



**Scholarship and Advising Programs as Promoters of International Student Mobility: A
Case Study of EducationUSA's Opportunity Funds Program**

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Table of Contents

Abstract	4
Introduction	5
Background	5
Research Questions and Hypotheses	6
Literature Review	6
Introduction and Chapter Overview	6
The Macro-Political Economy of Global Higher Education	7
Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power, and State-Sponsored Mobility	9
Bourdieu and the Sociology of Education	11
Contextualizing the Southern Cone: Centralization and Regional Dynamics	13
Synthesis and the Conceptual Gap	14
Research Methods and Design	15
Research Subject and Sample	15
Methodology	16
Survey	16
Interview	17
Data Analysis Process	18
Limitations and Positionality	23
Data Analysis	24
Survey Results	25
Interview Analysis	29
Outreach and Access	29
Equity and Barriers	31
Institutional Support and Constraints	34
Strategic Resilience and Adaptive Agency	35
Perception of Value	36
External Environment	40
Additional Findings	42
External Support Systems	42
Institutional and Individual Resilience	43
Serendipity and Pre-Existing Profiles	43
Long-Term Alumni Engagement, Demographics and Discrepancies	44
Discussion and Conclusions	45
Reframing the OF Program Beyond Enrollment Metrics	45
Equity Paradoxes and the Limits of Need-Based Selection	46
'Accidental' Profiles as a Structural Signal	47
Institutional Resilience Under Geopolitical Strain	48
The Transnational Mobility Question: Return, Brain Drain, and Credential Value	50
The Role of Mentorship and Cohort Community in Reducing Barriers	50
Implications and Recommendations	52
Conclusion	52
References	54
Appendices	(attachment)
Appendix A: Administrator interview guide	

Appendix B: Student interview guide	
Appendix C: Informed consent form	
Appendix D: Transcribed interview example	
Appendix E: Coding results	
Appendix F: Survey results - Chile	
Appendix G: Survey Results - Argentina	

List of Tables and Figures

Table 1. Survey questions	16
Table 2. Administrator interview codes	18
Table 3. Student interview codes	20
Table 4. Comparison Matrix for student and administrator interviews	22
Figure 1. Outreach as reported by students	26
Figure 2. Map of student attendance by state	27
Figure 3. Student areas of study	28

Abstract

This study examines the EducationUSA Opportunity Funds (OF) program in the Spanish-speaking Southern Cone, investigating the extent to which it functions as a vehicle of equitable international student mobility. Using a mixed-methods case study design, the research draws on interviews with three program administrators and four student alumni, alongside a survey of eighteen OF graduates, to analyze program operations, outreach strategies, and participant experiences. Theoretically based in Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of capital and habitus and Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Theory, and supplemented by Prebisch's Dependency Theory, the study finds that while the OF program delivers transformative individual outcomes and demonstrates institutional resilience under conditions of significant geopolitical and financial precarity, an equity paradox emerges through the program's selection criteria that requires both financial need and high volumes of linguistic and cultural capital. The near-universal pattern of “random” program discovery among participants and a serendipitously perfect profile further signals that program reach remains shaped by prior distributions of social capital. The study concludes with recommendations for investment in English language education and more targeted outreach to disadvantaged populations as necessary conditions for the program to fully realize its equity objectives.

Keywords: International student mobility, scholarship programs, higher education policy

Scholarship and Advising Programs as Promoters of International Student Mobility: A Case Study of EducationUSA's Opportunity Funds Program

This study examines EducationUSA's Opportunity Funds program within the Spanish-speaking Southern Cone countries of Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay. EducationUSA is a U.S. Department of State program consisting of over 430 international student advising centers across more than 175 countries and territories (EducationUSA, n.d.). The program's primary mission is to promote access to U.S. higher education by providing international students with accurate, comprehensive, and up-to-date information about accredited postsecondary institutions in the United States (EducationUSA, n.d.). Through one-on-one consultations, group sessions, and virtual resources, EducationUSA assists students in working through the admissions process, meeting standardized testing requirements, securing financial aid, managing student visas, and preparing for studies in the United States (EducationUSA, n.d.). It also provides advice and counsel on choosing a US university based on the student's unique profile and academic interests (EducationUSA, n.d.).

Within the larger EducationUSA ecosystem of programs, the Opportunity Funds Program (OF) provides specific, targeted assistance to highly qualified international students who face barriers due to the upfront costs of the application process (U.S. Embassy in Namibia, n.d.). Funded by the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, the program selects academically excellent candidates who possess strong leadership skills but lack the financial resources to apply to higher education in the United States, as demonstrated through a holistic review of the family's financial situation and/or attendance at a public school. The program works with the expectation that these students will ultimately secure substantial financial aid from U.S. universities (U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, n.d.). Country eligibility appears to be determined by indicators of national development that target the developing world, as evidenced by the program's concentration in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and South/Southeast Asia; the list of countries participating also changes depending on the year and tends to hover around 50 countries (Rice University, n.d.). While it does not pay for tuition in itself, the OF program covers immediate, upfront expenses including standardized test registration fees, university application fees, document translations, SEVIS and visa fees, and the cost of a one-way international flight to the United States upon starting one's degree (EducationUSA, "Opportunity Funds Program"). Through intensive cohort advising over the course of one academic year, the program serves as an equity tool designed to expand access to U.S. campuses for underserved and economically disadvantaged youth globally.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The purpose of this study is to investigate the ways in which EducationUSA's Opportunity Funds program operates as a vehicle of equity and fits within larger narratives of international student mobility.

Research questions

The research questions covered are as follows:

- **Main question:** To what extent does EducationUSA's Opportunity Funds program promote equity for internationally mobile students?
- **Sub-questions:**
 - How is the program managed and marketed to reach eligible students?
 - How do the operations of EducationUSA and their perceptions of student success fit into broader narratives of international student mobility?

Hypothesis

While the OF program attempts to promote equity for internationally mobile students, this is complicated by targeted marketing and management strategies that inadvertently favor students who already possess the resources to build competitive profiles. Consequently, institutional perceptions of student success align with meritocratic narratives that overlook pervasive barriers, ultimately reinforcing broader social inequalities in international student mobility.

Literature Review

Introduction and Chapter Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to review and synthesize the scholarship necessary to situate EducationUSA's OF program within the global political economy of international student mobility, and the ways in which the program may reduce individual-level barriers to mobility while leaving the structural distribution of cultural and linguistic capital that determines who is positioned to benefit largely untouched. To establish a comprehensive analytical framework, this review first examines global higher education on a macro scale, mapping contemporary trends, geographic flows, and the historical drivers behind student migration. It then investigates the institutional mechanisms of international student mobility, analyzing how state-sponsored educational initiatives operate as vehicles for public diplomacy, soft power, and geopolitical influence. To complement these notions, the review incorporates

contemporary scholarship on student agency and self-actualization, evaluating how individual motivations intersect with institutional opportunities. Finally, these thematic areas are contextualized within the unique socioeconomic and educational context of the Southern Cone, providing a localized basis for the study.

On a theoretical level, this thesis operates at the intersection of sociological and structural paradigms to capture the complex nature of educational equity. On the individual and institutional level, the study implements Pierre Bourdieu's foundational theory on the forms of economic, cultural, and social capital (1986). This lens allows for a critical examination of how class privilege and linguistic capital, among other factors shape a student's capacity to engage in international mobility. To complement this micro-level analysis, the study integrates Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Theory (1974) as a macro-analytical framework. By conceptualizing global higher education as consisting of core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral zones, World Systems Theory provides the necessary theoretical tools to investigate the impetus behind regional student movements and the unequal distribution of global knowledge capital. Together, these dual theories bridge the gap between systemic global inequalities and individual student experiences within the OF program.

The Macro-Political Economy of Global Higher Education

International student mobility (ISM) has transitioned from an individual or localized academic pursuit into a foundational pillar of the global knowledge economy. While the cross-border migration of scholars is not a new phenomenon, in the contemporary global landscape it has acquired unprecedented urgency. According to data from the OECD and the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, the volume of internationally mobile tertiary students surpassed 6.9 million globally, with projections estimating that the mobile student population will expand to 9 million by 2030 (UNESCO, 2026). This exponential growth is desirable for host states, as an influx of international students simultaneously generates substantial non-resident tuition revenue and bolsters institutional prestige (UNESCO, 2024). Beyond these fiscal and reputational benefits, nations have historically leveraged state-sponsored educational mobility as an instrument of foreign policy and bilateral diplomacy (Gauttam et al., 2024). Government sponsored initiatives, such as the Fulbright Program established in the mid-twentieth century, demonstrate how educational exchange has been implemented to foster peacebuilding and mutual understanding under the guise of neutral knowledge sharing (The Fulbright Program, 2025). Consequently, contemporary mobility functions as a phenomenon that promises mutual benefit. Host institutions capture global prestige, while individual students acquire specialized knowledge and cultural capital deemed necessary to compete within a globalized labor market (UNESCO, 2024).

Despite the rhetoric of universal expansion, global student mobility tends to flow in certain patterns. The contemporary state of ISM reveals asymmetrical regional flows defined by clear sending and receiving regions. Current statistics indicate that East Asia and the Pacific, alongside South and West Asia, generate approximately 47% of all outbound mobile students globally, with China and India remaining the primary exporters of students (UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean [UNESCO IESALC], 2023). On the other hand, the destination landscape has historically been monopolized by the "Big Four" nations: the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia (QS International Insights, 2025). While recent policy shifts which may include domestic international student caps, cost-of-living crises, and restrictive visa policies, have begun to slightly decentralize this monopoly in favor of emerging regional hubs in Europe and Asia, the traditional core nations have maintained their status as leaders of global student distribution for over four decades (UNESCO, 2026).

To critically examine the reasons behind this uneven distribution, global mobility must be analyzed through the lens of Immanuel Wallerstein's World Systems Theory (1974). Wallerstein posits that the global political economy is partitioned into core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral zones. Within this architecture, the leading destination countries, most notably the United States, function as the dominant "Core," utilizing their massive historical accumulation of economic and institutional capital to attract intellectual talent from the "Periphery" and "Semi-Periphery," which encompasses developing regions such as the Southern Cone. Rather than viewing student flows as voluntary migrations, World Systems Theory exposes how core zones actively extract elite academic talent from peripheral zones. The Core relies on a highly sophisticated academic infrastructure that is built on centuries of colonial expansion, economic dominance, and geopolitical leverage and which positions its universities as the superior, legitimate providers of advanced knowledge validation (Schöpf, 2020).

There are various schools of thought as to why students are motivated to study in Big Four countries. Historically, student motivations have been explained by Walter McMahon's (1992) "push/pull" factors, which posits that students are "pushed" away from their home countries by adverse domestic conditions (such as underfunded systems or poor labor opportunities) and "pulled" toward destination states by rational calculations of institutional prestige and post-graduation earning potential. While push/pull models accurately capture individual, superficial motivations, they fundamentally obscure the underlying macroeconomic forces that produce these choices.

By also applying Raúl Prebisch's Dependency Theory (1950) onto these migration flows, it can be observed how dependency compels peripheral nations to rely on core knowledge economies. Under

dependency dynamics, the peripheral states of the Southern Cone remain exporters of raw talent and consumers of imported knowledge. Individual student aspirations, therefore, are not formed in an open, meritocratic vacuum; rather, they are conditioned by an unequal global division of labor that positions Western degrees as a benchmark of socioeconomic mobility.

