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The internationalization of for-profit higher education institutions in the United States: Seeking legitimacy and responding to market forces via international student mobility

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Abstract

Institutional internationalization has been extensively researched in US higher education, particularly with reference to the public and private nonprofit four-year sector. This study contributes to an emerging body of literature that explores internationalization in other higher education sectors and forms, using an explanatory mixed methods research approach to examine for-profit higher education institutions. We draw from business, economics, and sociology literature to develop a theoretical framework that helps explain observed internationalization activity within for-profit higher education and apply it to examine trends in in-bound and out-bound international student mobility. Specifically, we focus on the economic rationale for the internationalization of higher education, the notion of for-profit higher education institutions as privately-owned entities, and key theoretical constructs, namely neo-institutionalism, market imperfection, and niche market orientation. The quantitative portion of our study helps us to understand the extent to which actual in-bound and intended out-bound international student mobility is present in for-profit US higher education. Our qualitative analysis informs how for-profit institutions market themselves to compete for international students, what strategies these institutions use to promote study abroad, and the relevance of an institution's market niche regarding student mobility. Our findings indicate that while neo-institutional theory, market imperfections, and niche market orientation help us understand international student mobility in for-profit higher education, these institutions also vary in which activities and target audiences they exhibit such behavior toward. Given the significant role that for-profit institutions play in the US higher education landscape, analysis of how and why these institutions engage in aspects of internationalization is warranted.

Keywords Higher education · Internationalization · International student mobility · Study abroad · For-profit education · Niche market · Market imperfection · Neo-institutional theory

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Introduction

The internationalization of higher education (HE) is a widely researched phenomenon that is key to addressing the missions of many higher education institutions (HEIs) (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Prior research on this topic has primarily focused on the internationalization of public or private nonprofit HEIs instead of HEIs that distribute profits to owners/shareholders. Researchers' focus on public and nonprofit HEIs is logical, as the majority of HEIs fall in one of these two categories. However, private, for-profit, HEIs, particularly in the United States (US), provided post-secondary educational services to over a million students in the 2024 academic year according to the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS). Given the significant role these institutions play in the US HE landscape, analysis of how and why private, for-profit HEIs engage in internationalization is warranted.

Internationalization has been linked to activities aligned with elite and semi-elite institutions across the nonprofit and public sectors, such as international student mobility (both international student recruitment and study abroad for domestic students), international faculty recruitment, language programs, internationalization of the curriculum, international partnerships, research collaborations, etc. (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Recent scholarly explorations have addressed internationalization at other institution types, such as two-year institutions (Whatley, 2021), shedding light on the nuanced dimensions of their international engagement. However, the for-profit HE sector has not received similar attention. This controversial sector has targeted student recruitment, leveraging their high tuition fees to offset financial pressures (Otto et al., 2021). While the number of internationally mobile students in the for-profit HE sector is considerably lower than in other sectors, certain institutions' enrollment consists of a high share of international students, other institutions operate study abroad program portfolios, and some institutions are prolific in both aspects of student mobility.

While the sector's overall international engagement warrants further analysis, there are also concerns that arise from its internationalization focus centering on student mobility. Some for-profit HEIs have been implicated in unethical or illegal practices related to international student recruitment, including visa fraud, document falsification, and the provision of inadequate or nonexistent educational services. In high-profile cases—such as Tri-Valley University, Herguan University, and the Micropower Career Institute—institutions were shut down after federal investigations uncovered efforts to profit from international students while circumventing immigration regulations (Redden, 2016). ICE-led sting operations, including at the University of Northern New Jersey and the University of Farmington, further exposed networks of brokers and institutions exploiting student visa systems (Redden, 2019). Accreditation failures have also played a role, as some recognized agencies granted legitimacy to institutions that failed to meet basic academic standards (Redden, 2018). At the same time, a for-profit orientation does not inherently indicate misconduct. Many for-profit institutions operate responsibly, expand access to underserved populations, and respond flexibly to labor market demands (Gilpin et al., 2015). Acknowledging documented abuses is essential to understanding the risks involved in market-driven internationalization, but it is equally important to recognize the sector's diversity and potential for positive contributions.

