



Factors influencing ESL students' selection of intensive English programs in the Western United States

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Intensive English programs (IEPs) help speakers of other languages gain necessary language, cultural, and educational skills to succeed in an English-speaking environment (Hamrick, 2012; Toner, 2017). Whereas previous research investigated factors influencing student choice of IEPs in the southeastern United States (Williams, 1994) and in California (Jones, 2013), this is the first study to identify factors influencing choice of IEPs by students of English as a second language located in the wider western United States. Results indicate that participants highly valued a program that was well respected, provided an intense learning experience, and had excellent teachers. Location factors of greatest importance were the safety of the school and community, and the good reputation of the city where the program is located. The most important student services were academic or personal counseling, immigration services, and out-of-class activities. The marketing factors rated highest were the program's website, referrals from former students, and the ability to communicate online with the school. Social media appeared to be of minimal to moderate importance in influencing students' decisions. Implications of these findings are discussed for program directors of IEPs and teachers seeking to attract new students and grow their programs.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Intensive English programs (IEPs) play a critical role in helping speakers of other languages gain necessary language, cultural, and educational skills to succeed in an English-medium university (Colón, 2018; Toner, 2017), to develop language skills necessary for employment (Hamrick, 2012), and to develop essential communication skills necessary to function in an English-dominant country (Hamrick, 2012). These programs can vary in size from a dozen or so students to hundreds of students. To be an IEP, a program must provide 15 or more hours of language instruction each week. IEP students generally enter the United States on an F1 visa and thus are required to be enrolled in full-time English language study (Hamrick, 2012, p. 32). Many students who enroll in IEPs are international students seeking to improve their English before moving on to further their educational or professional goals.

In 2017, the portion of international students enrolled in IEPs across the United States was approximately 8% of the total international student body (Institute of International Education, 2018). These IEP students play an important role in enriching communities where they live by not only contributing to the economy, but also supplying an abundance of talents and innovative ideas (Heaney, 2009; NAFSA, 2018). Until recently, the number of enrolled IEP students has generally followed the increasing growth of international students. In 2016, however, while total international student enrollment continued to grow, IEP enrollment sharply declined from 133,335 students the previous year to 108,433 students. IEP enrollment continued to decline in 2017 to a low of 86,786 students, a 20% decrease from 2016 (Institute of International Education, 2018). Years earlier, Bain, Luu, and Green (2006) predicted that increased international market competition, changing perceptions of the United States, and policy changes in international countries would lead to a decrease of international students in the United States. Moreover, the Institute of International Education's (2017) Center for Academic Mobility Research and Impact cited a combination of factors that have influenced this recent decline including visa application issues or denials, costs of U.S. higher education, the social and political environment, and the increasingly competitive global market of higher education options.

With a downward shift in IEP enrollment, program administrators and teachers should be aware of those factors that influence international students' decision making as to why they choose to attend one program over another and how particular program features may attract students to a specific location. Without sufficient preparation, decreased enrollment could result in a program offering fewer classes, lowering teacher salaries, or even reducing the number of employees (Soppelsa, 2012, p. 151). This possibility places increased pressure on language program administrators to identify those factors that influence student program selection and to improve their program's strategic planning (Christison & Murray, 2008).

1.1 | Previous research

Few empirical studies have been conducted investigating factors influencing students' choice of English as a second language (ESL) program. Williams's (1994) study of 314 high-intermediate and advanced-level students attending university-affiliated IEPs in the southeastern United States appears to be the first empirical study analyzing this issue. He investigated program, affiliated university, student services, location, and personal influence factors. In his analysis, he rated the relative importance of each feature and analyzed variations in factor preferences between different genders, ages, and participant's first language. He found that the top three factors of most importance to