This geopolitical dependence fundamentally compromises the developmental promises of international exchange. State-sponsored mobility programs are routinely justified by the diplomatic rhetoric of "educational transfer" and eventual student repatriation. As Robert Cowen (2009) notes, educational transfer involves the complex movement, translation, and adaptation of academic policies, skills, and intellectual capital across national borders to enrich local communities. However, these idealistic expectations of circular knowledge transfer are consistently disrupted by the phenomenon of "Brain Drain," namely, the long-term, permanent migration of a country's highly educated professional elite to high-income destination countries offering superior economic stability (Docquier & Rapoport, 2012).

This loss of talent is particularly damaging for volatile regions within South America. While the Southern Cone has historically mitigated extreme, low-skilled emigration with public policies such as the provision of tuition-free public higher education in Argentina and Uruguay, it remains vulnerable to the loss of its highly specialized technological and scientific workers (UNESCO, 2024). When elite students from the Southern Cone use programs like the Opportunity Funds to access Core universities, they enter a pipeline that frequently leads to permanent or long-term residency in the Global North. This dynamic creates a policy paradox that simultaneously reinforces the resource domination of the already advantaged Core while depriving peripheral home nations of the intellectual resources required to break their dependency.

Cultural Diplomacy, Soft Power, and State-Sponsored Mobility

To fully comprehend international student mobility, research must interrogate the geopolitics of internationalization and the strategic objectives driving Core nations to promote international education. The cross-border recruitment of scholars extends far beyond simple university enrollment; it functions as a mechanism for macroeconomic expansion and national values and identity. While non-resident tuition fees provide immediate institutional revenue, the wider economic contributions of international students generate far-reaching effects across local and national host economies (IIE Open Doors, 2024). Furthermore, the influx of global talent feeds directly into the host nation's advanced knowledge economy. By channeling high-achieving foreign scholars into domestic research initiatives, Core nations

fuel innovation, secure intellectual property, and sustain competitive advantages across fast evolving technological and scientific fields (Levent, 2016).

Beyond these tangible financial and intellectual gains, a main driver for Core states to fund international educational infrastructure lies in its capacity to operate as an instrument of foreign policy and public diplomacy. This dynamic can be understood through Joseph Nye's (2004) conceptualization of "Soft Power," defined as a nation's ability to shape the preferences and behaviors of foreign actors through cultural attraction, and ideological persuasion rather than economic coercion or military force. Within this definition, international higher education serves as a highly effective mechanism for soft power projection. By hosting peripheral students, Core nations do not merely transfer technical skills; they export specific epistemological ways of knowing, institutional norms, and Western democratic values. Through the process of academic socialization, international students are temporarily assimilated into the host country's cultural norms. Upon their eventual repatriation or integration back into their home country, these scholars will ideally transmit their influenced beliefs, translating and legitimizing the Core's interests. On a macro-institutional level, this attraction is continually reinforced by global university rankings, which conflate a nation's capacity to draw diverse global talent with academic superiority and reputation (Adoui, 2023).

The operational structure of EducationUSA exemplifies this intersection of soft power, cultural diplomacy, and geopolitical strategy. Administered and primarily funded by the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) of the U.S. Department of State, EducationUSA commands a vast global network of more than 430 advising centers across 175 countries (U.S. Department of State, 2026). The program's official objective is to provide accurate, comprehensive, and unbiased information regarding higher education opportunities in the United States (EducationUSA, n.d.). However, its institutional placement within the State Department underscores a dual reality: its global advising system functions fundamentally to advance U.S. national interests and foreign policy objectives by identifying, vetting, and channeling highly qualified foreign human capital into American universities. Additionally, the funding structure of the program and its reliance on Embassies and American Spaces show a codependency with the American government and national interests therein.

This geopolitical framing aids in understanding of equity-focused initiatives like the OF program. Although the program does not directly finance university tuition, relying instead on institutional aid provided by American HE institutions, the State Department deliberately covers the prohibitive upfront costs of the application process for historically disadvantaged students, including those associated with visa fees and standardized testing. By removing these immediate barriers, the Core successfully expands

its reach into previously inaccessible socioeconomic demographics within the Southern Cone. Thus, with the missive of educational equity, the Opportunity Funds program operates as a highly refined diplomatic mechanism. It simultaneously diversifies the Core's recruitment pool, mitigates international critiques of educational elitism, and projects an image of benevolent meritocracy, all while attracting the highly capable youth of developing nations to United States higher education institutions.

Bourdieu and the Sociology of Education

Underlying contemporary international student mobility trends are academic and institutional assumptions regarding the socioeconomic profiles of the students themselves. While the demographic composition of mobile students is not entirely uniform, standard sociological critiques of international higher education have long characterized internationally mobile students as elite, highly privileged individuals (Yang, 2018). This traditional view posits that university degrees in general, including those obtained abroad, are almost exclusively the domain of upper-class families who possess the disposable economic capital to finance tuition and high cost-of-living expenses (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). Recent scholarship has challenged this depiction specifically in the case of international students; for instance, Schartner and Shields (2023) demonstrated that nearly 37% of surveyed international students identified as coming from working-class backgrounds, many of whom actively found low-wage jobs during their studies to sustain themselves. Yet, despite the documented presence of non-elite students within global higher education, elitism remains a dominant, pervasive force. In developing regions like the Southern Cone, marginalized students continue to face immense challenges when attempting to secure admission into elite foreign universities, often lacking access to English language education, extracurricular activities, and other profile components that are essential for admission (UNESCO, 2024).

To critically interrogate the persistent classism and stratification embedded within international student mobility, research must look past financial classifications and engage with Pierre Bourdieu's sociology. Bourdieu's foundational theory put forth the interplay of *habitus*, *field*, and *capital*, arguing that social fields, including the field of international higher education, operate as structured spaces of struggle where individuals deploy various forms of power to maintain or improve their social positioning (Bourdieu, 1986). A student's *habitus* represents a set of internalized, durable dispositions and worldviews acquired through early childhood socialization within specific class structures (Bourdieu, 1991). When a student enters the specialized *field* of global academic mobility, their ability to navigate its complex, bureaucratic pathways depends entirely on their accumulation, volume, and composition of *capital*. Bourdieu (1986) identifies three primary forms of capital that govern these educational trajectories: economic capital (property and income), social capital (networks of institutional influence and social

acquaintance), and cultural capital (long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, cultural goods, and qualifications) (p. 243). Within the operational structure of the EducationUSA Opportunity Funds program, these theoretical assets cease to be abstract concepts; they manifest as concrete factors that impact educational access and exclusion.

A critical manifestation of cultural capital within the Latin American educational context is institutionalized and embodied linguistic capital. In the context of the Southern Cone, high-level English language proficiency is not a neutral communication skill; it functions as a highly stratified form of cultural capital that is correlated with private schooling, elite family backgrounds, and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017). Regional policy analyses demonstrate that public school curricula across the region routinely fail to provide the English language training necessary to achieve the proficiency required by elite American universities and standardized admissions assessments like the TOEFL (Matear, 2008). Consequently, the capacity to even consider international mobility is predetermined by a student's early access to high-quality language instruction. Elite private bilingual high schools act as gatekeepers, transforming inherited socioeconomic privilege into legitimate, institutionalized cultural capital and ensuring that only those who have benefited from continuous, private educational investments can meet the linguistic requirements of global mobility programs.

This linguistic barrier is compounded by severe information gaps rooted in unequal distributions of social capital. In Bourdieusian terms, social capital represents the accumulation of actual or potential resources linked to the possession of a network of institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition (Bourdieu, 1986). For underprivileged youth in the Southern Cone, information and access to higher education at all, much less niche international mobility tracks like the Opportunity Funds program is impeded by low-quality public education, a dearth of awareness about opportunities, and poorly-leveraged public policy (UNESCO, 2023). On the other hand, elite private schools use the resources they possess to not only prepare students for academic excellence, but to inculcate soft skills and other ways of knowing that privilege students in their preparation for higher education (Kemelbayeva & Kurmanov, 2023). Students from working-class or geographically marginalized backgrounds are isolated from these informational pipelines.

The convergence of these inequities of capital highlights what contemporary higher education literature conceptualizes as an equity paradox within state-sponsored mobility initiatives. Sociological analyses of merit-based, low-income scholarship initiatives show that such programs frequently operate under a prevailing tension, requiring candidates to reflect deficits in economic capital while simultaneously demanding exceptionally high volumes of institutionalized cultural and linguistic capital

to meet elite admission baselines (Perna et al, 2015). By utilizing Bourdieu's sociology, researchers can map out how these competing criteria establish an exclusionary institutional filter within the international field. Rather than functioning as neutral vectors of social mobility, these criteria require careful interrogation to determine whether they inadvertently privilege demographics who possess disproportionate cultural assets despite their fiscal constraints.

Contextualizing the Southern Cone: Centralization and Regional Dynamics

To analyze the workings of Bourdieusian conceptions of capital within the Opportunity Funds program in the Southern Cone, a thorough understanding of regional dynamics is also required. Students throughout the Southern Cone have been pursuing higher education abroad at a consistently growing rate over the past two decades (UIS, 2023). However, compared to the rest of the world, Latin America and the Caribbean is one of the regions with the lowest proportion of students choosing to study in other countries, contributing only 4% of the number of students who move globally and with more students entering the region to study abroad than leaving it (UNESCO, 2024). The relative lack of students from the region in other countries could in part be attributed to economic scarcity, low-levels of English proficiency, and, conversely, opportunities for free public higher education within one's home country, as in the case of Brazil and Argentina (Hughes, 2019; Didou & Jokivirta, 2007). Within the region, students who do choose to undertake international studies are opting to study at regional hubs such as Mexico or Argentina in growing rates rather than defaulting to a Big Four country, highlighting the growing significance of intraregional mobility (UNESCO, 2024).

This study focuses on Chile, Uruguay, and Argentina, three major Spanish-speaking countries in the region. While these countries have been differentiated from other countries in the region due to their rapid rate of economic development, social infrastructure and relative stability, challenges still persist in accessing higher education (Balán, 2013). In the case of Argentina, while the country enjoys free public higher education and has had higher gross enrollment rates in universities than other countries in the region, its percentage of 19-25 year olds with a tertiary qualification still remains well below the OECD average of 48% and overall national investment in education is low (OECD Education GPS, 2025). In Chile, over three decades of increasing enrollment is complicated by persistent class inequalities, with disadvantaged students (including low SES, disabled and indigenous populations) facing lower rates of participation overall; this problem has been attributed to inequities beginning in lower levels of education (Espinoza & Gonzalez, 2016). For Uruguay, while the country boasts one of the highest per capita GDPs in the region and the lowest wealth disparity index, inequalities persist in all levels of the education system which may complicate higher education access (Aguerre & Cedrez, 2024).

Across all three regions, a significant issue lies not only within disparities based on socioeconomic status, but also the rural-urban divide. Latin America as a region faces an atypically high disparity in education achievement between rural and urban areas, with students from urban areas showing higher rates of educational achievement and enrollment rates in higher education (Fernández et al, 2025). The reasons for rural-urban achievement gaps globally are complex, and can include tangible reasons such as school quality, access to qualified teachers and resources, and also intangible factors that may include local culture and parental involvement (Sanfo, 2023). While most studies on the urban-rural divide in higher education focus on access to educational institutions within a student's home country, within the context of international higher education, students from rural areas may be less likely to have access to standardized testing centers, extracurriculars, embassies, and other resources necessary to cultivate a profile to study abroad. Therefore, despite recent and substantial progress in reducing disparities of access in certain demographic areas like gender, SES and geographical location continue to play a large role in student access to higher education in general and international higher education specifically.