Against the backdrop of the controversial reputation private, for-profit HE has garnered in the US, particularly in their internationalization approach which focuses on student mobility, this study answers the following research questions:

1. By institutional level, what is the extent to which in-bound and out-bound international student mobility is present in the for-profit sector of US HE?
2. How do these institutions market themselves to attract international students?
3. What kind of strategies do the institutions employ to promote study abroad?
4. What is the relevance of institutions' market niche regarding student mobility activities?

This study contributes to our understanding of the internationalization of HE and the for-profit HE literature by investigating organizational strategies involving student mobility (incoming and outgoing), at US for-profit HEIs. To analyze this behavior, we take an interdisciplinary approach and build a theoretical framework from the business, economics, and sociology literature. We then utilize an explanatory mixed-methods approach combining descriptive quantitative analysis with an instrumental multiple case study qualitative analysis of online marketing strategies to answer our research questions and propose hypotheses regarding the behavior of private, for-profit US HEIs. These findings bear implications for policy and practice by helping us understand, in part, how and why for-profit HEIs in the US context engage in the student mobility aspects of internationalization.

Understanding Profit-Oriented Internationalization and Higher Education

Economic Rationales for the Internationalization of Higher Education

Prior literature identifies four rationales that drive the internationalization of HE: political, economic, social/cultural, and academic (Knight, 2004). Collectively, these rationale groupings describe the motivations of various HE actors for participating in the process of internationalization (Altbach & Knight, 2007). Notably, these stakeholders can be classified into multiple levels. Students, faculty, and staff are actors at the individual level; HEIs, nonprofit associations, and for-profit service providers are actors at the institutional level; and governmental agencies and legislative bodies are actors at the subnational, national, international, and supranational levels (Knight, 2004). Each actor has their own relative hierarchy of priorities in determining which rationales they favor via various internationalization activities, and actors have relative power in determining the way internationalization is pursued (de Wit & Altbach, 2021).

While the rationales for internationalization are numerous, dynamic, and often inter-related, for actors at the institutional and national levels, economic rationales have come to dominate and largely determine/define many initiatives, programs, and overall strategic internationalization decisions and processes, regardless of public/private and for-profit/nonprofit status (Otto, 2021). Particularly for HEIs in Anglo-Saxon countries, a strong economic motive to utilize internationalization to generate revenues and make up for decreasing government funding exists (Altbach & Knight, 2007). International student recruitment at US HEIs is often cited as an example, noting the significantly higher fees international

students pay in comparison to their domestic classmates (Audretsch et al., 2022). As study abroad programming that sends domestic students to international destinations has become a regular part of HEIs' student development offerings, many institutions have also begun to include their study abroad portfolio in their overall domestic student recruitment strategies (Sison & Brennan, 2012).

While international student recruitment and domestic student study abroad programs also satisfy other institutional rationales for internationalization with political, socio/cultural, and academically beneficial outcomes (Lally & Islem, 2023; Lehmann et al., 2022, 2024), scholars have observed how an over-emphasis on economic rationales in designing and pursuing mobility programs results in harm for many stakeholder groups, particularly those from less-privileged contexts (Buckner & Stein, 2019). Despite these negative externalities, many HEIs in the US and other countries (again, regardless of public/private and for-profit/nonprofit status) continue to recruit international students aggressively and collect their higher tuition fees to help balance their budgets and pay salaries (Blanco & de Wit, 2020; Civera et al., 2024). They also market their study abroad portfolios to successfully recruit internationally minded, fee-paying domestic students (Doyle et al., 2010).

For-Profit HEIs as Privately Owned Businesses

In the US and many other countries worldwide, private HEIs may adopt nonprofit or for-profit status (Levy, 2024). Nonprofits must reinvest any profits back into the institution, while for-profits may also opt to distribute profits to their owners and shareholders (Kinser & Salto, 2017). Consequently, for-profit HEIs function more similarly to businesses and corporations in other sectors compared to their nonprofit or public counterparts.