students attending IEPs in the southeastern United States were the quality of the program, qualified native-speaker teachers, and the safety of the community. In addition, his analysis showed that there were significant differences between language groups in the perceived importance of academic aspects (e.g., the quality of the program and teachers, TOEFL preparation, curriculum), influence of others (e.g., information about the IEP available in the student's home country, a recommendation, having a friend or family member in or nearby the IEP), and university services (e.g., housing, food services, recreational facilities available). Thai speakers rated factors in the academic category higher on average than other language groups. In addition, Chinese speakers had the highest mean ratings for factors related to influence of others, and Japanese speakers rated factors in university services highest on average compared to other language groups. The analysis of gender showed a statistical difference in the importance of academic aspects, with females placing more importance on academic aspects than males. There were also statistical differences in the importance of university services by age, with students younger than 25 placing more importance on university services such as housing and food. Finally, Williams (1994) found that student services (e.g., housing, food, counseling) and institutional policies (e.g., conditional admission or guaranteed admission) were not as influential as he expected, with their level of importance falling below a moderate level of importance.

Since Williams's (1994) study, more recent research (Jones, 2013) has focused on the effect of marketing strategies and practices on students' choice of ESL program. Jones (2013) administered a survey to 335 students attending 10 ESL schools in San Diego, California. He found that the most influential marketing elements appeared to be the school's website, referrals from former students, and referrals from travel or educational agents. He also found that the rank order of importance for each of these factors varied depending on students' region of citizenship. ESL directory listings were highly rated by Asian and Middle Eastern students, a mailed brochure was highly rated by European students, and a U.S. embassy referral was highly rated by students from Latin America. In regard to age, younger students (under 25 years old) rated the importance of educational agent referrals higher, whereas older students gave more importance to referrals from former students. Finally, there did not seem to be many differences in the importance of factors between genders, with the exception of two factors rated higher by females: mailed brochures and blogs, chatrooms, and Twitter. Jones's findings provide valuable information for programs seeking to improve their marketing strategies. Because most IEPs—both independent and university-based—are responsible for their own financial security, IEP administrators have the challenging responsibility of ensuring that their programs have a steady revenue stream and a robust student enrollment. Administrators must also be aware of current and potential incoming student patterns, recognize economic and political conditions, notice marketing trends, perform promotional activities, analyze budgets, predict and prepare for future demands, make decisions about when or when not to expand a program, or even fundraise (Brady, 2008; Franklin, 2009; Hamrick, 2012; Panferov, 2008). To keep their programs viable, administrators are advised to “continually study the environment, the competition, and also their own programs to remain successful” (Franklin, 2009, p. 152). Some IEP administrators may generally be acquainted with the needs and preferences of their own student populations through surveys, interviews, or communication with other administrators. New administrators and teachers, however, may not be familiar with important factors influencing ESL student decision making, especially when it involves insights gained from empirical research of a broader range of programs. Because programs also vary in size, knowing specific factors influencing students who select smaller programs versus larger programs could directly benefit a program's marketing efforts. Continual research in this area is necessary so that anyone concerned with marketing or student retention can be informed as to regional and national circumstances or factors directing students to their respective program.

1.2 | Current study

Although the studies by Williams (1994) and Jones (2013) provide essential foundational information for IEP administrators seeking to maintain or grow their programs, these studies acknowledge that they have neglected other regions of the United States in their search for answers, adding a caution against generalizing their findings beyond the scope in which the data were collected. The current study was designed to gather empirical data investigating factors influencing students attending IEPs located in the western United States as well as to probe the importance of social media in students' decision making. Given that enrollments in IEPs can vary greatly, an additional variable explored in this study was how program size may shape those factors influencing students' choice of program.

1.3 | Research questions

The following research questions were investigated in this study:

1. How important were the following factors in influencing ESL students' selection of IEP?
 - program
 - location
 - student services
 - marketing
2. How do selection criteria for ESL students differ according to the size of IEP?

2 | RESEARCH DESIGN

An online survey was used to collect data from students attending IEPs of varying sizes located in the western United States. All 54 IEPs initially contacted for this study were located in five western states and were accredited or functioning within an accredited institution. Representatives from only eight programs, located in Utah and Wyoming, chose to participate in the data collection, resulting in 174 survey responses from students. In an effort to respect program anonymity, individual participating programs are not identified. An intensive program was defined as a program where learners were studying 15 or more hours of English language coursework per week.

