with consistent, updated information if they want to entice students to apply. Carmen explained to me that "the website is the only portal of access, where they will see this information, it's very unlikely that I'll call you in your office." She says that even though students might resort to emailing the university for clarity, it takes time to get a response and if information had been consistent from the first place, students who do not have the liberty to pick up the phone and just call lose valuable time in the application process.

Lastly, consistency also should be considered across university websites both with the information and with the way that different websites from the same university are designed. Carmen's suggestion for making the application process easier for international students was to be consistent with information across the university website. Martha also suggests that universities check what information they are providing in their different websites. She mentions, "They should make sure that whatever pages they are creating that everything matches what they said in other pages too because people will read everything and it shouldn't confuse people." It is vital for universities to work with all their programs to make sure that information that is being provided is always consistent and that there are no places of ambiguity or confusion. By keeping the websites consistent, students would be less confused or even frustrated, again making the process smoother. Another participant, Ana, also suggested that universities should make their different department websites consistent because it would lead to less confusion and it would also open room for collaboration between peers. She mentioned that she has friends in different programs in the university and she explains, "*tenerlo un poco mas homogéneo haría menos*

47

confuso el proceso, (having it a little bit more homogeneous would make the process less

confusing),” meaning that having uniform websites would make the process less confusing.

Information on application websites is an important part of the application process for

international students. During the *platicas*, students voiced the need for universities to provide

students with updated information, working and relevant hyperlinks, and consistency throughout.

By making sure that the information that is on the websites is up to date and that it is consistent

throughout can help reduce confusion or problems for students. Having relevant and helpful links

on the websites can help guide students through the process and answer their concerns. In the

end, if students have a smoother process with less problems, they will probably contact the

university less for any questions about information that should already be provided.

Help and Collaboration

Along with the need of information, the need for help and collaboration between

university offices was discussed during *testimonios* that students shared. During the *platicas,* the

topic of help and collaboration came up in three different contexts: receiving help in any form

during the process, the use or need of a helpdesk at the university, and lastly collaboration

between university offices.

First, students discussed any help, or the lack of, that they received during the application

process. Most of them mentioned that they had received help from friends or other students.

Rosa, Mateo, Cesar, and Helena explained that they received help from people they knew that

had already gone through the process. Rosa explained that during her PhD applications, she did

not have many issues because, “I had somebody on the ground, who I knew he was in the

program and he really helped me with a lot of things, so I didn’t have those navigational

problems as a first timer applying to schools in the US.” The help she received during her

application was so important that now she says other people from her home country, Ghana, call her and ask her for help when they are applying, and she is happy to help them. Mateo explained that he had to email program directors to ask them about current information, but that in the schools where he had friends in the program, he asked them directly. These are examples of how valuable help during the application process is and how once students enter graduate programs they are willing to help others.

Cesar also mentioned that connections he made with students in the program were essential for him during this application process. He recalled meeting a professor from the university a year prior to applying and this professor connected him with a current student in the program: "*Entonces este vinculo con un alumno que estaba estudiando fue esencial, por que me explico muchas cosas que yo no sabia* (So this connection with a current student was essential, because he explained many things that I didn't know to me)*"* The connection he was able to make with a current student was essential because he helped explain any confusions or questions. Helena also mentioned that knowing people from the program she was interested in gave her knowledge about how to apply to the program. If students have access to other individuals who have already gone through the process and that can answer any questions that arise during the application process, students will probably not have to contact the university since other students can help them.

Students also mentioned that they received help from professors, staff, and advisors during their application process. Andres mentioned that he received help from professors to see what options were available to him for the field he was interested in applying to, explaining, "*Uno de mis profesores me aconsejo aplicar al doctorado en física, y otra maestra me aconsejo maestría solamente en física, no física medica* (One of my professors advised me to apply to a doctorate program in physics, and another professor advised me to just do a master's in physics,

not medical physics)*.*" Because different professors recommended different programs, a PhD in physics or a master's in physics, Andres was made aware of the different programs available to him. We can see that professors can be a vital part of the process since they are the ones that can show students different programs across the US. Helena also had help from professors in her program since she did not end up in the program she thought she wanted to join. Through the help of professors she was able to learn about different engineering programs and ended up in the program that was the best fit for her interests. Carmen explained that she "heard about programs based on some research and faculty recommendations;" however, "there was faculty at my university at the time and she mentioned a program, which is where I ended up, but she actually told me about the program so I looked into it, I didn't even know of it." These experiences show the importance of faculty and professors for students during their application process since students learn about programs that they can apply to through these connections. Lastly, Ana mentioned that her advisor was helpful during her application process because she answered any questions that came up. She did say that if she had not received help from her advisor, she would have asked her mother for help since her mother is in a graduate program in the same university. While Ana had the opportunity to ask her mother for help, this was not the case for everyone.