For-profit HEIs face many challenges due to their status, and many doubt that good education and profit can be achieved together. Consequently, for-profit HEIs are highly contested and have faced tighter regulation than their public/nonprofit counterparts in the US, as most examples of "predatory" behavior usually include prominent for-profit providers (Deming et al., 2012). While most examples in media reports understandably focus on scandals, the for-profit sector in the US is quite diverse, and includes institutions that serve niche markets other types do not, usually due to their potential capacity to adapt to market demands faster than their nonprofit and public counterparts (Gilpin et al., 2015).

Between Neo-Institutionalism and Market Forces

Neo-Institutional Theory and Peer-Group Mimicking Behavior

For-profit institutions employ various mechanisms to compete in the broader HE market. According to neo-institutionalism, these institutions seek legitimacy by emulating ideal-typical forms. This often leads organizations to become "isomorphic" over time (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The classic example involves HEIs in the United States becoming more research-intensive and selective, mirroring the "Ivy League" model (Milian, 2018).

Lower-status, non-elite institutions do not rely on the prestige associated with research focus and selectivity to compete with others (Levy, 2006). In contrast to high-tier nonprofit/public institutions, for-profit HEIs mimic based on offerings and services. A Canadian study

(Milian, 2018) illustrates how for-profits seek new niches and portray themselves in unconventional ways in promotional materials. Instead of mimicking institutions in other tiers, isomorphic forces in for-profit HEIs operate within similar types of institutions, legitimizing and differentiating them from institutions with other missions and characteristics (Milian, 2018). For instance, the growth of for-profit MBA programs in the US resulted from unconventional marketing aimed at underserved populations or niches not previously targeted by their nonprofit/public counterparts (Bañuelos, 2016).

Within the for-profit sector, institutions may seek legitimacy through different avenues. Larger for-profit providers offering online programs rely on marketing tactics to recruit students who depend on federal loans (Kinser & Zipf, 2019). In contrast, smaller institutions offering in-person programs may focus on recruiting international students or providing study abroad opportunities as a means of gaining legitimacy. While research on US for-profits has not explored these strategies, a study on Brazilian for-profits found that institutions use internationalization activities for branding purposes and hub expansion (dos Almeida et al., 2021).

Market Imperfection and Niche Market Theories of Internationalization

The niche focus of many small for-profit HEIs may be quite narrow in comparison to public and non-profit HEIs (Rawlings & Bourgeois, 2004). They may specialize and exclusively provide education and training in music, film, culinary arts, dance, medicine, sports, technology, or other specific areas. In these instances, there may not be a large enough market of potential fee-paying students locally, regionally, or even nationally to financially sustain the institution's business model when accounting for competing institutions, leading these HEIs to recruit students not only domestically, but also internationally. This situation is referred to in the business and economics literature as a market imperfection, where there is an insufficient consumer base within a defined geographic proximity for a business to be viable or to maximize its profits (Hymer, 1960). The theory of imperfect markets identifies this behavior as one of the main underlying forces motivating the internationalization of private firms (Audretsch et al., 2018). Applying this theory in the for-profit HE sector, the imperfect local market conditions push institutions to market and expand their reach internationally beyond their defined geography to appeal to more potential consumers (i.e., students) abroad, whose enrollment then generates more profit (Morgan & Katsikeas, 1997). Further, limited domestic market demand pushes for-profit HEIs to compete for domestic students more fiercely, in some cases by adding study abroad programs to their portfolios to become more attractive to potential domestic enrollees (Doyle et al., 2010).

The niche focus that drives for-profit HEIs to engage in internationalization in the first place (by entering an imperfect market) may also be a significant factor in their ability to successfully enroll enough domestic and international students to remain financially viable. Business and economics literature is also helpful in detailing this phenomenon. Studies have demonstrated how niche firms can be successful outside of their local, regional, and national borders by marketing their highly specialized and internationalized products and services to potential customers in locations where there are no providers of either the same product or service or an equivalent/substitute product or service (Parrish et al., 2006; Toften & Hammervoll, 2009). In the for-profit HE context, the same unique niche that makes an institution non-viable when constrained to a local context also allows it to appeal to more students in

an international context through a unique value proposition since fewer HEIs with the same disciplinary focus exist globally. The local/regional competitors that do exist may not go so far as to differentiate their product by offering study abroad programming, thus giving a domestic recruitment edge to those who do (Doyle et al., 2010).