2.1 | Participants

Participants in this study were 174 ESL students at English proficiency levels of intermediate, advanced, and superior. The rationale for including intermediate and higher level students was to build on the research of Jones (2013) and Williams (1994), both of which included students of intermediate and higher proficiency levels to ensure that all survey participants would sufficiently understand the issues raised in the survey and respond accurately. The demographic data were self-reported by participants. A total of 87 female and 87 male participants from 35 countries responded. Fifteen languages were represented, with the most common being Spanish (52.9%), Portuguese (15.5%), Chinese (8.6%), Japanese (5.2%), French (4.0%), and Korean (3.4%). The following languages represented less than 2% of the population: Arabic, Burmese, Haitian Creole, Fante, Mongolian, Polish, Russian, Thai, and Turkish. Participant age was divided into two categories: 24 years and younger and 25 years and

older. These age categories were chosen to replicate Williams's study and are additionally supported by Kasworm (2003), who explains that adult students (defined as 25 years and older) participate in higher education differently than do young adult students (24 years and younger) due to age, maturity and developmental complexity, and differing roles and responsibilities. The sample population included 84 participants who were 24 and younger and 90 participants 25 and older.

2.2 | Instrument

An online Qualtrics survey was developed to capture data about program factors that had drawn students to enroll in their respective IEP. The survey consisted of four sections (program, location, student services, and marketing factors), with participants rating the importance of a total of 68 items distributed between these sections. The areas investigated in this study were selected based on the surveys created by Williams (1994) and Jones (2013). In addition, seven demographic questions were included at the beginning of the survey inquiring about the participants' country of origin, native language, gender, age, source of school funding, anticipated length of time in the United States, and level of English proficiency. A section inquiring about students' reasons for studying in the United States was added at the end of the survey. Before participants were able to begin the survey, they viewed a statement that explained the purpose of the survey, how their data would be used, the incentive to participate, the voluntary nature of the study, and that completion of the survey provided consent to have their data included in the study. After giving consent and completing the demographic questions, participants answered one open-response question seeking the main reason they had chosen to attend their current ESL program. Participants then rated various factors related to the ESL program, student services, and marketing. The influence of each factor was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, which included the following responses: "This factor was *not at all important* (1). I considered this factor, but it was *not very important* (2). This factor was *moderately important* (3). This factor was *important* (4). This factor was *very important* (5)." Permission was obtained from the university's institutional review board to collect data with this instrument.

Once the survey was constructed, experienced ESL instructors reviewed the wording to ensure that students at an intermediate level would be able to comprehend the questions. Next, the survey was piloted at a university-affiliated IEP with 27 ESL students at intermediate and higher levels of proficiency. Following the pilot, slight changes in wording were made to six questions to improve clarity.

2.3 | Data collection and analysis

A list of 54 ESL programs in Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Utah, and Colorado was compiled using Internet searches and directory lists by selecting programs that appeared to be intensive based on their description. Programs were not included in the list if they were labeled as community ESL programs because their students are not required to attend at least 15 hours of class per week. Using funds from a university research grant, 12 Amazon gift cards were purchased and all participating program administrators and students who opted in were entered into a drawing for one of these cards. Participating administrators had a one in four chance of winning a \$50 gift card, and the students had a one in 25 chance of winning a \$15 gift card. The gift cards were used as incentives for administrators to allow students in their programs to participate in the survey and for students to complete the survey. Program administrators were emailed a description of the study, an explanation of how the collected data would be used, and a link to the Qualtrics survey. Subsequent weekly emails encouraged each program to participate and included a copy of the information from the initial email, unless a program

had opted out of the study. Of the eight programs that allowed their students to participate in the data collection, only seven were identified as intensive programs. Program directors from each of these programs were contacted by phone to obtain an estimate of how many students were currently attending their program to determine program size.

The quantitative data collected from the Qualtrics survey was analyzed using measures of central tendency (frequencies, means, and standard deviations) as well as a repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA). Using the Likert scale numerical values for each factor, the mean score for each value was used to place factors in a rank order. Means, standard deviations, p -values, and effect sizes are reported for each item. A stepwise regression analysis was used to answer the second research question, regarding program size.