Synthesis and the Conceptual Gap

The intersection of Immanuel Wallerstein's and Pierre Bourdieu's theories reveals a multi-layered matrix of exclusion within international student mobility. While World Systems and Dependency theories successfully illustrate how global macroeconomic architectures construct an unequal playing field, positioning Core knowledge economies as attractors of talent from the Periphery at times at the expense of developing countries, they frequently overlook the individual agency and localized mechanics that dictate who actually navigates these pathways. On the other hand, a Bourdieusian analysis exposes how broader deficits in economic, linguistic, and social capital restrict international opportunities to elite demographics. Aligning these dual paradigms demonstrates that macro-structures establish the broader geopolitical borders, whereas micro-level distributions of capital determine which specific individuals possess the institutional leverage to cross them.

A critical review of the current scholarship exposes a distinct conceptual gap at this theoretical convergence. While existing international education literature extensively documents either macro-level trends like brain drain and public diplomacy in isolation, or micro-level student psychological adjustments and motivations, there is a notable scarcity of empirical research linking the two through an institutional lens. Specifically, a deficit exists in investigating how merit-based international scholarship programs centered in equity navigate or fail to navigate socioeconomic limitations. Scholarship has yet to fully investigate how these local actors implement equity-focused mandates like the Opportunity Funds

program within the specific geopolitical landscape of the Southern Cone. This thesis directly addresses this gap in knowledge by shifting the analytical focus to the advisors and students themselves, evaluating how localized institutional mediation both reinforces and challenges global shifts of students, moving underrepresented students toward United States higher education institutions.

Research Methods and Design

Research Subject and Sample

This study was carried out with two distinct samples: administrators of Opportunity Funds programs in the Spanish-speaking Southern cone, and alumni of the Opportunity Funds program in that region who were either currently studying in a US University or had already graduated. The first point of contact was the administrators, who then authorized contact with the students by distributing the survey. Contact was gained with an administrator during an internship in Montevideo, Uruguay, who then facilitated or suggested contact with the other administrators, reflecting a snowball sample. Administrators were only interviewed and did not complete any survey. In the student survey, students had the opportunity to give consent to an interview and leave their email addresses to establish communication. For interview purposes, administrators are referred to as A1-A3 and students as S1-S4 to protect anonymity. Participants were asked to either sign an informed consent form authorizing the interview or directly state their consent on the audio recording. As current Opportunity Funds cohorts are not always 18 years of age, this study chose to focus on Opportunity Funds alumni who had already gained entry into US universities or had graduated, thus avoiding ethical complications due to age limitations.

Methodology

This study implemented a mixed-methods research design to simultaneously learn more about student demographics, considering country-specific information on program participants is scarce, while also gaining insight on lived student and administrator experience within the OF program. A mixed-methods approach was chosen due to this research type's capacity to show general patterns and trends through quantitative data while also exploring the "why" behind these observed trends (Banawa, 2025). This research also fits under the general label of a case study; that is to say, it is an in-depth examination of a specific type of student mobility program to provide insight on a country's overarching

student mobility strategies. As much of the study is interview-based, separate sets of interview questions were designed for administrators and students.. This study also relied on a 14-question student survey.

Methodologically, the type of case study undertaken in this research will be a “descriptive case study”; using Yin’s (2018) definition, this is a case study which intends to describe a phenomenon, rather than explain it or explore further areas for research. While case studies can be carried out in various ways, this research is a mixed-methods study. It relies on interviews with people associated with EducationUSA, and also analyzes survey results to provide more insight on student demographics

Survey

The survey consisted of 14 questions, the first of which was a consent question and the last of which was an option for students to express interest in a follow-up interview. The other questions asked students to state the following:

Table 1.

Survey Questions

Demographic	Question format	Notes
Age	Multiple choice	
Gender	Multiple choice	
Area of origin/ city size	Multiple choice	
First-generation student status	Multiple choice	
Monthly family net income	Multiple choice	ranges adjusted to local currency in each country
Level of degree studied in the USA	Multiple choice	

Modality by which they first learned of the EducationUSA program	Multiple Choice Multi-Select	
Modality by which they attended most EducationUSA programs	Likert Scale	In person or online
US state in which they studied	Open answer	
Area of study	Multiple Choice Multi-Select	
Residence plans following graduation	Multiple choice	
Plans to participate in additional US studies	Multiple choice	

As direct access was not granted to student contact information, the survey was created in Google Forms and then shared with the administrator of each respective country, who distributed it to their alumni network. Additionally, as the sample size was quite small with 18 total survey respondents, the information will only be analyzed with a view to descriptive statistics; that is to say, no predictions or broad conclusions will be made based on the data collected. All figures and charts featured in this study were initially created using Google Forms and then modified using Artificial Intelligence to combine the survey results across countries.

Interview

Interviews consisted of a series of questions, designed to last approximately 30-45 minutes, and with the option to conduct the interview in Spanish or English.

Data Analysis Process

To analyze the interview data, the recordings of all seven interviews were transcribed using a transcription software. Transcripts were carefully reviewed to avoid typos or misprints, and identifying information about each participant was removed from the transcripts. As per the confidentiality agreement

with participants, these recordings will be saved for a limited amount of time following the study and will only be shared with the researcher's thesis supervisor. The majority of participants chose to interview in Spanish. While the transcripts were not translated in their entirety, relevant quotes for the purpose of the thesis were extracted and translated by the researcher. All translations are the researcher's own. Once transcribed, the interviews were all coded according to a coding scheme. A coding scheme was created for both the administrator and student interview questions, which can be seen here:

Table 2.

Administrator Interview Codes

Variable	Source Questions	Coding Focus (Admin Perspective)
1. Role & Expertise	Q1, Q2	ADM-XP: Professional background, scope of authority, and specific program oversight (e.g., OF vs. general advising).
2. Students (Demographics)	Q3	ADM-DEMO: Trends in student profiles, urban vs. rural distribution, preferred fields of study, and shifting applicant pools.
3. Program Criteria	Q4	ADM-CRIT: Formal definitions of eligibility; including merit and need.
4. Outreach Strategies	Q4a, Q4b	ADM-OUT: Marketing tactics, digital vs. physical presence, and methods used to reach eligible candidates.

5. Partnerships	Q4c	ADM-PART: Reliance on institutional bridges such as high schools, NGOs, or government agencies to refer students.
6. Barriers to Access	Q5	ADM-BARR: Systemic obstacles for students (e.g., testing costs, English proficiency) from a management viewpoint.
7. Internal Constraints	Q5a	ADM-INT: Organizational limitations like budget caps, staffing shortages, or US State Dept. regulatory barriers.
8. Perception of Value	Q6	ADM-VAL: What the admin believes is most beneficial to the student (e.g., the financial aid vs. the prestige).
9. Success Metrics	Q7	ADM-SUCC: Quantitative (enrollment numbers) vs. qualitative (student growth) definitions of a "successful" outcome.
10. Sociopolitical Barriers	Q8, Q9, Q10	ADM-POL: External pressures such as visa policy changes, US political climate, and regional economic volatility (inflation/currency).

Table 3*Student Interview Codes*

Variable	Source Questions	Coding Focus (Student Perspective)
1. Academic Profile & Intent	Q1, Q2	STU-ACAD: Reasons for pursuing US higher education and specific academic fields; plans for post-grad residency.
2. Access & Outreach	Q3 (Probe)	STU-OUT: How the program was discovered (word-of-mouth, social media, etc.) and the effectiveness of marketing.
3. Program Criteria	Q5, Q6	STU-CRIT: Personal experience meeting eligibility requirements (English, extracurriculars) and the effort required.
4. Barriers to Access	Q4, Q10, Q11	STU-BARR: Lived obstacles such as bureaucratic friction in the application process and personal/socioeconomic disadvantages.
5. Personal Support	Q12, Q13	STU-PERS: Experience with mentorship, emotional encouragement, and one-on-one guidance from advisors.
6. Programmatic Support	Q7, Q12	STU-SUP: Experience with the cohort model, group meetings, and the impact of financial/material equity measures.

7. Student Perception of Value	Q8, Q9	STU-VAL: Criteria for choosing a university and the perceived role of the program in their life journey.
8. Success Metrics	Q9, Q13	STU-SUCC: Individual definitions of success ranging from attaining the degree, building a network, or long-term career growth.
9. External Sociopolitical Barriers	Q2, Q14, Q15	STU-POL: Perceptions of the US political climate, visa accessibility, and the feeling of being welcomed as an international student.
10. Strategic Advice	Q14, Q15	STU-ADV: Advice to future peers

The interview questions and codes present were organized around six thematic pillars. These six pillars are:

- Outreach and Access
- Equity and Barriers
- Institutional Support
- Defining Success
- Perception of Value
- External Environment

The thematic pillars were designed to explore the main research question and its two sub-questions, with Outreach & Access and Institutional Support addressing the management and marketing of the program and the remaining pillars addressing questions of equity and how the program fits into broader narratives of ISM. To understand how the pillars worked across both administrator and student interviews, a comparison matrix was formed

Table 4.*Comparison Matrix for Administrator and Student Interviews*

Themes	Admin Variable	Student Variable
Outreach & Access	Outreach Strategies (Q4a)	Access & Outreach (Q3-Probe)
Equity & Barriers	Barriers to Access (Q5)	Preparation & Barriers (Q5, Q11)
Institutional Support	Internal Constraints (Q5a)	Programmatic/Personal Support (Q7, Q12)
Defining Success	Success Metrics (Q7)	Impact & Perception (Q9)

Perception of Value	Student Perception of Value (Q6)	Advice & Strategy (Q14, Q15)
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External Environment	Sociopolitical Barriers (Q8)	Academic Profile & Future (Q2)
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Limitations and Positionality

The scope of this study was fundamentally constrained by the structure of the OF Program. Nationally, the program operates on a highly selective scale, averaging only ten students per cohort annually and with typically only two to three participants ultimately securing full institutional funding from U.S. universities. Furthermore, administrative capacity is limited, as individual EducationUSA centers generally assign only a single advisor to manage the entire program. These institutional factors directly limited the potential participant sample, resulting in a final sample size of 18 survey responses, four student interviews, and three administrator interviews.

Additionally, this study encountered institutional access constraints. While an interview was successfully conducted with the program administrator in Uruguay, internal institutional approval constraints ultimately prevented access to Uruguayan students. Consequently, the qualitative student data in this research cannot be generalized to the entire Southern Cone region; instead, it is representative only of Opportunity Funds alumni from Chile and Argentina.

Further complicating this representation is the fact that of the 18 survey respondents, 16 were from Chile and two from Argentina. This, combined with the fact that neither of the Argentine students gave their consent to interview resulted in a student sample that was heavily representative of the Chilean

Opportunity Funds experience. Due to this unevenness in representation, any attempt to characterize patterns based on nationality in this study will be an impossibility and avoided.