Some students mentioned that they did not receive any help during the application process. Martha said that she did not receive any help for the application process; the most help she received was having people she knew review her application essays. However, she did mention that even that help was minimal and she just had to complete the application by herself. Carmen also felt that although she learned about programs from professors, she did not receive much help with the application itself. She mentioned, "I feel like I didn't have a lot of guidance that's specifically for international students like me," and although the process was a challenge, at the end of the day she was able to complete the process by herself. She continued by

explaining "that's part of the problem, international candidates are capable of doing it, and we can figure things out, but at the same time that doesn't justify the lack of support that probably should have or could have been provided." Carmen voiced an important problem-- the lack of support for the international student population. While students can eventually figure out the process and get things done, institutions are still responsible to provide international students with the information and tools that they might need to apply. Just because students complete an application on time does not mean that they are not facing challenges along the way that should probably not be there in the first place. If universities make sure to provide students with support, students can complete the application process without feeling confused or isolated.

The need for there to be help available from the university also brought up conversations about the need to contact the university and to have help desks available. Most of the students recalled having to contact the program or the university in order to clarify information. Sergio mentioned that contacting the university was a positive part of his experience because, "I used to get an answer instantly and that made me happy because the people are interactive." He also mentioned that he used the "request information" button provided on the application website and that he received a reply very promptly. He was not the only person who mentioned that he was happy with the support from the university, Martha explained that people were responsive to questions that she had when she would call or email to clarify information. Mateo also mentioned he had to email program directors to find out current information that he did not find on the website. However, Helena said that she feels that she was constantly referred to the office for international students at her university, but other than that no one else knew how to help. Other issues with finding who to contact happened during Cesar's usability test when he was trying to find a program coordinator, there was no designated coordinator and he was not sure who he should have contacted.

This is why there were suggestions for the university to set up a help desk for students. Beatriz said, "there should be some place, a help desk, that international students can have communication with, without any kind of hesitation." She mentions this would be helpful because not everyone is comfortable with using video calls or can have the access to call the university because it depends on their country and their access to these programs. Having a helpdesk available for international students could make them feel like their concerns are important and that they can actually ask questions regarding issues that pertain to them. However, in order to achieve a helpdesk that can actually address the needs of this population, university offices must collaborate. Rosa explained, "I think that departments should work together, in collaboration with the graduate school, the office of international students, and the department come together and create a guide of all the resources in the various departments." This would help reassure students that all the departments at the university are aware of the process that international students go through, and therefore they can receive help at all levels without having to go to different offices to get information. Carmen also believes that graduate school and the different programs should work with the office for international students "to learn more about international student needs to understand where international applicants might be coming from." Collaboration between different offices and departments is vital because it is the only way that all these different offices can be equipped with the information that can help international students during their application. Through collaboration, universities can offer cohesive information that can help save students time because it can all be provided in one same place.

It is vital to provide students with the resources that they need during the application process. These resources can be something as simple as connecting international students with other international students in the program that they can feel comfortable to ask questions to.

Help can also be provided by professors and faculty by guiding students through the different programs and options available to them. Universities need to make sure that they are constantly returning calls and emails so that students can ask any questions that they may have, and this process can be further streamlined by creating a helpdesk for international students where all of their different concerns can be addressed in the same place.

International Student Concerns

While the previous themes that I discussed with the students were concerns that involved all students, not just international students, the students did mention some concerns that were specific to them as international students. Students were concerned with the immigration and visa process, requirements on the website pertaining to international students, and issues with language and culture differences.

While students were sharing their testimonios, we discussed application requirements as a whole, and while we talked about more general requirements, students brought up issues that pertain to them as international applicants. Specifically, students brought up their concerns with immigration and visa issues. Rosa mentioned that the difficulty she faced was with her visa and her Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) account, which is where your information as an international student is managed for your visa, because she did not know anything about her SEVIS information. She recalled that she went to her interview at the consulate before she realized that she had to pay a SEVIS fee and the consulate official who talked to her asked her if she was trying to trick them because she went for her visa interview before paying the mandatory fee. She recalled that she told them she did not know because "I got the information from the school that this is my SEVIS number, but they did not tell me that I had to pay the fee. I had to go through a whole other process with a payment and who I needed to

send the payment to and all that, for me that was the major struggle." Rosa's experience is shared with many other international students who do not have knowledge about the visa process and what steps they must follow. Many students rely on the university and the office for international students to guide them through the process. If the university does not properly inform students of the process the consequences might be bad, and some students might not be able to process their visa. It is vital for universities to provide students with detailed step by step information about the visa process for students so that students can successfully apply for and obtain a visa.