Theoretical Framework

Drawing from this literature, our study's theoretical framework helps explain observed internationalization activity within the for-profit HE sector in the US. We theorize that the nature of for-profit HEIs as private business causes them to be motivated by financial pressures and opportunities to act in ways that seek legitimacy via mimicking institutions they perceive as their peers/competition (neo-institutionalism), that expand their prospective consumer base beyond local market constraints (market imperfections), and that exploit their competitive knowledge/service advantage they may derive from having a niche disciplinary focus (niche market orientation). This confluence of factors may help explain why some for-profit HEIs employ student mobility activities to exploit the economic rationales for the internationalization of HE for institutional financial gain. This underpinning for the internationalization of for-profit HE in the US is displayed in Fig. 1 as a visualization of our theoretical framework and serves as the basis for our mixed-methods methodology which we utilize to further investigate this phenomenon. While this framework may also apply to public and private nonprofit HEIs, the nature of for-profit HEIs legal status as explicating profit seeking institutions draws additional focus onto theoretical considerations from well-established business and economic literature.

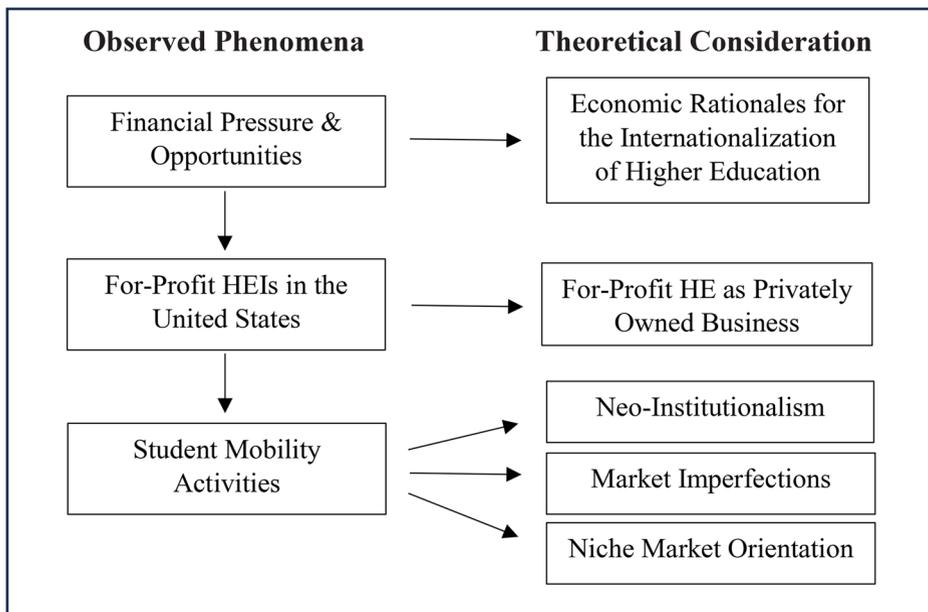


Fig. 1 Theoretical Framework for Student Mobility Activities within the Internationalization of For-Profit Higher Education in the US

Methodology

To answer our research questions, we adopted an explanatory mixed-methods research design. This begins with a quantitative phase providing a general overview of the research area followed by a qualitative phase that provides depth to, and perspective on, the quantitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In this study, we first use descriptive quantitative analysis of institution-level, nationally representative data to describe the overall engagement of for-profit HEIs with international student mobility practices, namely international student enrollment and the offer of study abroad opportunities for domestic students. We then use the results of this descriptive analysis to identify specific institutions to explore as case studies for the second, qualitative phase, which we analyze as examples of for-profit engagement in internationalization through student mobility, providing deeper insights into institutional international student marketing strategies, strategies for promoting study abroad opportunities, and the theories that help explain these behaviors.