This study is also subject to a degree of selection and survivorship bias. While the research aims to assess the extent to which the OF program promotes equity, the participant sample consists exclusively of successful program alumni. Due to institutional data privacy regulations, it was impossible to access or contact applicants who were rejected from the program. Consequently, the findings reflect only the experiences of those who successfully navigated the initial systemic barriers. The perspectives of unsuccessful applicants who may arguably have faced the most acute barriers to international mobility remain unrepresented. This omission limits the study's ability to fully analyze the exact mechanisms of exclusion and inequity within the program.

From a standpoint of positionality, my privilege and identity may have granted me access to participants in a way that would otherwise be challenging. The connections were first made during an internship with a major international organization, and this role was referred to in order to give credibility to my profile, thus reflecting privilege. Additionally, as an American citizen, it is possible that students or administrators may have felt some degree of self-censorship when giving their responses, intentionally altering their perspectives on the US HE environment. It was emphasized in the informed consent form that participating in this study would in no way impact students' standing in the OF program in an attempt to mitigate this outcome.

Data Analysis

As previously mentioned, the data collection tools were designed around six main research pillars:

- Outreach and Access
- Equity and Barriers
- Institutional Support
- Defining Success
- Perception of Value
- External Environment

In the following sections, the findings corresponding with each research pillar will be discussed, both for the administrator and student interviews and their implications briefly covered.

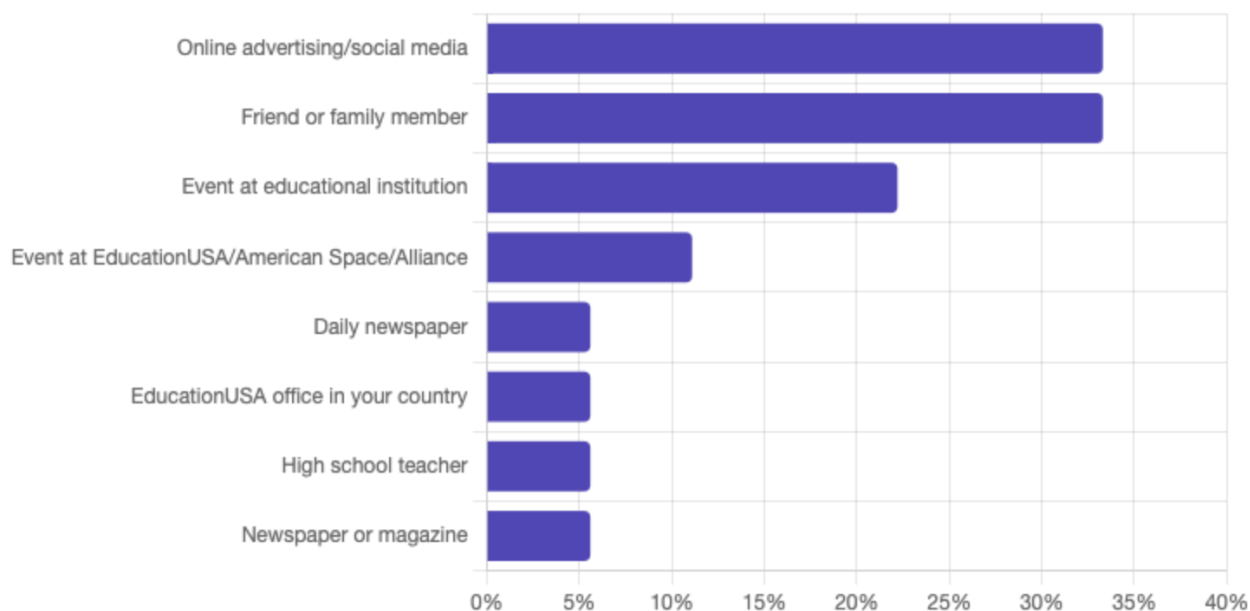
Survey Results

Of the 18 students who completed the survey, some general patterns can be observed. 67% of the students who filled out the survey were between 18 and 22 years old, and the remaining 33% were between 22 and 30 years old. There were no students over 30, perhaps reflecting the relative newness of the OF program. 8 of the 18 students who responded were female, 8 were male, and 2 identified as nonbinary. 61% of students came from a large city with more than 500,000 inhabitants. Interestingly, the remaining 27% came from small cities with less than 100,000 inhabitants, and only 11% came from medium-sized cities. Only 39% of students surveyed were first generation college students.

Regarding family income level, 33.3 % of students identified as having a high-income family background. 27.8% identified as having an upper-middle income, 22.2% as middle-income, and 11.1% as lower-middle income. While one student chose not to respond, it is notable that no students self-identified as coming from a low-income family. Of the students surveyed, 17 studied a Bachelor's degree in the United States. 1 studied a Master's, 1 a PhD, and 1 studied a Bachelor's but did not complete their studies.

Figure 1.

Outreach as reported by students

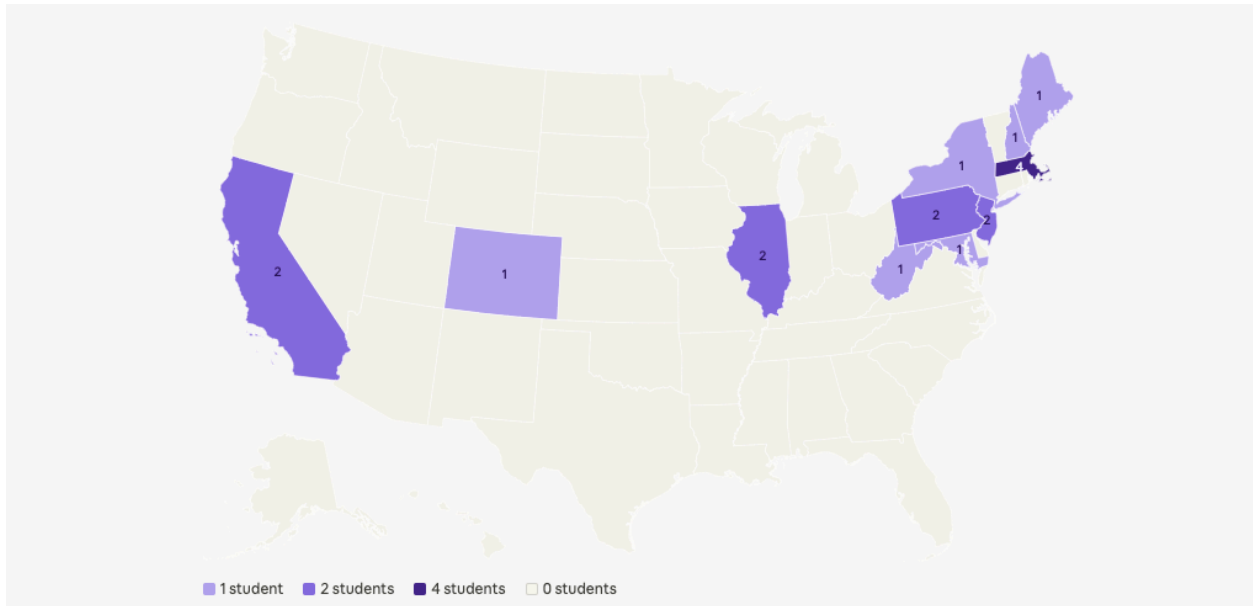


As illustrated in the figure, when asked about the modes in which students first learned about EducationUSA, "Online advertising/social media" and "Friend or family member" lead at 33.3% each, "Event at educational institution" at 22.2%, and the rest each contribute small shares around 5–11%.

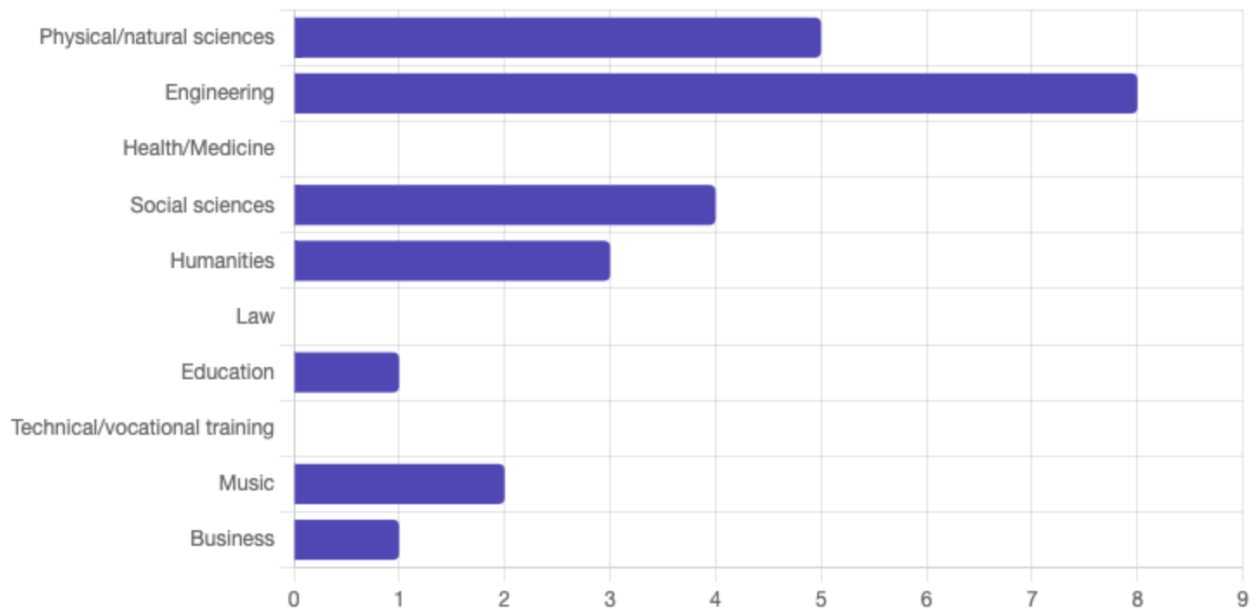
50% of students surveyed attended either all or the majority of EducationUSA events online, while 33% reported attending either all or the majority of EducationUSA events in person. The remaining percent of students surveyed attended a mix of in-person and online events.

Figure 2.

Map of student attendance by state



The figure shows that the highest concentration (4 students) studied in Massachusetts, followed by Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Illinois, and California with 2 students each. Across the map, students were quite widespread, although the majority (72%) studied at an institution on the east coast of the United States.

Figure 3.*Student areas of study in the USA*

The majority of students studied a major related to Engineering or Physical and Natural sciences (13 responses total). Social sciences were the next most popular major with 4 respondents having studied this field, followed by Humanities with 3 responses. Music was a major for 2 of the respondents, and only 1 student studied Education or Business respectively. As this was a Multi-Option question, students were allowed to choose more than one option, resulting in 24 total responses.

When asked about their post-graduation residency plans, 50% percent of students responded that they would not or did not stay in the United States following graduation. 27.8% responded that they were considering it, and the remaining 22.2% expressed that they did or would stay in the United States following graduation, thus expressing a degree of uncertainty over future plans. Similarly, when asked if they would pursue additional studies in the USA, 50% responded that they were considering it. 22.2% responded that they had intentions to do so, and 27.8% responded th

at they would not.

Interview Analysis

As previously mentioned, the interview results will be analyzed in accordance with the six research pillars identified in the comparison matrix.

Outreach and Access

When analyzing the "Outreach and Access" pillar, both administrators and students highlighted the critical role of strategic institutional partnerships in recruiting students. From the administrative perspective, a primary focus was placed on leveraging established, U.S. government-supported resources to maximize outreach. In particular, the EducationUSA program in Uruguay relies heavily on its close institutional proximity to Binational Centers, locally known as *Alianzas*, and the broader network of "American Spaces."