The participants' comments obtained from the open-ended question were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000). First, initial categories were created based on patterned key words used in the 174 qualitative comments. Those categories were then used to tag responses. Some responses were tagged in multiple categories due to the inclusion of multiple key words. A secondary rater, experienced in tagging qualitative data, then independently tagged the responses using the given categories. A random sample of 10% of the responses was checked for inter-rater congruity to ensure the data analysis was reliable. There was 89% agreement between the raters. The remaining items were resolved through discussion.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Program factors

To answer the first research question, regarding the level of importance of various program features in the ESL students' choice of IEP, a repeated-measures ANOVA was used along with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction to adjust for a lack of sphericity. The results were statistically significant, $F(8.08, 1349.50) = 40.85, p < .001$. Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for the factors in order of importance.

The most important program factor selected by students in their consideration of which IEP to attend was the perception that the program provided an intense learning experience. This factor was closely followed by the program being well respected. Other factors high on students' list of importance included having excellent teachers, providing individual attention, and offering a variety of classes, including TOEFL preparation. All of these factors were given an average rating of 4 or above on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating they were *important* or *very important*. Although the top three factors were not statistically significant from each other, the top factor did differ significantly from the four lowest rated factors. Pairwise comparisons with a Bonferroni adjustment showed that an intense learning experience differed significantly from reasons such as having small class sizes ($p < .001, d = .527$), having a low cost ($p < .001, d = .586$), having few students who spoke the same first language (L1) ($p < .001, d = 1.06$), or having many students from the same country or who spoke the same L1 ($p < .001, d = 1.26$). The effect size ranged from medium to large.

3.2 | Location factors

The second series of factors investigated in students' selection criteria were location factors. The results of a repeated measures ANOVA with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction were statistically

TABLE 1 Program factors

Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Intense learning experience	4.27	1.00
The program is well respected	4.25	1.07
The teachers are regarded as excellent	4.17	1.11
Individual attention	4.14	1.06
The program offers TOEFL preparation	4.13	1.17
Variety of classes	4.05	1.00
The program has good resources	3.99	1.13
Class times are convenient	3.99	1.14
Right number of class levels for my plans	3.92	1.16
Program is part of a college I want to attend	3.83	1.34
Students from many different countries	3.71	1.26
Class sizes are small	3.67	1.26
The cost is low	3.60	1.27
Few students who speak my L1	2.90	1.52
Many from home country or who speak same L1	2.67	1.50

Note: The reported mean scores are the result of participants rating the importance of each factor on a 5-point Likert scale.

significant, $F(6.64, 1102.03) = 31.86$, $p < .001$. Table 2 displays the associated descriptive statistics listed in rank order of means.

The top two location factors identified by students revolved around safety: safety of the community and the school being in a safe part of the city. The mean scores for these top two factors were at a rating of four or above. Although the top factors were not statistically different from each other, there were significant differences between the highest rated location factor and the bottom three factors of having a friend or family member in the city ($p < .001$, $d = .639$), the city where the program was located having good weather ($p < .001$, $d = .744$), and having a friend or family member in the ESL program ($p < .001$, $d = 1.17$). The effect size for these factors ranged from medium to large. This was shown

TABLE 2 Location factors

Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Safe community	4.16	1.13
School is in safe part of city	4.12	1.19
City has good reputation	3.89	1.18
Low cost of living	3.59	1.32
City is multicultural	3.47	1.42
Convenient local transportation	3.41	1.38
Size of the city	3.35	1.45
Friend or family member in city	3.29	1.56
City has good weather/climate	3.25	1.31
Friend or family member in ESL program	2.56	1.57

through pairwise comparisons with a Bonferroni adjustment. Of moderate importance was that a city that is affordable, is multicultural, and has a convenient transportation system.

3.3 | Student services factors

The third series of factors examined in students' selection of an IEP focused on student services. The results of a repeated measures ANOVA with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction were statistically significant, $F(4.90, 818.17) = 38.89, p < .001$. The mean scores and standard deviations for each of the factors are provided in Table 3.