Phase 1: Quantitative

Data and Variables

The data that we used for the quantitative phase of this research come from the US National Center for Education Statistics' Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) and represent fall 2019, the last term prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ In the United States, the federal government requires HEIs that receive Title IV federal funds to respond to surveys regarding student enrollment and educational offerings, among other topics. For-profit HEIs are not exempt from this requirement and thus our dataset represents the 2,562 four-, two-, and less-than-two-year for-profit institutional survey respondents in the fall 2019 term. However, not all institutions responded to the survey questions that were the focus of our study. In total, 390 of the for-profit HEIs in our dataset were four-year institutions, 620 were two-year institutions, and 1,552 were less-than-two-year institutions.

Our analysis focused on two key variables. The first variable was non-resident student enrollment, which we used as the best-available proxy for international student enrollment. As defined in IPEDS, this variable represented students enrolled for credit during the fall 2019 term who were not US citizens or nationals, who were present in the country on a visa or temporary basis, and who did not have the right to remain in the US indefinitely. These students are often in the US on F-1 (academic student) or M-1 (vocational student) visas, which allow their physical presence for study in a degree program or English language program (F-1) or a specially designated vocational education program (M-1) (Punteney, 2019). Despite its frequent use in preexisting literature, one shortcoming of this variable is that students who are often not considered to be international students, most notably un- or under-documented students, are sometimes counted in this category. To address this situation, we considered using the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Study in the States School Search, which lists all educational institutions in the United States that are certified to enroll F-1 and M-1 students (see <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/school-search>). However, this search engine only provides information for the most recent academic term (fall

¹ We chose to use data from before the COVID-19 pandemic given this event's significant impact on international student mobility not only in the year that it occurred, but for several years after its occurrence.

2025 at the time of writing) and does not indicate whether an institution actually enrolled international students and, if so, how many. Consequently, we use IPEDS data to represent international student enrollment in the for-profit sector and note that a small amount of students included in the IPEDS nonresident category may not match many common definitions of ‘international student.’

The second international mobility variable that we included in our analysis was a binary indicator of whether a HEI reported offering study abroad opportunities, which are typically offered for domestic students. This variable is found among a list of special learning opportunities on the IPEDS survey, and institutional representatives indicate via a yes or no response regarding whether it is offered. The survey defines ‘study abroad’ as an arrangement by which a student completes part of their academic program studying in another country, which can be at a campus abroad or through an agreement with another US HEI or an institution in another country. We use this variable to proxy for outbound student mobility under the assumption that if institutions offer these programs, then at least some students participate in them. Again, although IIE also collects data on study abroad participation at US HEIs, we found the IPEDS indicator to be better suited to our study, not only because of the missing data issue mentioned previously, but also because IIE only collects data on the number of students who participate in study abroad. For this reason, if an institution is not represented in IIE’s study abroad data, as is the case for most for-profit institutions, it is unclear whether this is because the institution has study abroad but elected not to report this information to IIE or the institution simply does not offer study abroad and therefore has zero students participating.

Analysis

We analyzed these two key variables, non-resident student enrollment and the binary indicator of study abroad availability, by level (four-year, two-year, and less-than-two-year) among the for-profit HEIs in our dataset using descriptive statistics. For international student enrollment, a continuous variable, we calculated means, standard deviations, minimums, and maximums. For four-year HEIs, we also calculated these international student enrollment statistics disaggregated by graduate and undergraduate status. For study abroad, a binary variable, we calculated the percentage of HEIs at each level offering this opportunity. This overarching descriptive information regarding international student enrollment and study abroad availability provided us with context to select key institutions for our qualitative analysis.

Phase 2: Qualitative

Data

To demonstrate this wider internationalization phenomenon within the for-profit HE sector, our qualitative analysis takes on an instrumental, multiple case study design (Stake, 2013). For the qualitative portion of our study, we selected for-profit HEIs that implemented at least one of the international student mobility strategies explored in the study’s first phase. To provide a more holistic perspective of the types of institutions from our sample, we selected two cases each from the following categories: active in international student enrollment,