Apart from the immigration part of the process, students voiced issues with required sealed transcripts and paying application fees. The need for sealed and signed official transcripts can become an issue for international students who are not living in their home countries anymore. Martha and Carmen both shared their difficult experiences with having to submit transcripts. For Martha, the issue was having to have the institution send her transcripts directly. She mentioned, "there is no way for us to contact them again, we don't live there anymore." Martha had to go through the task of requesting multiple copies of sealed and signed transcripts in order to send them herself through international mail. Carmen had a similar experience and explained that she had a difficult time mailing sealed transcripts internationally because she could not do so electronically, and for her this was a time-consuming task. When Carmen applied for PhD programs, "there was an issue of if they required undergrad transcripts again and I had to go through that process again of going back to China and getting all of that. So that's why I didn't actually apply to a lot of PhD programs because I was in the US already and I was on OPT and couldn't leave the country." Carmen was lucky to have had requested extra copies when she had applied to master's programs, but this is not the case for everyone. The struggles with trying to obtain sealed and signed official transcripts or having transcripts mailed directly from an institution are issues that many international students face. Universities should attempt

to be more accommodating and understand that not all students are applying from the home countries and may not have access to previous institutions they attended.

Another requirement issue that international students had to tackle had to do with the financial aspect of the application. Students brought up issues that arise from having to deal with banks from different countries and showing bank statements. Sergio shared a story during his application process when he was trying to pay his application fee. He recalled, "once I went for the submission of the money, because, again, we don't have dollar cards here, we have to rely on the bank and when I go the bank says that today the process system is not working." While this is not an issue directly with the university, the lack of understanding and flexibility from the institution can become an issue. Universities, again, must try to understand where their international applicants come from, what their circumstances are like, and from there try to be more accommodating. Another issue regarding the financial aspect is that there are some institutions that require that students prove that they can pay for tuition. During her usability test, Carmen also pointed out that many universities require international students to provide bank statements to prove that they can pay for tuition for the visa application; however, Carmen was not able to find information about this on the UTEP website. Even if UTEP did not require a bank statement from students, the issue is that this is not clear on the application website and students end up confused. Again, institutions need to strive to provide students with as much clear and detailed information.

Students also brought up many concerns regarding the language that is used in the application process. First, the issue of language came up with various students. Andres mentioned his concern with the verbal and written portions of the GRE exam because Spanish is his first language. He explained, "*el GRE es conocimiento mas avanzado que se les facilita a personas que su lengua materna es el Ingles* (the GRE involves more advanced knowledge that

is easier for people whose first language is English)." Not only did he feel he had a disadvantage with English as his second language during the GRE exam, but also during the navigation of the application websites. Andres mentioned that he found some websites where he could read the information in Spanish and he found this helpful. While it is difficult to ask universities to have information in different languages because this would mean that websites would need translations in every language, Sergio made a very important observation. Sergio pointed out that students come from different countries around the world and some might not understand the complicated and technical language being used. He continued saying students cannot complain about English language since if "you are applying for a PhD or master's" because you need to have a working knowledge in English but he urges universities to recognize that "sometimes English is someone's third language, not even second, so in that case people might get confused." This is why universities should consider the language that they use on their websites. While students have to have a working knowledge of the English language, for some, English might be their second or third language and having so much technical language used might be difficult for them. Universities should make sure that the language they use is accessible to all, meaning that they should use plain language that can be understood by everyone and this might mean using less technical language or maybe explaining that the technical language means.