None of the student services factors was rated by students in the *important* to *very important* range. The top four factors were of *moderate importance*, whereas the services of homestays and airport pickup were *not very important*. The repeated measures ANOVA did show, however, that the top factor was statistically different in importance from the bottom two factors of being able to homestay with an American family ($p < .001, d = .667$) and the program picking up the student from the airport ($p < .001, d = .847$). These factors had a medium to large effect size.

3.4 | Marketing factors

The fourth series of factors examined in students' selection of IEP addressed the importance of various marketing factors. The results of a repeated measures ANOVA with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction were again statistically significant, $F(8.33, 1365.45) = 17.68, p < .001$. Table 4 shows the accompanying mean scores and standard deviations for these items.

In rating the importance of marketing factors, students identified the school's website, a referral from a friend, and online communication with the school as moderately important factors. The remaining list of factors was identified by students as being less important, with the bottom three factors being significantly less important than the top factor, shown by comparing the school's website with the lowest three factors, which were a poster or flier about the school ($p < .001, d = .661$), a newspaper or magazine advertisement ($p < .001, d = .668$), or watching a video that was not produced by the school ($p < .001, d = .728$). These factors had a medium effect size.

In addition to the marketing factors listed above, another research question sought to investigate the importance of social media on ESL students' choice of IEP. In a repeated measures ANOVA with a Greenhouse-Geisser correction, results comparing six social media platforms proved statistically significant, $F(3.26, 518.21) = 47.82, p < .001$. Table 5 shows the associated descriptive statistics.

TABLE 3 Student services factors

Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Academic or personal counseling	3.51	1.39
Immigration services	3.49	1.41
Out-of-class activities	3.37	1.36
Help to find housing	3.07	1.45
School offers meal plans	2.98	1.56
Offers homestay with American family	2.57	1.43
Airport pickup	2.32	1.42

TABLE 4 Marketing factors

Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
The school's website	3.62	1.31
Referral from former student	3.50	1.30
Communicating online with the school	3.38	1.39
ESL directory list	3.02	1.40
Educational fair	3.01	1.47
Referral from school	2.96	1.37
Watching a video produced by school	2.96	1.48
Referral from employer	2.93	1.43
Mailed brochures or information packets	2.93	1.39
News article or TV news report	2.87	1.41
Referral from U.S. embassy	2.82	1.42
Referral from agent or recruiter	2.76	1.38
Poster or flier about the school	2.72	1.41
Newspaper or magazine advertisement	2.70	1.44
Watching video not produced by school	2.64	1.38

Although Facebook was statistically more important than the rest of the social media platforms, the effect size was small between Facebook and the next most influential platform, Instagram ($p < .001$, $d = .328$). However, the effect size increased to medium when Facebook was compared to blogs ($p < .001$, $d = .669$) and Snapchat ($p < .001$, $d = .718$), and to large when compared to Twitter ($p < .001$, $d = .811$) and Reddit ($p < .001$, $d = .986$). Although Facebook was significantly different from other social media sites, the mean scores given by the students put it in the category of *not very important*.

3.5 | Program size

The second research question was posed in an effort to see what factors contribute the most toward a student's decision to attend a large or small IEP. Using a stepwise linear regression analysis, the data were analyzed to see which factors—out of 68 variables—were associated with students who chose to attend a large program compared to those factors that were associated with students who chose to attend a smaller program. Programs with an enrollment over 100 were considered large, programs with

TABLE 5 Social media platforms

Platform	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Facebook	2.88	1.57
Instagram	2.38	1.48
Blog	1.93	1.25
Snapchat	1.87	1.22
Twitter	1.76	1.16
Reddit	1.59	0.98

50–100 students were considered medium, and programs with fewer than 50 students were considered small. With an adjusted R^2 of .471, this regression analysis accounts for just under half of the variability associated with program size. Table 6 presents the associated statistics.