active in study abroad programming, and active in both. Our selection focused on institutions that were highly active in international student mobility to examine clear and strategic expressions of engagement in this area. While we recognize this approach privileges outlier or atypical cases rather than the “norm,” our aim was not to generalize but to explore how internationalization functions when it is most visibly integrated into institutional strategy. This aligns with the instrumental case study design, which seeks insight into broader phenomena through specific, illustrative cases (Stake, 2013). We also sought to maximize variation in institutional level (four-year/less than four-year) to reflect diversity across the for-profit sector. Following these criteria, we selected Southern States University (highest percentage of international students, 4-year), L3 Commercial Training Solutions Airline Academy (highest percentage of international students, less than 2-year), DeVry University (most campuses offering study abroad, 4-year), Miami Ad School (most campuses offering study abroad, 2-year), Academy of Art University (highest total international student enrollment and highest international student enrollment at the graduate level, while also offering study abroad, 4-year), and School of Visual Arts (highest international student enrollment at the undergraduate level while also offering study abroad, 4-year).

As noted earlier, we theorize that some for-profit HEIs may actively engage in the student mobility aspects of internationalization to increase profit margins and legitimacy. To show that engagement with these aspects of HE internationalization is intentional and not mere happenstance, we focus our instrumental multiple case study analysis on the online marketing efforts of the selected cases. Prior literature has clearly demonstrated how marketing activities are intrinsically linked to the strategic priorities of organizations (Chaffey & Smith, 2022; Lisnik & Majerník, 2023; Smaliukienė & Petrauskaitė, 2018). If an institution is using their online presence to speak directly to prospective international students and/or to advertise their study abroad offerings, then the institution is intentionally engaging in these components of internationalization to be more attractive to, and recruit, international and/or domestic students.

Data Collection and Analysis

To ascertain the online marketing efforts of these six HEIs, we employed an online archival tool called the “Wayback Machine,” which is a free-to-use online database containing saved versions of previously existing webpages (Internet Archive, 2024). For each institution, we used the most complete October 2019 capture available, or the nearest available date if October was missing. When multiple captures existed in October, we selected the one closest to mid-month that contained the most complete archived content and applied this rule consistently across cases. We then systematically reviewed each archived capture in its entirety—scrolling through the full page content and, where available, linked subpages—to identify messaging related to international student recruitment and study abroad. In this study, analyzing the “full website” refers to reviewing all content preserved in that specific capture, rather than reconstructing every historical link path. This approach enabled us to document institutions’ online marketing strategies during the period reflected in our quantitative phase.

To analyze each HEI’s website we relied upon content analysis methodology (Krippendorff, 2018) to interpret images, documents, and texts, thoroughly scanning all webpages from top to bottom to identify messaging which either targeted an international audience as

potential recruits, or advertised study abroad programming to potential domestic students. Webpages (text, visuals, and documents) were treated as units of analysis, and codes were developed deductively from our theoretical framework and refined inductively as themes emerged. This approach of analyzing each HEI's entire website, while very time-intensive, enabled us to avoid the use of search tools or keywords, which may have led to missing important content, and instead focus on the entirety of their website marketing efforts, as they presented it in their own words. To enhance reliability, we applied consistent archival captures (October 2019) and coding procedures across all cases; validity was strengthened through triangulation with our descriptive quantitative analysis. Results are represented thematically and illustrated with institutional examples (summarized in findings, with full analyses in the supplemental material provided).² This then provided evidence of a strategic intent of student mobility activities through online marketing practices (Chaffey & Smith, 2022; (Lisnik, and Majernik, 2023); Smaliukienė & Petrauskaitė, 2018).

Findings

Quantitative Profile of For-Profit HEIs in the US Engaging in International Student Mobility, by Level (RQ1)

International Student Enrollment

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for raw total international student enrollment and the percentage of total enrollment consisting of international students at four-, two-, and less-than-two-year for-profit US HEIs in the fall 2019 semester. Average total enrollment for each for-profit level is included in Table 1, and information about public and not-for-profit sector institutions is included in footnotes throughout this section for comparison purposes. For four-year institutions, this table also provides a breakdown of total enrollment for undergraduate and graduate students.