In the Uruguayan educational context, the *Alianza Cultural Uruguay-Estados Unidos* operates as an independent, non-profit educational institution supported by the U.S. Embassy, maintaining 41 branches throughout the country (Alianza Uruguay, n.d.). A subset of these facilities function as "American Spaces," which are open-access learning environments designed to promote cultural and academic exchanges (Embajada de Estados Unidos en Uruguay, n.d.). While Uruguay's two physical EducationUSA advising centers are structurally centralized within the capital city of Montevideo, the administrator emphasized that utilizing the *Alianzas* as a resource is essential for decentralization. This partnership allows the program to bridge the urban-rural divide, actively engaging prospective students from the country's interior regions who would otherwise face steep informational barriers. Furthermore, the administrator noted that the cultural and academic programming hosted by these spaces provides a pathway for prospective applicants. Activities such as English conversation clubs and digital research libraries act as recruitment channels, simultaneously building the foundational language competencies required for U.S. university admissions while introducing students to formal mobility counseling.

When contrasting the Uruguayan outreach framework with other Southern Cone nations, distinct regional variations emerge regarding institutional capacity and recruitment strategies. While Uruguay must navigate geographic decentralization through external partnerships like the *Alianzas*, both Chile and Argentina leverage a higher density of localized, official EducationUSA advising centers distributed across non-central regions. This decentralization minimizes their reliance on general-purpose American Spaces for basic geographic reach.

In Chile, for example, outreach policy has evolved beyond traditional methods like school visits toward targeted partnerships with student-facing organizations, particularly specialized STEM initiatives. This shift reflects an intentional strategy to optimize limited institutional resources by engaging pre-vetted, high-potential applicant cohorts. As the Chilean advisor noted:

“There are a few organizations that we've been working with to recruit [...] Because sometimes you go to a school and you present to like 100 kids and there's like maybe one kid in the group who might be interested or who might have the profile. Whereas if you go to some of these organizations, there's a greater percentage of kids there who might have the profile.” (A3)

By focusing on student organizations rather than mass secondary school presentations, the Chilean centers enhance their operational efficiency, capturing a higher density of students possessing both the academic profile and the interest required for international mobility. Alternatively, the operational strategy in Argentina highlights a different institutional structure. Rather than placing primary emphasis on physical spaces or specialized programmatic niches, the Argentine advisor's reflections centered heavily on centralized public diplomacy efforts promoted and funded directly by the U.S. Embassy, such as embassy-driven advertising and targeted public relations campaigns.

Ultimately, these comparative findings reveal a clear institutional connection across the Southern Cone. Argentina and Chile operate from a position of relative maturity, utilizing a permanent network of official regional offices and targeted organizational pipelines to engage peripheral student populations. In contrast, Uruguay's reliance on the *Alianzas* network represents a flexible, adaptive model, compensating for its lack of formal regional centers by utilizing pre-existing local cultural infrastructure. Uruguay also complements its attempts to reach students from diverse regions with virtual information sessions and events, as do the rest of the Southern Cone countries.

Administrators in all three countries emphasized the importance of digital infrastructure, with social media serving as the baseline for student-facing outreach. This reliance on digital channels was most pronounced in the Argentine context, where the administrator identified social media as the single most critical tool and the primary avenue for student discovery. Returning to the survey results, the majority of students did learn about EducationUSA through social media, thus corroborating the administrators' observations.

Rather than relying solely on institutional announcements, the centers utilize dynamic, peer-led outreach strategies to reach more students. A prominent example includes "Instagram takeovers," where

Opportunity Funds alumni studying in the United States document their academic and daily lives. This tactic not only demystifies the international mobility process but translates the opportunity into an attainable reality for prospective applicants by using peers as program ambassadors. Beyond these digital means, administrators continue to employ many traditional outreach mechanisms. These include local newspaper features highlighting student success stories, regional college fairs, targeted physical mailings, and direct informational presentations within public secondary schools. It is notable that the data collected from student interviews validates these administrative strategies, illustrating a direct alignment between institutional outreach and student acquisition. The students' pathways into the EducationUSA ecosystem can be categorized into two distinct branches: institutional/media-driven discovery and word-of-mouth recommendation.

Within the institutional and media category, students corroborated the efficacy of both modern digital outreach and traditional public relations. For instance, one student recounted discovering the program through a Google search that brought them directly to a U.S. Embassy webpage demonstrating the value of EducationUSA's connection to US government spaces and institutions. On the other hand, confirming the continued relevance of traditional media, another student reported that their initial exposure to the program came from a local newspaper article about a successful Opportunity Funds alumnus.

The data simultaneously highlights the profound impact of organic social networks and localized institutional embeddedness. Reflecting the targeted organizational partnerships discussed in the Chilean context, one student discovered EducationUSA through their participation in an extracurricular STEM organization. Furthermore, the role of school and peer networks emerged as powerful factors for application. One respondent noted that their decision to apply had a dual inspiration: they were encouraged by a secondary school teacher who was familiar with the program, and they were inspired by witnessing peers from their immediate social circle successfully gain admission to U.S. universities via the Opportunity Funds pathway the previous year. This underscores the reality that while institutional media can broadcast an opportunity, social capital and peer success stories remain vital for the encouragement of high-stakes international mobility.

Equity and Barriers

When asked to reflect on the barriers that students face when attempting to access the OF program, all three administrators unanimously identified baseline English language proficiency as a primary obstacle. While the OF program provides institutional support to help students improve their language skills during the preparation year specifically through English advising sessions and standardized exam preparation, administrators noted that demonstrating a sufficient foundational level of English to enter the program and remain competitive for full-tuition U.S. scholarships remains a steep barrier for prospective applicants.

This particular barrier presents a significant equity paradox within the selection process, as prospective applicants possessing advanced English language capital often do not meet the strict financial need requirements of the OF program. As one administrator (A2) observed:

"There is a slight contradiction, which is that there are very strong students with a low level of English—who perhaps have the fewest resources to study the language—yet they are, let's say, very strong candidates. On the other hand, there are students who are very strong candidates, know a great deal of English, and perhaps hold an IB [International Baccalaureate] diploma; they have no issues being admitted, but they do not need the financial assistance as much."

English proficiency emerged as both a deeply political issue and a major organizational barrier. Prospective students' low English levels stem not only from personal socioeconomic backgrounds but also from systemic national policies on foreign language education. As one administrator (A1) noted:

"For example, programs like Opportunity Funds are there to provide maximum support...but it has always been [dependent on English levels], you already have to take the student with a certain level of English. So, I believe that our organizational challenge there depends on the challenge at the country level regarding language teaching policies."

This comment highlights that student English levels are shaped by a complex intersection of socioeconomic standing and national education policy. Beyond language, administrators frequently cited the hyper-competitive application process as a barrier. As students compete for admission and full financial aid at highly selective universities, the required academic and extracurricular profiles become increasingly difficult to attain. Cultural differences further complicate the process. Because the OF application mirrors the US higher education system, both students and administrators identified admissions essays as a major hurdle, noting that students often struggle with the unique style of US academic writing. Furthermore, cultural norms within students' own communities can hinder progress:

"So many of these kids are told, like, you're crazy, like, why are you doing this? [...] They just have people around them that feed their imposter syndrome so badly" (A3).

This cultural disconnect was noted to be most pronounced along socioeconomic lines; upper-class families typically have more exposure to different cultures and travel experiences which would give credibility to the idea of studying in another country. Financially, they are ineligible for the OF program. To combat this imposter syndrome among prospective applicants, the administrator emphasized using alumni stories and social media takeovers to show what is possible, regardless of background.

Importantly, student interviews mirrored the administrators' concerns. English remained a principal challenge, with several students citing poor-quality language instruction at their high schools. In fact, two interviewed students were largely self-taught through media and free time activities, only refining their skills in the language during their year in the OF program. Additionally, students felt the pressure of the competitive process; many feared their extracurricular profiles were insufficient, particularly if their high schools offered limited opportunities or were not equipped to prepare them for opportunities abroad.

"I think one of the things that put me at a disadvantage when it came to finding the program was that I went to just any regular school in Chile. I wasn't at a private school, nor a traditionally prestigious school. Because of that, the information from EducationUSA didn't exactly reach my school... I found the program through a newspaper, and it was practically luck." (S3)

One student who participated pre-pandemic noted that proximity to the EducationUSA center was a major barrier. Despite living in the capital, her commute exceeded an hour each way, making it difficult to balance OF commitments with her school schedule. To accommodate this, EducationUSA permitted her to attend some sessions online. This hybrid approach foreshadowed the program's post-pandemic evolution, where a broader transition to virtual programming allows administrators to recruit heavier numbers of students from outside capital cities. This shift aligns with the collected survey data, which shows most students participated primarily online. It also coincides with the administrator-observed demographic trend of more students participating from regions outside of the country capital and smaller cities, which can be seen reflected in the student survey results as well.

The admissions essay writing process both for entrance into the OF program and US HE in general was another significant barrier, validating the administrators' earlier observations. Students credited the program's structure and EducationUSA's tutoring resources as critical to mastering the

stylistic expectations of US academic writing. For instance, one student aspiring to study liberal arts noted that while general academic requirements mirrored those in Chile, the liberal arts pedagogy itself was unfamiliar and required a steep learning curve.

Beyond institutional barriers, students cited personal adversities that complicated their journeys, such as the illness or passing of family members, or difficult family dynamics that motivated them to seek opportunities abroad. However, while all students required full financial aid to attend university and emphasized this point, they did not state that their financial distress was a barrier that hindered their access to the OF program itself or their ability to build a competitive application profile.

Institutional Support and Constraints

A defining tenet of the OF program is its longitudinal, preparative nature. Rather than acting as a simple financial grant, the program is structured as a cohort-based, intensive calendar year of academic and cultural advising designed to connect high-achieving, low-income students with full-tuition scholarships at U.S. universities. This holistic support system comprises individualized counseling, standardized examination preparation, and cohort seminars addressing cross-cultural adjustment, institutional norms, and culture shock.

However, administrators across the Southern Cone reported that the delivery of these intensive services is increasingly limited by institutional, financial, and geopolitical constraints. These budgetary contractions have significantly impacted operations across all three case studies, ultimately resulting in a noticeable decrease in applicant numbers across the region as marketing, outreach, and operational capacities shrink.

The findings reveal that the OF system is highly vulnerable to external funding barriers originating both within the home countries and from the United States.

- **Argentina:** The institutional strain manifested primarily as understaffing, which limited advisors' capacity to provide the one-on-one counseling that the cohort model demands. Many of the advisors work part-time, also limiting the capacity of the organization to provide complete and comprehensive advising.
- **Chile:** The program confronted steep national-level budget cuts which impacted the program on various levels. National politics and budget restrictions within the educational and non-profit sector also impacted the specialized partner organizations that EducationUSA relies upon to recruit and support vulnerable cohorts, such as regional STEM initiatives.

- **Uruguay:** The entire 2025 Opportunity Funds cycle was forced to close due to administrative complications stemming from a U.S. government shutdown. Furthermore, the Uruguayan advisor noted a reduction of available full-tuition scholarships within U.S. higher education itself, which directly suppresses the potential placement outcomes for students.