The standardized beta (β) column in Table 6 represents relatively how much each factor contributes to the overall model. The factors with positive β values at the top of the table are most strongly connected with choice of a large program, and those factors at the bottom of the table with negative β values are most strongly connected with student choice of a smaller program. The factors in the middle of the table that have values closer to zero, though still meaningful, are less important than those factors at the top and bottom of the table. Students who agreed that their purpose for learning English was mainly for a vacation were strongly associated ($\beta = 0.373$) with being enrolled in a larger program. Another factor important to students in large programs was that their ESL program is part of a larger college or university that they would like to attend. Additionally, higher proficiency students were more strongly associated with being enrolled in smaller programs. Students in smaller programs also seemed to be more concerned with the economics of their international study given that the exchange rate between their country and the United States was a reason for their choice of a smaller program.

3.6 | Analysis of qualitative comments

In the survey, participants responded to one open-ended question inviting them to identify the main reason they chose to attend their current ESL program. The comments were categorized using a grounded theory approach (Titscher et al., 2000) according to keywords and the main ideas included in each response.

The primary reason (28.5% of the responses) students gave for selecting their current IEP was for the purpose of improving their English. The second most frequent answer (26.6%) was that they believed this program would help them achieve their goal of furthering their education and/or obtaining an advanced degree. Other reasons for choosing their current program involved enabling them to obtain future or better employment (9.8%), to attend a program with a good reputation (8.4%), and environmental factors (8.4%) such as studying in an English-dominant country or being surrounded by people with similar standards and beliefs. The remaining responses included the affordability of

TABLE 6 Regression analysis showing factors associated with program size

Factor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>p</i>
(Constant)	250.203	43.766		<0.000
My purpose is mainly for vacation	20.564	5.138	0.373	<0.000
ESL program is in a larger school I want to attend	21.616	4.866	0.354	<0.000
ESL program provides intense learning experience	23.335	8.428	0.264	0.007
The city has a good reputation	14.302	5.528	0.201	0.011
The school offers airport pickup	−9.540	4.255	−0.157	0.027
The city has convenient local transportation	−10.821	5.023	−0.162	0.033
English will help me get a good job someday	−15.637	6.777	−0.171	0.023
There are many students who speak my L1	−9.641	4.050	−0.175	0.019
The ESL program is well respected	−16.888	8.057	−0.197	0.038
There is a good exchange rate with the U.S. dollar	−14.210	4.994	−0.252	0.005
Higher proficiency level	−43.179	10.117	−0.312	<0.000

TABLE 7 Taxonomy of student choice factors from the open-ended survey question

Category	N	Representative response
Improve English	61	"I want to improve my English."
Pursue education	57	"To be able to go to college here in the States."
Pursue employment	21	"Improve my English to find a good job."
Program reputation	18	"I researched about ESL program in [location name] and I found it has good ratings."
Environment	18	"I decided to come here because I thought that if I went to a country that only speaks English I will learn more, and I was right."
TOEFL preparation	8	"To help me to prepare to take the TOEFL exam and improve my English."
Referral	7	"It's a good option and friends of mine recommended it."
Affordable	7	"After research I figured this is the best option for good money."
Better future	5	"For a better future in my life."
Self-improvement	3	"Because I want to have a better job and be a better person."
Other	2	"Easy acceptance"/"Because it's faster."

Note: Grammar in participant's responses was edited for clarity.

the program (3.2%), preparing for a better life (2.3%), and self-improvement (1.4%). A complete list of categories with example statements is included in Table 7. Six responses could not be categorized due to incomplete and unclear expression of ideas. These items were eliminated from the data analysis.

4 | IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine which program, location, student services, and marketing factors were of most importance to students choosing to study in IEPs located in the western United States. This study was designed to build on previous findings from Williams (1994) and Jones (2013) and to investigate factors related to program size that may have influenced students' choice of IEP.

Because most of the funding that supports IEPs tends to come from student tuition and fees (Murray, 2012), it is critical that programs identify ways to ensure that enrollment remains robust and that careful budgeting and strategic planning be incorporated (Christison & Murray, 2008) to help guide a program's success. The findings from this research suggest that IEPs located in the western United States should continue to provide a high-quality intensive learning experience for their students. Much of this can happen if they maintain a program that is well respected (Eaton, 2002) and hires excellent teachers (Williams, 1994). In addition, students indicated that curriculum content should include elements personally important to learners, such as tutoring, TOEFL instruction, and a variety of classes.