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 indicate that four-year for-profit HEIs enrolled an average of 58.53³ international students, compared to 2439.92 total students on average, in fall 2019 (sd=261.91) with a maximum of 3,230. These same institutions enrolled an average of 36.22 (sd=174.07) international students at the undergraduate level and 46.09 (sd=178.42) at the graduate level. The percentage of international students enrolled ranged from 100% to 0%, with an average of 4.44%⁴. This descriptive analysis uncovered three institutions that we included in our subsequent qualitative analysis. First, Southern States University, located in San Diego, California, reported that 100% of its total enrollment consisted of international students. Academy of Art University in San Francisco, California reported both the maximum international student enrollment ($n=3,230$) and the maxi-

² Please see the supplemental material for full institutional analyses on each of our case institutions, as these were omitted from the main paper for space/redundancy considerations.

³ Using IPEDS data from the same term, this average compares to an average of 674.99 international students enrolled per institution in the public four-year sector and 216.36 in the private, not-for-profit four-year sector.

⁴ Using IPEDS data from the same term, this average compares to an average of 3.58% international students in the public four-year sector (min: 0%, max: 29.62%) and 6.27% (min: 0%, max: 100%) in the private, not-for-profit four-year sector.

Table 1 Descriptive Statistics for International Student Enrollment at For-Profit HEIs Across Levels (Fall 2019)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<i>Four-year HEIs (N=353)</i>				
Total enrollment	2439.92	8846.62	5	96,211
Total international enrollment	58.53	261.91	0	3230
Total international undergraduate enrollment	36.22	174.07	0	1968
Total international graduate enrollment	46.09	178.42	0	1518
Percentage enrollment international	4.44%	14.25	0	100
<i>Two-year HEIs (N=566)</i>				
Total enrollment	356.72	440.00	7	3673
Total international enrollment	1.76	11.65	0	154
Percentage enrollment international	0.91%	6.47	0	95.29
<i>Less-than-two-year HEIs (N=1,459)</i>				
Total enrollment	143.88	12.14	1	2232
Total international enrollment	0.83	14.51	0	540
Percentage enrollment international	0.45%	3.60	0	82.95

International student enrollment was proxied with IPEDS' measure for non-resident student enrollment. Non-resident student enrollment information is missing in IPEDS for 37 four-year institutions, 54 two-year institutions, and 93 less-than-two-year institutions. With these exceptions, this table represents all for-profit higher education institutions documented in IPEDS for the fall 2019 term

International student enrollment at the graduate level ($n=1,518$). Finally, the School of Visual Arts in New York City reported the maximum undergraduate international student enrollment ($n=1,968$).

At two-year institutions, average international student enrollment was much lower at 1.76⁵ (sd=11.65), as compared to an average of 356.72 total enrollment, with a maximum of 154 and a minimum of 0. The average percentage of total students comprised of international students was 0.91, with the maximum percentage international student enrollment at 95.29%⁶. Institutions of particular interest that these results highlight include Learnet Academy, located in Los Angeles, California, which reported the maximum percentage of international student enrollment at the two-year level (95.29%) and Midwestern Career College, located in Chicago, Illinois, which reported the maximum nonresident enrollment at this level ($n=154$).

Finally, less-than-two-year for-profits enrolled even fewer international students on average at 0.83⁷ (sd=14.51), compared to 143.88 average total enrollment, with a maximum of 540 students. The average percentage of students that were classified as international at this level was 0.45%⁸. One institution, L3 Commercial Training Solutions Airline Acad-

⁵ Using IPEDS data from the same term, this average compares to an average of 81.14 international students enrolled per institution in the public two-year sector and 9.01 in the private, not-for-profit two-year sector.

⁶ Using IPEDS data from the same term, this average compares to an average of 0.95% international students in the public two-year sector (min: 0%, max: 13.82%) and 2.03% (min: 0%, max: 39.39%) in the private, not-for-profit two-year sector.

⁷ Using IPEDS data from the same term, this average compares to an average of 0.69 international students enrolled per institution in the public less-than-two-year sector and 0.30 in the private, not-for-profit less-than-two-year sector.

⁸ Using IPEDS data from the same term, this average compares to an average of 0.10% international students in the public less-than-two-year sector (min: 0%, max: 8.11%) and 0.15% (min: 0%, max: 3.13%) in the private, not-for-profit less-than-two-year sector.

emy, located in Orlando, Florida, accounts for both the maximum total international student enrollment and the maximum percentage international student enrollment at this level.

