

Making Market Choices in Higher Education: How Students Choose Universities and Specializations and how Universities Create New Specializations in Contemporary Kyrgyzstan

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(1) Project Research Goals:

The aim of this work was to investigate how university students in contemporary Kyrgyzstan make choices about universities to attend and about what specializations to enter within the universities they choose. An additional aim of the research was to investigate how universities “market” themselves in the country in order to compete for potential students. The research effort employed a three-pronged approach.

Part one of the study saw the creation, field testing, and final adoption of a survey research instrument including 39 forced-response questions related to university choice and satisfaction among students within a convenience sample of national (state) universities and newly emerging private (but state certified) universities. All survey items were written in Russian, and each item allowed for extended open-ended responses where students were invited to comment. In excess of 200 surveys were collected across five different universities in Kyrgyzstan. Surveys were completed primarily by student cohorts in 2nd and 3rd courses of study, mostly in humanitarian and international relations fields. The data collected during the Spring semester is currently being coded and analyzed.

Part two of the study involved extensive ethnographic study of several cohorts of students, faculty and staff at two state universities between the months of February and May, 2008. Goals of this research phase were to collect interviews and act as participant observer within multiple university settings in order to more fully describe cohort composition, dynamics of teaching and learning, relationships between students within their groups and between groups, and between the student groups and university teachers and administrators. In addition to document collection related to learning plans and teachers schedules and strategies, I collected approximately 30 extensive structured interviews with students, teachers and administrators at several universities, as well as with several parents and former deans and program directors of different universities (and secondary schools). Interviews are currently being transcribed, and I expect to have this work completed by July, 2008.

Part three of the study involved comparing and contrasting marketing strategies and protocols of state versus non-state universities. That is, I collected documents and performed interviews at the two state universities described above with university staff and deans with an interest in learning why administrators believed students should come there, to be compared and contrasted with how and why students reported choices they made (see Part two, above). Meanwhile, I also collected documents, performed interviews and collected enrollment and program description data from administrators and teachers at four international universities which compete with state universities for students.

How fully were you able to complete these goals?

Since my project was fluid and also informed by earlier fieldwork (from 2007), I was able to complete almost all of my research goals in 2008. I did run out of time, however, to return to several of my sites for confirmation of themes that emerged in fieldwork options of my research. But, I intend to briefly return in the Fall for updating some of my findings.

What hindered and/or aided you in completing these goals?

I was able to achieve most of my data gathering objectives due to several years of previous work in and with several of the universities that were the subject of my research. I was the Principle Investigator of a Freedom Support Act partnership with universities in Kyrgyzstan, and also had a Fulbright Scholarship there in 2001. Many of the individuals I needed to work with and through are still there. I had the advantage of comparatively easy access.

Did you give any talks, briefs, lectures, and/or held meetings with Embassies, NGOs, or Government officials about your research?

I gave a talk at the American University of Central Asia (AUCA) on my research project in March of 2008, and also a presentation on aims of the research at International Ataturk Alatau University in April. The analysis of my data is not yet complete, so further presentations based up them will be forthcoming. I also worked with the US Embassy in Bishkek on several collateral projects related to higher education reform during my stay.

How can U.S. analysts and decision makers use the research you completed to develop more effective policies in the region?

Since the data are not fully analyzed at this time, I am reluctant to prescribe how decision makers can use my study (yet) in policy discussions on higher education in the Kyrgyz Republic. At this point, the best I can say is that how a university is defined and what students and administrators think is happening there are still different in content and organization that universities in the West. Explaining how and why is the aim of my continuing analyses.

In retrospect, how important was your time in Eurasia for the completion of your overall research project?

Explaining what universities are and how they work can only be done on-site. This project was vital to my work and my understanding.

(2) How effectively did American Councils for International Education assist you in Pre-departure preparations (e.g., travel, stipend, university affiliation, visa, arrangements at your university, assisting with archive access, arranging support services, medical care, etc.) as needed.

ACCELS provided all the assistance requested, and in a timely fashion. I was more fortunate than some, in that I needed less help than most. I have been traveling to Kyrgyzstan yearly for almost a decade and understood the where's, what's and how's of my project requirements. I arranged my university affiliation and visa support (through AUCA), and fortunately did not require medical assistance when I was there. The local ACCELS office was very helpful in providing information and connections needed for some interviews and other data. Everything worked well

Future Plans:

I am now in the data reduction and compilation phase of my project. Surveys are being coded and interviews being transcribed. I have developed a book prospectus where each of the three components of my fieldwork will constitute a book chapter, and have also already made two conference proposals to be based upon comparing how international universities in Kyrgyzstan are attempting to market their distinctive features viz. the state universities. One of these proposals is to the Central Eurasian Studies Society (CESS) meeting in September, 2008; the other for the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) meeting in November, 2008. I plan on submitting revised versions of these presentations to regional studies journals, and also imagine that several other distinct papers will emerge from analysis of survey questions and the student and teacher interviews now being tallied and coded. This work will likely prove the source of at least half a dozen journal articles and other book chapters.

Supplemental Questions:

- 1. On average, how much personal spending money do you feel is necessary per month in your city? What advice on money can you give future program participants?**

Expenses in Bishkek have risen greatly in the past couple of years. Counting rent, a visitor would need approximately \$1500 per month to live reasonably.

- 2. Please comment on the monthly stipend award amounts. Did your living, housing, and book stipends adequately allow you to conduct your research?**

Yes, the allowance was quite adequate, especially since I had support also from AUCA.

- 3. For participants on the Title VIII Combined Research and Language Training program: How would you rate your improvement in your language abilities over the course of the program?**

NA

- 4. In what areas should American Councils strive for improvement?**

I think the program was administered well. I was given the help I needed.

- 5. What suggestions or advice can you provide for future program participants?**

Best to do your homework early about where and how you will live on-site, and try to develop a network of folks in-country who can assist if needed.

- 6. How would you rate your overall experience? Why did you choose this rating?**

Please use 1-5, with 5 as the highest. 5

Everything worked just as described. The only problem I had was with timing of visa and travel dates. It takes at least a month from when one starts applying for a visa and being able to actually confirm flights. Future participants need to understand that getting visas to former Soviet countries is still somewhat of a mystery. Don't buy your plane ticket until you have your passport and visa in-hand!

- 7. Please provide any additional comments on the back.**

No further comments; thanks for the great assistance!