Lastly, while students are applying to institutions in the US and are dealing with the time consuming process they also have to keep in mind cultural differences. While dealing with different languages, bank systems, and even immigration processes, some students also mentioned wanting to feel welcome despite cultural differences. Cesar was discussing his application process when he disclosed that he had found a map with rhetoric programs across the US, and he began to research which states were more republican. He shared "*estos son republicanos, tienen tradición de ser mas racistas, entonces no me interesa meterme en un lugar*

56

así aun que la beca sea superior (these are republican and have more racist traditions, therefore I was not interested in attending a place like that even if the funding was superior)." Therefore, Cesar only looked at democratic states where he felt that he would be more welcome. Cesar's process of looking for programs in places where he thought he would be more welcome shows the importance of universities to lead efforts of inclusion and diversity. Carmen also mentioned during the usability test that programs should have information about international student applicants, even if it is just cross linking back to the graduate school to show their interest for this population. She continued, "since they have 'diverse community,' 'diverse studies' as a tab to show their community, how would they recruit into the community and prioritize international students that might be looking at applying." Carmen brought up an important point, which is that universities advertise being diverse, but it goes beyond just having the words and actually showing students how they are being taken into account and how their needs are being addressed. If universities wish to continue benefiting from international students, they must show students that they care about this population and show students how the program will prioritize them.

The international students that shared their *testimonios* during our *platicas* discussed their own experiences applying to graduate programs and brought to light many struggles that they had to overcome. Their experiences and their struggles are probably shared by many more students across the world who look to continue their education in the US. Their experiences help share important knowledge about how universities can take the needs of international students into consideration to create a more accessible website.

LIMITATIONS

During both the survey and interview portions of this project, valuable information was shared that helped shed some light on the experiences of international students as they applied to graduate programs in the US. However, even with the valuable data that was collected, there were some limitations with the project that must be addressed. Limitations with the surveys and interviews will be addressed in this section.

First, there were a few limitations with the data collected from the survey. My goal was to obtain 100 participants for the survey, but due to the limited time and the limited population, I obtained 32 responses. This can be addressed in the future by having more time to recruit participants for the survey. Along with the extended time, it is vital that there is a wider reach for the survey. Most students that participated were located in Texas, because of my location and my relation to the participants. This was evident in the survey results; Texas was the state with the most responses. While this is not necessarily detrimental, we can see that many international students are interested in Texas, it is important to go beyond the state of Texas if I wish to get a better understanding of the international student population. Hopefully, as more participants are recruited with more time for distribution, there can be more participation from students across the country. Another limitation was the lack of incentive for students to participate in the survey. A next step to take would be to obtain funding in order to provide students with incentives, such as gift cards, to try to gain more participation. By having incentives and a longer time to distribute the survey, more participants around the world would share their experiences applying allowing me to better understand the experiences of international students as they applied to programs in the US.

Second, there were some limitations with the interviews that when addressed will help obtain more testimonios that can be used to address the experiences and concerns of this

population. During the project, I was able to have platicas with ten students where they shared their testimonios. The testimonios of these students were very valuable and had many similarities; however it is vital to continue to connect with international students in order to obtain more testimonios from other students. As the survey is distributed more widely, this will also help get me in contact with more students across the US. Having more students share their testimonios is important because there is more to learn from the lived experiences of different students. Another aspect that can be addressed with the wider spread of the survey is having more participants from different fields of students. During the project, the majority of students were in Rhetoric and Composition with a few students from other programs; however with these participants it was easy to see that they had different concerns and experiences based on their field. It would be great to have participants from more areas of study in order to fully comprehend what students from different fields deem important and to get a better picture of how their experiences differ.

Lastly, a really important aspect that needs to be addressed is the usability test. During this project, all students were asked to complete a usability test of the UTEP application website because there needed to be a baseline to be able to compare everyone's experiences. This means that all students had to explore the same website to see how different users have different experiences with the same website. It would be interesting to see how other university application websites are used during a usability test to see if the issues with websites are unique to the university itself, or if there are similarities that can be addressed by academia as a whole. In the future, the goal is to obtain usability tests from many different university websites in order to be able to provide better guidelines for institutions and solutions for any issues international students have.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Academia

Through international students' *testimonios*, in both the surveys and the interviews, it was clear that student's experiences had both positives and negatives that designers can learn from to create more accessible websites. While students shared their experiences, there was mention of several positive experiences during their application process. These experiences are crucial in understanding what universities should continue doing. However, there were many issues with application websites that need to be addressed through different recommendations that can be grouped into the following categories: information, help, and accommodation and flexibility. These will be discussed more in depth in order to give a clear idea how universities can make changes in these areas to create more user-friendly application websites.