As for location, students' comments indicate that issues of safety are a primary concern. This finding supports earlier findings from Williams's (1994) study of IEP students attending IEP programs in the southeastern United States, where he found that the safety of the community was one of the top three factors of concern. Students in this study indicated that they wanted to be enrolled in a school that is located in a safe community and that the location is one that has a good reputation. Of moderate importance was a city that is affordable, multicultural, and has a good transportation system. In regard to student services, programs would be wise to have academic counseling available for students (Middlebrook, 1991) as well as immigration services and a variety of out-of-class activities that provide social connections for students. In marketing their program, administrators and teachers

should see that their school's website is a source of important information for potential students as well as a means for interested students to contact school personnel with specific questions. Students also reported valuing referrals from former students and the ability to communicate online (through the website or email) with the school. Social media apps were found to be less important as tools for marketing respective programs, but of those surveyed, Facebook was used most often.

Other marketing factors program administrators and teachers should consider include ensuring that the layout of the website is intuitive and user-friendly. Photos should be professional quality. Because referrals from former students were indicated to be important in the decision-making process, it may be useful to include a section of the website that shares student testimonials regarding the program. Because brochures were found to be a valuable source of information for students in various parts of the world in earlier research (Jones, 2013), programs seeking to bring students from abroad may also want to include a downloadable brochure on their website that potential students can print and share with extended family and friends who may not have ready access to the Internet. Finally, as students communicate online with the school, it may be beneficial to have a staff member assigned to provide prompt responses to emails or online communication with prospective students.

Finally, administrators and teachers should consider the size of their program and how this factor attracts students to their school, as well as how the program can fill a competitive niche in the market. For students attending a larger program for whom a vacation is important, program offerings could include field trips and the advertising of community events particular to the city in which the program is located. Programs could also give students assignments that allow them to participate in cultural experiences in the city where they can interact with native speakers of the language. The regression analysis also showed that students attending larger IEPs were concerned that the ESL program was connected to a larger college or university and that it provided an intensive learning experience. These elements could be added to the marketing materials that larger programs produce.

For participants attending smaller IEPs, there appeared to be a strong connection with students of higher proficiency levels. Smaller IEPs could advocate a more personalized learning environment with individualized support to help students better achieve their English language learning goals. Another factor strongly connected with smaller IEPs was that students felt there was a good exchange rate between the United States and their home country. Although the actual exchange rate of a country's currency is influenced by a number of factors beyond the students' control, it is possible that students attending smaller schools were more cost-conscious than those attending larger programs, showing an increased concern with cost-of-living issues.

5 | CONCLUSION

At present, ongoing global factors and circumstances continue to impact international students entering the United States to study (Institute of International Education, 2018). These factors include changes in government regulations regarding the availability of visas for students from particular countries, concerns about health and welfare, changes in economic stability and currency of nations, and the cost of studying abroad.

This study investigated the importance of four categories of factors that influence ESL learners' choice of IEP in the western United States: program, location, student services, and marketing factors. These factors were also analyzed with regard to program size. Some of the study's findings may be consistent with institutional observation and experience. However, the contribution of this study is that it provides empirical evidence of factors influencing student choice of IEP across a broader

spectrum of programs, and it suggests ways that administrators and teachers can enhance their program offerings and communication to better attract future students.

Ongoing research into these factors needs to continue in an effort to help both existing and new programs further cope with changes in the global marketplace and economies as well as attitude shifts toward immigration and international travel. The number of students attending an IEP impacts the financial well-being of the institution as well as its ability to hire qualified teachers, establish and maintain an excellent reputation, implement a responsive and engaging curriculum, and effectively utilize technology in language teaching and in program marketing. Ongoing data collection and analysis is encouraged (Panferov, 2008) so institutional decisions can be well informed.

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