Beyond purely financial shortages, geographic centralization remains a stubborn operational bottleneck. In Chile, standardized admissions testing (such as the SAT and TOEFL) is a highly centralized process. As a result, students living in underrepresented regions must endure costly geographic displacements to the capital city of Santiago simply to take required exams. While EducationUSA is responsible for covering the costs of travel for students to attend exams, this results in further budgeting complication for the organization, especially as they note more students participating from previously underrepresented regions.

Meanwhile, in Uruguay, the country's small scale is compounded by a lack of localized resources necessary to address systemic equity barriers, most notably the baseline English language gap. This highlights a profound internal paradox raised by one advisor and echoed in the observations of others, mainly that the program is not sufficiently equipped to reach the most strongly disadvantaged socioeconomic populations, as these students rarely possess the academic and linguistic profiles required to make it through the competitive selection process.

Strategic Resilience and Adaptive Agency

Despite these systemic restrictions, the data reveals significant resilience and agency among local EducationUSA administrators. When institutional or financial barriers threaten cohort viability, advisors innovate to maximize their resources. A prime example of this micro-level policy adaptation is found in the Chilean context, where the administrator bypassed traditional, cost-prohibitive testing formats to protect student access. As the Chilean advisor (A3) observed:

“I’ve been trying to get creative in ways to save money. For example, I completely stopped having [students] take the TOEFL. In Chile... to do it in person involves traveling to Santiago [as] a lot of the places where you could take it in regions are not doing it anymore... And the in-home version just had so many technical problems... and it’s so expensive. So this year I had the kids take the Duolingo English test. You run the risk that there’s a handful of universities that won’t take it... [but] everybody else just applied with Duolingo and they were able to apply everywhere they wanted to.”

This strategic shift from the TOEFL to the more economical Duolingo English Test (DET) illustrates a calculated trade-off in pursuit of stronger support for students. The advisor deliberately accepted the risk of minor institutional non-acceptance by certain U.S. universities in order to eliminate the steep travel and registration fees that may cause financial strain. Similarly, administrators across the region reported relying heavily on external partner organizations to compensate for funding cuts and maintain student support pipelines. However, this strategy of cross-institutional reliance remains inherently fragile, as these local partner organizations are themselves navigating their own institutional constraints.

Perception of Value

The value derived from the OF program is multi-faceted and varies depending on individual student objectives and the specific barriers they encounter. Because the lived experience of value can differ significantly from external observations, comparing the perspectives of program administrators and students provides a productive point of analysis.

Administrator Perspectives: Information and Holistic Guidance

Administrators noted that students find great value in both the OF program and the broader EducationUSA network as a centralized "channel of communication" (A1). Through this channel, students can access thorough information on the highly specialized topic of US higher education admissions in one place. Beyond information access, several administrators highlighted personalized support and the development of trusting relationships with advisors as core pillars of the program's value. Describing the thorough and holistic nature of the advising process, A2 remarked:

"I think that in general [the most valued asset] is having someone who can help you at any moment, in any part of the application. Whether they are looking for universities, [...] looking for what types of scholarships, writing an essay, or navigating doubts about high school transcripts. Or, once admitted, when they receive the letter and the financial aid package, seeing if it can cover everything or if it is necessary to do something more. We accompany [them] during absolutely everything. Even once accepted, we give them information about visas, we cover the costs of visas, and all those... costs too."

Administrators also emphasized the importance of fostering peer networks, noting their role in connecting current OF students with successful alumni and facilitating communication channels, such as WhatsApp groups, to help students form peer bonds. Some administrators observed that this cohort-based

support is crucial for reducing student insecurity, combating impostor syndrome, and bridging cultural disconnects. As A3 observed:

"The opportunity [allows] students to bond among themselves, but they also make connections with Competitive College Club and Undergraduate College Club students, so that there's a relatively huge cohort of students that are in the same boat as them. Because again, it goes back to being the 'odd duck' where nobody in school understands what you're doing or why you're doing it. So at least this little core of students does understand, and they can support each other and complain to each other."

Finally, administrators perceived significant student value in the program's focus on cultural familiarization. This included preparing students for the distinct expectations of U.S. college applications such as holistic essay writing and standardized testing as well as pre-departure sessions designed to address culture shock and prepare students for arrival in the United States.

Student Perspectives: Mentorship, Community, and Crisis Support

Turning to the students' own perceptions of value, every participant emphasized the vital role of mentorship and advisor support. Students often entered the program with specific goals, such as pursuing a particular field of study or attending a type of institution, such as a liberal arts college. While all interviewed students were successful applicants who ultimately gained admission to their target institutions, they stressed that the program's support extended far beyond academic preparation. In particular, one student noted, albeit humorously, that EducationUSA "supported me with all the emotional and [some of] the academic preparation," (S1), illustrating that the program's impact transcends application preparation.

Echoing the administrators' observations, students found the cohort model and peer bonds to be rewarding and long-lasting. Many participants cited ongoing, meaningful friendships with members of their local OF cohort, as well as international OF students attending the same U.S. universities.

Ultimately, mentorship served as a critical component of the program's value, providing students with an enriching and protective experience. Students highlighted not only the strong rapport they shared with advisors and the practical resources provided ranging from English language practice to essay workshops, but also instances where support went above and beyond standard professional duties. In one case, a student faced academic persecution at their local institution due to political activity; they credited EducationUSA with advocating on their behalf and helping them maintain their student status.

As a result, students largely characterized their participation in the program as a transformative experience, one that reshaped not only their academic trajectories but also their personal resilience and socio-emotional well-being.

“Opportunity Funds really was the beginning of everything... I mean, I believe that I wouldn't be where I am, nor would I have the experience that I have and maybe the career that I have if it weren't for that. I always think backwards and really that was like the beginning of everything.”
(S3)

This profound sense of personal transformation directly informs how both administrators and participants ultimately conceptualize institutional achievement. The primary intended outcome of the OF program is for students to secure admission to a U.S. university with full financial funding. Based on this institutional metric alone, student success would be expected to mirror this singular outcome, however, the data reveals that conceptions of a "successful program" held by both students and administrators are far more nuanced and multi-dimensional than mere enrollment statistics.

Institutional Fit and Transnational Knowledge Networks

One administrator emphasized that program success extends beyond helping students find an institution that would accept them; rather, the goal is to identify a "good fit." Elaborating on this concept, the administrator noted that institutional fit transcends traditional measures like ranking and competitiveness, instead representing a holistic alignment with the student's academic interests, personality, and lifestyle preferences.

Furthermore, administrators adopted a long-term view of program success, framing it as a vehicle for cross-border knowledge exchange and intellectual capital sharing. For instance, one participant noted, “Our goal is... always that the students take what they've learned in the USA and bring it and contribute it here in (the home country)” (A1), reflecting an institutional expectation of student return and subsequent domestic knowledge transfer.

Another administrator shared a similar perspective on knowledge transfer but framed it through a more multilateral, diplomatic lens:

"[W]e know that in some way they are ambassadors of (home country) in the United States, and they can also engage in cultural exchange, bringing a bit of (home country) to the

United States and, if they return, bringing a bit of the United States back to (home country)."

(A2)

Claims such as these acknowledge that student return is not guaranteed. When asked further, the administrator clarified that the majority of OF alumni had not yet returned home for professional reasons, pointing to the economic volatility currently facing their country as a barrier to repatriation. This pattern was echoed by administrators from other countries, who observed that most of their OF alumni choose to remain abroad to enter the workforce or pursue postgraduate opportunities in the United States or third-party countries.

Student Conceptions: Opportunity, Domestic Realities, and Return

From the students' perspectives, success manifested in diverse and practical ways. Several participants emphasized that securing full funding remained their most critical criteria for success, underscoring that financial viability remains paramount even when students select universities based on qualitative preferences. Beyond the financial, students conceptualized success through highly individualized narratives. For some, studying at a foreign institution represented a successful departure from the limited opportunities of their hometowns, yet this was frequently coupled with a strong desire to return to their home countries in the future. For the majority of participants, studying abroad was fundamentally linked to upward mobility, aligning with broader literature that connects international student mobility to enhanced career prospects and increased earning potential.

Intriguingly, this pursuit of opportunity was not intrinsically tied to a desire for long-term settlement in the United States. In fact, some students explicitly contrasted the saturated U.S. job market with the competitive advantage a U.S. degree would afford them in their home regions. One student studying at an Ivy League university highlighted this dynamic when discussing her professional ambitions within South America:

"Chile is my main goal; I would like to go back to Chile. But I also want to continue my studies. I want to do a master's, and I would like to have a PhD. Being realistic, I don't want to jump from [University], which is a great school, to a school that is not as good. I would like to go to Chile and have a job there. I want to live there; I want to die there. I am very patriotic; I love my country. I want to stay there, but the institutions here [in the U.S.] are also great.

However, the market here is much tougher. I always joke that when I return to my country, I'm going to be like Michelle Obama, (laughs), because I'll be coming from [University] and it's going to be great. I'll get a job right away. It's a big joke, but it really is very difficult here. I don't think I can get a job here, especially being a [foreign] citizen. It is almost impossible." (S2)

While not all participants demonstrated the same level of career specificity, an overarching narrative persisted regarding the long-term opportunities generated by international study. As another student reflected:

"I think it is one of the most difficult things I have ever done, but it's worth it. It is worth it for what it means to study abroad, for what it means to study in English as well, and for the connections and opportunities." (S3)

Amid these general trends, one participant emerged as a notable outlier. This student reported a predominantly negative experience in the United States, driven primarily by cultural disconnect. From their perspective, daily life in the United States felt like a socioeconomic downgrade compared to their home country, characterized by poor local infrastructure and a lower perceived quality of life. Yet, despite this negative lived experience, the student still validated the institutional definition of success, acknowledging the undeniable value of holding a U.S. degree on paper.

External Environment

Macro-level sociopolitical and economic factors exert a profound influence on the international student experience, shaping both the accessibility of the OF program and the long-term trajectories of its participants. Program administrators highlighted a complex interplay between domestic barriers and shifting U.S. institutional policies that either impede or enable student success.

Domestic Policy and Economic Volatility

At the domestic level, national policies and economic conditions significantly dictate the barriers confronting prospective applicants. For instance, administrators noted that the absence of robust national policies promoting English language learning directly limits the pool of eligible candidates by complicating overall national language proficiency, especially for those educated in public schools. Beyond educational policy, shifting political climates in the home countries alter the institutional support

mechanisms available to students. In the case of Chile, a shifting political landscape has increasingly restricted the state funding available to support outward student mobility.

Compounding these policy limitations, severe economic instability serves as a primary barrier to program entry. One administrator underscored how the country's ongoing economic crisis has suppressed application numbers and priced out otherwise qualified candidates, observing:

"Compared to three years ago, there are fewer applicants to the Opportunity Funds cohort at the moment. We don't know if it is due to a lack of interest, or if perhaps the economic situation of our country makes any expense associated with going to the United States, even the most minor ones, feel completely out of reach due to the country's lack of purchasing power and the instability of recent years. Therefore, if something was costly a few years ago, today it is much more expensive; when we look at the exchange rate between the (national currency) and the U.S. dollar, it's impossible."

This economic precarity transforms even heavily subsidized pathways into strong financial burdens, as hyperinflation and currency devaluation render almost all costs as prohibitively expensive for local families.

International Political Climates and Institutional Barriers

On an international level, shifts in the U.S. political climate and federal government have tangible, trickle-down effects on the operational outcomes of the OF program. While administrators observed that undergraduate applicants themselves rarely alter their goals in response to U.S. political changes, these geopolitical shifts diminish institutional capacity. Specifically, administrators reported that federal and state funding cuts have compromised the ability of U.S. universities to offer fully funded tuition packages to international students.