Before addressing the issues and recommendations that came out of this project, I want to address how the use of *platicas* to share *testimonios* was vital in this project. Using *testimonios* for the project in order to connect with students and learn from their experiences helped to understand the application process for international students. I do believe that having *platicas,* or friendly mutually benefitting conversations, with my participants to create a safe space for them to share their lived experiences was what made the project successful. Through the *testimonios,* students were able to share what experiences they had gone through and they had a space where they could talk about issues or injustices that they faced without feeling like they were the problem. Instead, participants shared their experiences and talked about what issues they faced and what changes would have made their experience better. They had a space to share their frustrations, their confusion, struggles, and even how they experienced this process. I believe that they were able to voice problems that others in our community face, representing a population that is often forgotten. Their experiences brought valuable knowledge to this project, and I think

that if these conversations and sharing of knowledge had not been structured in a *platica*, this knowledge would not have been shared in the same way. Therefore, it is important to highlight that *testimonios* shared through *platicas* are an important tool and method that can give participants a safe space to share their lived experiences that allows us to learn from the knowledge of others.

During our platicas, students shared their testimonios about their experiences applying. While we discussed at length any issues or problems that they had during their application process, there were several aspects mentioned by several students that they considered positives. I believe that it is important to mention these aspects, because it is important for institutions to know what parts of their services are helpful to students. The main positive takeaway from the application process for these students were the people they had communication with. When asked about positive experiences again and again, all students explained that when they contacted universities the staff was responsive, polite, and professional. For the most part, students mentioned that they got prompt and helpful responses. Their communication with faculty and current students was also a positive experience because students were able to ask questions, make connections, and in some cases these connections convinced them to attend the program. It was easy to see the impact that good communication between the university staff, faculty, and students, and prospective students. Universities should continue to foster this type of communication because it shows prospective students that they care and are interested in providing help and resources. Communication experiences cannot be taken for granted; they should be encouraged.

Even though students had that positive experience, students also had many concerns about the information that was provided on the university websites. Suggestions came up multiple times for institutions to provide clear, detailed information upfront to students. During

the surveys, testimonios, and usability tests, it was clear that while institutions attempt to provide

students with information, they might not always be doing it in a way that is helpful. This is why

universities must first provide upfront information for students. This can be done by creating a

step by step process for students to apply and having this information on the homepage, or in a

place that is easy to find. By having all the information that students need to apply in one place,

students will not have to go looking for information avoiding possible confusions. Apart from

organizing information so that students can have everything they need in one place, institutions

need to make sure that information that is provided is updated and correct and that any

hyperlinks that are used are both relevant and working. Oftentimes, students found old

information or links that did not work or directed them somewhere different than stated. This

would lead students to contact the university adding an extra step to their process. If information

that is already on the website is updated and working, students will not have to contact the

university saving both students and the institution an extra step.

Another aspect to keep in mind is consistency of information. Institutions need to make

sure that the information they are providing is the same on all their different websites in order to

avoid confusion. Achieving consistency across university websites can be achieved through

collaboration between different university offices. Often, students found that different university

websites, for example the graduate application website and the program website, had different

information or were missing important information. If university offices make an effort to

collaborate in order to come up with consistent information and requirements, there would be

less gaps of information across these websites. Universities should also collaborate with offices

for international students as these offices offer important information for international applicants

that should be available across university websites. Collaborating with offices for international

students will not only provide international applicants with important information regarding their

application, but it will also show interested applicants that the university cares about these students and that it is interested in offering support to this population.

While the students who shared their testimonios had different priorities when it came to application requirements, it is still valuable for institutions to pay close attention to the requirements that are valuable for international students. Again, this matters because if institutions want to keep having international students so they can benefit from them, institutions need to keep their interests and needs in mind. Students were very interested in funding, required exams and exemptions, deadlines, and areas of research, but they had difficulties finding these on the university website. This means that institutions have to take a closer look at their websites to make sure that they are providing international students, and all students for that matter, with the information that is important to them. The requirements that differ for international students, or that are of big interest to them, should be explicit, clear, and easy to find. Universities need to be upfront and provide all this information in a place that is easy to locate. There is no reason why students should have to go through many different tabs and links in order to find basic, important information for their application. Universities must provide students with the relevant and important application information without confusions or ambiguity.

Apart from providing international students with information that is important to them and showing them that they care, universities also need to pay closer attention to the international student population. By paying closer attention to this population, I mean that universities need to understand their international students, so that they can realize that all international students have different backgrounds and needs, and their experiences cannot be generalized. Universities must provide students with resources that fit their unique needs, for example international students who have completed schooling in the US before, not having access to stable internet connections, differences in bank systems, not having access to previous institutions, etc. Universities have to

move away from the one size fits all approach, and more to a more flexible and accommodating approach that really understands the needs of this population. There are circumstances that international students cannot control, and institutions should understand this and try to be more flexible. By moving away from this generalized one size fits all approach, students will probably face less confusion during their application process.