Tightening immigration and labor regulations have also constrained the professional avenues available to international scholars within the United States (Shie et al, 2025). Restrictions on postgraduate employment and undergraduate internships (such as Optional Practical Training) create a dampening effect, potentially discouraging future cohorts from engaging with EducationUSA programs due to a perceived reduction in long-term return on investment.

Interestingly, out of the four students interviewed, only one explicitly identified the U.S. political climate as a defining factor in her academic and professional journey. In addition to anticipated

difficulties in finding employment, this student encountered significant difficulties in accessing US HE. Following the implementation of student visa screening protocols in 2025, her social media history was flagged for administrative review. The resulting review caused a substantial delay in her visa approval, illustrating how macro-level security policies materialize as disruptive, stressful bottlenecks for individual international students even when successfully accepted into the OF program.

Additional Findings

Beyond the parameters of the initial coding scheme guided by the six thematic pillars, several salient thematic areas emerged inductively from the data across both student and administrator profiles. These emergent findings highlight the critical role of external supports and internal psychological resources in mitigating barriers.

External Support Systems

Participants frequently identified external, non-institutional supports that heavily influenced their ability to navigate the OF program and secure admission to a U.S. university. At the secondary school level, several students emphasized the positive intervention of teachers, who not only raised awareness about the OF program but also provided emotional encouragement and administrative support throughout the competitive application cycle. For instance, one student who initially struggled with language proficiency received mentorship from an English teacher, who prepared her for the rigorous OF selection interviews.

Access to extracurricular resources also proved vital; while many students evaluated their schools' institutional prestige or baseline academic offerings poorly, they actively sought out and leveraged community-based extracurricular activities. These initiatives ultimately proved beneficial when constructing their application profiles for the OF program.

In another way, students' family circles emerged as a primary site of support, even when families were experiencing acute crises, such as terminal illness, disability, or the loss of a family member. It raises notice that even in instances characterized by strained familial relationships, the family unit still functioned as a support system. For example, one participant who reported a difficult domestic environment still received a modest financial allowance from family members while abroad, which served as a crucial resource to cover living expenses not covered by institutional financial aid.

Institutional and Individual Resilience

Both administrators and students pointed to a dynamic combination of systemic flexibility and internal psychological resilience as critical determinants of success. Administrators framed resilience through an organizational lens, noting how the advisory network adapts to challenging geopolitical landscapes and localized funding cuts. This institutional adaptability was underscored as a vital mechanism for sustaining long-term program efficacy. As one regional administrator (A1) reflected:

"I think something I have observed in the program over these years is our capacity to adapt. My prediction is that no matter what comes, what happens, or how volatile things become, within the program, we are going to adapt to work as hard as possible to improve student profiles. We will continue guiding them on alternative approaches and, importantly, building much stronger connections with the universities."

To operationalize this resilience, administrators frequently use innovative resources to help students. These strategies include implementing standardized test preparation, seeking funding support from international partner organizations, and covering logistical costs, such as student travel and lodging for regional testing centers. Within this framework, organizational resilience is defined as a deliberate capacity for flexibility in direct response to evolving student barriers.

Conversely, student resilience appeared mainly as an intrinsic trait cultivated over their lifetimes. For example, multiple participants detailed how they overcame substandard English language instruction at their secondary schools by learning through media and dedicating their free time to language study. To give another example of this, when reflecting on her success in securing full funding at a highly selective institution, one student attributed her competitive edge to intrinsic creativity and self-expression, which allowed her to excel in the essay components despite a lack of familiarity with standard U.S. writing conventions.

Serendipity and Pre-Existing Profiles

Notably, an overarching narrative of serendipity and luck emerged across the dataset. In all cases but one, students discovered the Opportunity Funds program by chance, rather than through an intentional search for U.S. higher education pathways. Participants universally perceived that they entered the application cycle with an academic and personal profile that was already aligned with institutional

expectations. As a result, formal preparation was framed not as a transformative process, but rather as the realization of pre-existing qualities. As one student (S1) observed:

"[By that point], I already had a much better-rounded resume—not specifically because I wanted to target universities [in the U.S.], but simply because I felt born to apply and participate in all those activities. [...] I didn't prepare because I felt that it truly matched my profile."

This perception of entering the program with an intrinsically "fit" profile rather than one that required intentional cultivation represents a significant pattern across the student cohorts. This phenomenon, and its implications for student agency and habitus, will be analyzed at greater length in the discussion chapter.

Long-Term Alumni Engagement, Demographics and Discrepancies

Every participant emphasized the long-term impact of the OF program on their trajectories, detailing how they have maintained active connections with the organization through ongoing outreach and mentorship initiatives. It is notable that this commitment persisted even for the participant who reported a predominantly negative lived experience while studying in the United States. Across all student cohorts, the program was retroactively evaluated as a profoundly supportive and impactful mechanism. Consequently, participants framed their continuous involvement as a form of institutional reciprocity and a deliberate effort to "give back" and sustain the program's vitality for future cohorts. This empirical trend directly corroborates the objectives articulated by program administrators, who underscored the necessity of cultivating an alumni network and utilizing past participant experiences to optimize future outreach efforts. This alignment suggests that the program successfully fosters a strong sense of institutional loyalty, transforming alumni into long-term stakeholders.

While administrators provided formal institutional data regarding participant demographics, the students frequently offered observations based on their lived experiences within their respective cohorts. Several participants noted a distinct regional shift in recruitment, observing an increasing inclusion of students from municipal areas outside national capital cities, a trend verified by the regional students within this sample who benefited from this geographic diversification.

Participants also offered critical reflections on cohort size and funding scalability. On average, students reported that within a localized cohort of approximately ten participants, only two or three ultimately secured full institutional funding. This observation highlights the highly competitive and

selective nature of the final placement process, illustrating that program entry does not automatically guarantee a fully funded outcome.

It is striking that one participant raised a significant critique regarding the socio-economic composition of the program, alleging a discrepancy in financial reporting. This student claimed that a notable portion of accepted OF participants originated from upper-middle- or upper-class households, suggesting that some applicants may have strategically misrepresented themselves or lacked complete transparency regarding their family's true financial standing during the screening process. However, this student also emphasized the need for holistic review of profiles, stating that while in her case her family was not low-income, they faced significant struggles due to chronic illness that complicated their financial situation.

Although this specific observation was raised by only one interviewee and likely because it emerged unprompted during the interview, it points to critical undercurrents regarding equity and meritocratic selection within fully funded pathways. This qualitative insight aligns closely with the quantitative data gathered from the student surveys, in which only a small minority (approximately 11%) self-identified as low-income. This convergence of mixed-methods data underscores the complexity of auditing financial need in highly competitive, self-reported scholarship systems.

Discussion and Conclusions

Reframing the OF Program Beyond Enrollment Metrics.

The Opportunity Funds program is formally designed around a singular, measurable outcome: securing full-tuition admission to a U.S. university for high-achieving, low-income students from the Southern Cone. Yet reducing program efficacy to placement statistics obscures a far more complex reality. The data collected from administrators and students across Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay reveals that the lived experience of the OF program and the value participants derive from it far exceeds what any enrollment figure can capture. At the same time, the conditions under which the program operates reveal persistent and, in some cases, heightening tensions between its equity objectives and the barriers it cannot fully overcome. Ultimately it can be seen that while the program reduces individual-level barriers to mobility, the cultural and linguistic capital that determines who is positioned to benefit remains largely untouched, thus presenting an equity paradox.

This discussion argues that the OF program functions as a high-performing adaptive system operating within a landscape with strong barriers. Its administrators demonstrate remarkable institutional

resilience, its students have extraordinary personal agency, and its outcomes are transformative at the individual level. However, despite these strengths, inequities persist, thereby lending some credence to the hypothesis and revealing a fundamental equity paradox within the program's structure. Understanding both the program's achievements and its limitations requires moving beyond enrollment as a metric for success and engaging seriously with the equity paradoxes, vulnerabilities, and human dynamics that the data affirms

Equity Paradoxes and the Limits of Need-Based Selection

Among the most consequential findings of this study is the emergence of an equity paradox embedded within the OF program's own selection process. The program is explicitly designed to serve students who are simultaneously academically exceptional and financially disadvantaged. This is a population that, in theory, would be excluded from international higher education without institutional intervention. In practice, however, the selection criteria interact with structural inequalities in ways that complicate this vision and risk reproducing the very hierarchies the program seeks to disrupt.

The most immediate manifestation of this paradox is the English language proficiency barrier. All three administrators identified baseline English proficiency as a primary obstacle for prospective applicants, yet the students most likely to possess advanced English skills are disproportionately those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, precisely the population excluded from OF eligibility on financial grounds or school criteria. This dynamic creates a catch-22 in which the financial need and linguistic readiness that are both required for program participation are inversely correlated across the population the program most intends to reach.

This barrier is not merely a product of individual circumstance. As one administrator observed, student English levels are shaped by the intersection of family socioeconomic standing and national-level foreign language education policy (A1). In this framing, the English proficiency gap is not a personal deficit but a systemic outcome, one that the OF program is ill-positioned to address given that it intervenes at the point of university application rather than earlier in students' educational careers. This represents a significant limitation of the program's equity reach as it supports students who have already achieved a certain linguistic baseline, but cannot easily extend to those who never had the conditions to reach that baseline in the first place. Overall, the frequency of remarks about English language capability as a main barrier, manifesting itself in all of the administrator interviews and most of the student interviews, shows the real and pressing impact of linguistic capital as a key facet of international student mobility.

A second and distinct equity tension emerges from the data concerning the socioeconomic composition of accepted cohorts. One participant alleged that a notable proportion of OF participants originated from upper-middle- or upper-class households, suggesting that some applicants may have strategically obscured or misrepresented their family's true financial standing during screening. While this observation was raised by only one interviewee, it is corroborated by the quantitative survey data, which together point to a troubling pattern: that in self-reported, highly competitive scholarship systems, strategic self-presentation can become a mechanism through which existing privilege is at times overlooked within equity-targeted initiatives. While it is true that the financial analysis of student profiles for the OF program is holistic, taking into account various factors, this cannot deny the fact that only a small percentage of low-income students were represented in a sample for a program aimed at financially disadvantaged students. This phenomenon is not unique to the OF program but it reflects a broader vulnerability in need-based aid systems and their capacity to reach students from the most disadvantaged socioeconomic classes.

Taken together, these dynamics are highly indicative of Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of cultural capital and habitus. The students who successfully navigate the OF selection process are not simply those with the greatest financial need, nor those with the most raw academic potential. Rather, they are those who already possess the linguistic capacities, and institutional familiarity that the application process rewards, whether this is through family background, school environment, or extracurricular exposure. The program may broaden access at the margins, but it remains shaped by the prior distribution of cultural capital over the course of a student's life.

'Accidental' Profiles as a Structural Signal

One of the most striking and theoretically significant patterns to emerge from the student interviews is the near-universal role of chance in program discovery. With only one exception, every student participant reported encountering the Opportunity Funds program accidentally through a Google search, a local newspaper article, a teacher's encouragement, or a peer's success the previous year. None described actively searching for pathways to U.S. higher education prior to this accidental exposure. This pattern of serendipitous discovery is not merely a curiosity; it carries significant implications for how the program understands and measures its own reach, and also complicates a narrative of international student mobility in which individuals actively seek opportunities abroad.

Closely related to this finding is a second pattern: the perception among successful applicants that they entered the OF program with a profile that was already aligned with institutional expectations.

Students did not describe a process of deliberate self-construction in preparation for competitive international admissions. Instead, they characterized the program as the moment at which a pre-existing identity shaped by years of extracurricular activity and personal resilience was finally recognized and formalized. Formal preparation for these students was not transformative but revelatory, surfacing capital that was already there.

This perception deserves careful analytical scrutiny. On one level, it speaks to the genuine strength and intrinsic motivation of the students the program attracts. But on another level, it raises a consequential question: what does it mean for an equity-oriented program when its successful participants feel they were already ready? If the students who find and succeed in the OF pipeline are those who had already developed a strong profile through prior advantage gained by strong teachers, extracurricular access, peer networks, and family stability then the program may be reaching a population that is, relatively speaking, already positioned closer to success than the broader range of financially eligible students.

This is where the patterns of accidental finding intersects with the equity paradox discussed above. The organic social capital that mediates program discovery is not randomly distributed. It clusters in certain schools, cities, and social networks. Students from under-resourced rural areas or from secondary schools with limited extracurricular offerings are less likely to encounter these informal gatekeeping channels, and therefore less likely to discover the program at all, not because they lack the potential, but because they lack proximity to the channels through which the opportunity travels, including STEM organizations and peer networks. The program's growing investment in virtual programming and regional outreach represents a meaningful response to this problem, but the data suggests the pipeline remains shaped by the prior geography of social capital in ways that warrant ongoing critical attention.

Returning once more to Bourdieu, the serendipity pattern can be understood as a function of habitus: the students who recognize the OF opportunity as an opportunity plausible for someone like them are already those whose accumulated dispositions make such recognition possible. The program does not simply find students to prepare them for the admissions process; it finds students who are already, in some sense, prepared.

Institutional Resilience Under Geopolitical Strain

If the equity paradoxes discussed above represent the internal tensions of the OF program, the data reveals an equally significant set of external pressures that threaten program viability from the

outside. Across all three national contexts, administrators described operating under conditions of institutional precarity in which a convergence of domestic budget contractions, economic instability, and shifting U.S. federal policy has substantially put at risk the conditions required to carry out the program.

The specific manifestations of this precarity differ by context but follow similar patterns. In Argentina, chronic economic crisis marked by hyperinflation, currency devaluation, and declining household purchasing power has suppressed application numbers, as even the minor administrative costs associated with the program become prohibitive for families facing acute financial instability. In Chile, national-level budget cuts have contracted both the EducationUSA operation itself and the partner organizations upon which it relies for targeted recruitment, particularly the specialized STEM initiatives that serve as pipelines for eligible applicants. Uruguay faced the most acute disruption: the entire 2025 OF cohort cycle was suspended due to administrative fallout from a U.S. government shutdown, illustrating how macro-level political decisions in Washington can have a profound impact on the educational prospects of individual students thousands of miles away. Compounding this, the Uruguayan administrator noted a reduction in the availability of full-tuition scholarship packages from U.S. universities themselves, a trickle-down effect that diminishes program outcomes even when the local operation functions as intended. The cascading effects of policy-level restrictions and funding barriers in destination countries seeing their effects in home countries exemplifies Dependency Theory, in which Periphery countries are profoundly impacted by the direct and indirect actions of the Core (Wallerstein, 1974).

In response to these multi-directional pressures, administrators across the region have manifested a remarkable capacity for creative adaptation. In one country, the program's strategic substitution of the DET for the TOEFL both eliminates steep travel and registration costs for students in non-central regions and exemplifies a form of calculated micro-level policy improvisation: accepting a degree of institutional risk (a small number of universities that do not recognize the DET) in order to preserve the program's core equity function. Similarly, the post-pandemic transition to virtual and hybrid programming has demonstrably extended geographic reach, enabling recruitment of students from outside capital cities at a scale not previously feasible and thus helping to bridge the rural-urban divide. These adaptations reflect genuine institutional adaptability and a commitment to student outcomes under conditions of scarcity, while also challenging theories of dependency which place countries in a peripheral status, lacking in agency.

The Transnational Mobility Question: Return, Brain Drain, and Credential Value

A recurring tension in the administrative framing of program success concerns the question of return. Administrators across the three countries articulated a desire for alumni to return with their U.S.-acquired knowledge and contribute to development in their home regions. One administrator expressed this directly: "our goal is always that students take what they've learned in the USA and bring it and contribute it here in (home country)" (A1). Yet the data simultaneously reveals that this aspiration is rarely realized in practice: administrators acknowledged that the majority of OF alumni currently remain abroad, working or pursuing graduate education in the United States or third countries, with the Argentine administrator explicitly citing the country's economic volatility as a barrier to return.

The student data complicates any straightforward reading of this pattern as brain drain. Most participants expressed a genuine desire to return to their home countries rather than a preference for permanent settlement in the United States. Survey results confirmed that they were often undecided about their post-graduation residency plans. What mediates between aspiration and outcome is not individual choice but economic constraints. Saturated U.S. labor markets, restrictions on Optional Practical Training and post-graduation work authorization, and the comparative advantage that a U.S. degree confers in home-region job markets all shape post-graduation trajectories in ways that may look like emigration but are better understood as deferred return. As one student articulated, the U.S. degree is valued not as a ticket to U.S. employment but as a competitive differentiator within Latin American labor markets, a logic that simultaneously validates the program's investment and reveals the limits of framing student retention abroad as program failure. While these aspirations for return may complicate arguments for Brain Drain, Dependency Theory ultimately still reigns true, as students themselves and their economies at large remain dependent on educational credentials obtained abroad, thus illustrating Prebisch's theory in action on an individual level (1950).

The Role of Mentorship and Cohort Community in Reducing Barriers

Amid the various constraints and equity tensions documented throughout this analysis, one finding emerges with consistent and striking force: the interpersonal dimensions of the OF program, including mentorship, cohort community, and the sustained relationships with advisors that are pillars of the program's efficacy. Students across all cohorts identified these elements as central to their success, and their accounts make clear that the support they received frequently exceeded the boundaries of standard professional practice. Understood through a Bourdieusian lens, these relational structures are not

incidental to the program's promotion of equity; they constitute a deliberate mechanism for social capital transfer in a context where such capital may sometimes be difficult to cultivate.

Students described advisors who advocated on their behalf in institutional conflicts, provided emotional support through periods of crisis, and remained accessible across the full arc of the application cycle and beyond. For students who described being actively discouraged by their communities, told they were "crazy" for pursuing U.S. university admission (A3), and experiencing what administrators named as "imposter syndrome fed by those around them," This discouragement is legible in Bourdieusian terms as a form of symbolic violence in which the student internalized the dominant social order's judgment that international mobility is not a legitimate aspiration for students of their background (Bourdieu, 1991). In this case, the program's support services served as a critical counter-environment and a space in which aspirations were treated as legitimate.

The cohort model amplifies this effect. Students who entered the program as outliers in their local social contexts, what administrators described as "odd ducks" (A3) whose peers and families often could not understand or validate their ambitions, found in their OF cohort a community of mutual intelligibility. These bonds proved durable, extending into friendships maintained across international distances and through shared institutional experiences at U.S. universities. Informal communication networks, such as WhatsApp groups connecting current students with alumni, functioned as a practical extension of this community, providing peer support and lived knowledge.

This dimension of the program deserves recognition as an evidence-based mechanism of equity, one that mitigates the isolation, cultural disconnection, and imposter syndrome that disproportionately affect international mobility students, especially those from a disadvantaged background. In the OF program, resources such as advising and alumni networks show the ways in which the program not only bridges gaps in linguistic or economic capital, but creates a cultivated and communal network of efforts intended to grow capital and foster wellbeing. For students whose habitus was formed in contexts that offered limited access to the social networks through which international mobility opportunities normally travel, the program provides a substitute: a structured field in which knowledge is exchanged and the aspiration is, for the first time, reflected back as rational.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study carry practical implications across multiple institutional levels. For EducationUSA and the OF program specifically, the serendipity pattern identified in this study suggests the need for a more proactive, intentional outreach model that does not rely on prospective students happening to encounter the program through informal networks, but actively employs recruitment within the schools and communities least likely to produce such encounters organically. Equally pressing is the need for earlier investment in English language pipeline development; as long as program entry requires a linguistic baseline that is inaccessible to the most disadvantaged applicants, objectives of equity remain incomplete. Finally, the socioeconomic discrepancy identified in this data points to the value of earlier intervention to reach low-income students.

For U.S. higher education institutions, the findings underscore the consequences of reducing full-tuition international scholarship availability. These funding decisions do not occur in isolation but they directly determine the viable outcomes for the OF program and, by extension, the program's capacity to fulfill its mission for students who have invested a full preparation year in pursuit of admission. For regional governments, the data makes a clear case for national foreign language education policy as having a strong influence on equity. Systemic investment in English language instruction within public secondary education would not merely improve program access; it would address a foundational barrier at the point in students' trajectories where intervention is most efficient.

For future research, this study points to several productive avenues: longitudinal tracking of OF alumni trajectories to better understand the motivators of return versus continued residence abroad; further mixed-methods investigation into the socioeconomic composition of accepted cohorts; and comparative analysis that extends beyond the Southern Cone to evaluate whether the patterns identified here are regionally specific or indicative of broader dynamics within EducationUSA's global network.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how the OF program functions as a mechanism for equitable international student mobility. The findings confirm that, measured by its own institutional terms, the program achieves its goals: students who enter the program emerge with the academic preparation, application competency, and financial support necessary to competitively apply for U.S. higher education at elite institutions that would otherwise remain out of reach. But the data also tells a more complicated story in which the program's achievements are inseparable from the conditions it navigates, the equity

tensions it reproduces even as it works to disrupt them, and the extraordinary human dedication it depends upon to function.

Perhaps the most telling summary of what this study finds is captured in the words of a student for whom the program represented nothing less than a life changing experience: "I believe that Opportunity Funds really was the beginning of everything... I believe that I wouldn't be where I am, nor would I have the experience that I have and maybe the career that I have if it weren't for that" (S3). A transformation that goes beyond the academic and replicates itself across years, locations, and cohorts, is the program's most significant and least quantifiable output, reinforced by the commitment and dedication of its advisors.

However, the conditions that make such transformation possible are neither stable nor guaranteed. Funding disruptions from the US federal government, economic crises in Argentina, budget contractions in Chile and more all materialize as disruptions to individual students' trajectories. The program's demonstrated resilience in the face of these pressures, while admirable, is also problematic as institutional continuity becomes dependent on advisors improvising their way around structural inadequacy, adding a layer of precarity to the equity produced. In this way, this thesis' contribution was to point to the strong barriers that equity-based initiatives in international higher education face, and the need for a reinvention of programs if they are to reach the most disadvantaged students. The efficacy of these reinventions would be a highly recommended area for further study.

While the value of such programs on the individual student's life is striking, what more effective equitable international mobility could look like requires more than adaptive programming at the point of application and calls for national investment in language education, systemic resourcing of public diplomacy infrastructure, institutional commitment from U.S. universities to maintain full-funding availability, and a willingness among program designers to interrogate the selection dynamics that shape who, among all eligible students, is ever in a position to be found.

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