Next, in order to better serve the international student population, universities need to provide clear information and resources available regarding the immigration process. Many students are unaware of how to process their visa in order to start their studies in the US. Since the university is their point of contact between them and the visa process, the university needs to inform students properly about what steps they need to take. If there are issues that the university does not deal with, regarding immigration, universities should at least provide students with outside resources that might be helpful during this process. In order to have a bigger international student population, institutions need to provide students with help to successfully process their visa.

Lastly, since most students shared that their positive experiences came from their communication interactions with staff, faculty, and students, universities should continue to make the effort to connect prospective students with people from the university. Institutions can do this through a helpdesk that is available for international students. The reason a helpdesk should be created for this population is because of all the extra requirements and steps that these students need to complete. People who run this helpdesk should be equipped to answer questions regarding exam exemptions, immigration and visa issues, and other cultural concerns. Having a helpdesk that addresses these unique needs will make students feel that the university is equipped to help and that they care about the international student population. It is essential that specialized help for these students is available for their successful application.

Overall, the graduate school application process is a time consuming, yet necessary, task that many international students struggle with. If we ignore the needs and concerns of international students, this population will continue to have difficulties and might even be deterred from applying. In order to make the application process easier to navigate for international students, and in turn all students, we need to actually take the time to listen to the experiences of this population. Great knowledge can be acquired from the stories and experiences of those who have completed the process that can later be used to create more functional websites. If these issues are addressed, the end result will be websites that are more accessible and user friendly for all students, and universities will have to spend less resources having to be constantly addressing these issues individually. The accessibility of these websites for marginalized populations is possible; we just have to learn to listen.

User Experience

While the previous section discussed the areas of the application process that must be addressed by academic institutions, there is an important contribution to the field of UX. I want to recommend UX professionals to incorporate *testimonios* through *platicas* as a part of usability testing with marginalized users. Bringing in a Chicana Feminist perspective to this project is what allowed me to connect with students and learn from their experiences. I believe that by using *platicas*, or friendly conversations, I was able to create a space for my participants to feel safe and valued. The use of *platicas* is important because it created a space that was not as formal or strict as a traditional interview. There needs to be emphasis on the fact that *platicas* are spaces that are conducive to listening with empathy, because they offer participants a space where their *testimonios*, or experiences, are valued as vital knowledge.

Testimonios are a valuable tool and method that UX professionals can use to learn from the lived experiences of users who share their stories. *Testimonios* are traditionally known for being a space where people can share their injustices and their struggles, and I believe that UX professionals need to listen to these experiences if they wish to create products that are user friendly. We can create more user-friendly products by listening to the struggles of vulnerable people so we can understand what their experiences look like and identify their needs. *Testimonios* should be used as part of usability testing because it will allow for users to share their experiences, both good and bad, in a space where they can feel that their experiences are valuable knowledge.

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Survey

1. In what states did you submit graduate school applications?
   (drop down menu with all 50 states)

2. Please rank what information is most important to you on graduate school
   applications/admission websites.

   International student resources
   Deadlines
   Exams
   Requirements
   Fees/funding
   Other:

3. Please rank the accessibility of this information in the graduate school
   application/admission website.

   International student resources
   Deadlines
   Exams
   Requirements
   Fees/funding
   Other:

4. Please rank these by level of difficulty on the graduate school admissions/application
   websites.

   Finding relevant information
   Understanding language used
   Navigating the website (ease of use)
   Finding information specific to international students
   Other:

5. If you received help, who helped you navigate the website and application process?

   Family
   Friends
   Professor/other faculty

No one

Other:

6. What are some suggestions you have to make these websites more user friendly for international students?

7. Are you interested in participating in a follow up interview? During this 60-minute interview, you will he asked to further discuss your experience applying to graduate programs. If you are interested in participating in the follow up interview, please provide an email where you can be contacted.

APPENDIX B

Interview

1. Can you tell me more about the schools you applied to and where they are located? How did these applications differ?

2. Can you tell me about your application process?

3. What information was the most important for you during the process?

4. Were there any difficulties during the process? Were there any positives?

5. What are some suggestions you have to make these websites more user friendly for international students?

Usability Test

1. Go to the UTEP graduate school website (https://www.utep.edu/graduate/) and look for the following information:
    a. Application requirements (general and for your program)
    b. Exams needed
    c. Deadlines
    d. Funding
    e. Information related to international students

VITA

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