Study Abroad Programming

Our descriptive analysis indicated that study abroad in the for-profit HE sector is almost exclusively concentrated at the four-year institutional level. Of the 369 four-year institutions that reported whether study abroad was available, 52 (14.09%) indicated that their institution offered study abroad opportunities to students. This percentage compares to 80.48% in the public four-year sector and 59.42% in the private, not-for-profit four-year sector in the same year. Seventeen of the 52 for-profit institutions (32.69%) were campuses of DeVry University, located in California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

At the two-year level, only four (0.69%) of the 580 reporting institutions indicated offering study abroad. This percentage compares to 31.08% in the public, two-year sector and 2.65% in the private, not-for-profit two-year sector. All four of the for-profit institutions offering study abroad were campuses of the Miami Ad School, namely the campuses in Atlanta, Georgia; New York, New York; San Francisco, California; and Wynwood (Miami), Florida. At the less-than-two-year level, four (0.27%) of the 1,483 reporting institutions indicated offering study abroad, including two campuses of Protégé Academy located in Mt. Pleasant and East Lansing, Michigan. Neither public nor private not-for-profit institutions at this level reported offering study abroad.

Qualitative Profile of For-Profit HEIs in the US Engaging in Student Mobility Activities

Table 2 provides a general overview of the institutions that were part of our qualitative analysis, including information about their Carnegie classification, location, level, and student body characteristics, among other information. These six institutions vary in their institutional profile; some of them are master's institutions while others specialize in one or two academic/professional areas. Their enrollments range from very large (e.g., DeVry University) to very small (e.g., Southern States University), as does their average net price and completion rate. These institutions also represent a large range of percentage of students who receive a Pell grant, an indicator of lower socioeconomic status in the United States. For example, Southern States University enrolls no students who receive this type of federal financial aid, while 55% of the students attending one of the identified campuses of DeVry University do.

Marketing for International Students and Study Abroad (RQ2 and RQ3)

Our in-depth content analysis (described above) of each HEI's full website revealed that our case institutions used a combination of marketing strategies to differentiate themselves in the competitive market for international students (See the supplemental material for full institutional analyses on each of our case institutions, which are summarized for space considerations below). SSU, MAS, AAU, and SVA highlight their locations in the US as one of

Table 2 Characteristics of Selected Cases

	Southern States University (SSU)	L3 Commercial Training Solutions Airline Academy (L3)	DeVry University (DeVry)	Miami Ad School (MAS)	Academy of Art University (AAU)	School of Visual Arts (SVU)
Case selection criteria	International Student Enrollment	International Student Enrollment	Study Abroad	Study Abroad	International Student Enrollment and Study Abroad	International Student Enrollment and Study Abroad
Carnegie Classification	Special focus: Business and management schools	Not in Carnegie universe	Varies by location - Special focus: Business and management or Master's colleges and universities	Not in Carnegie universe	Master's colleges and universities	Special focus: Arts, music, and design schools
Location	San Diego, California	Sanford, Florida	Various	Various	San Francisco, California	New York, New York
Institution level	Four or more years	Less than two years	Four or more years	At least two but less than four years	Four or more years	Four or more years
Highest degree offered	Master's degree	Non-degree granting	Master's degree	Non-degree granting	Master's degree	Master's degree
Total fall enrollment	405	651	25,250 ¹	203 ¹	9,812	4,562
Average net price ² (in 2017)	N/A	\$111,606	\$27,746	N/A	\$32,614	\$45,040
150% completion rate (in 2017)	N/A	93%	21% ¹	N/A	34%	64%
Percent Pell recipients (in 2017)	0%	9%	55%	11%	36%	21%
Percent non-resident students	100%	82.95%	Not applicable – institution selected for study abroad	Not applicable – institution selected for study abroad	32.92%	52.26%

All information from IPEDS in the 2019-20 academic year, except for where indicated, where information represents the 2017-18 academic year (the latest year for which data were available in the Urban Institute's Education Data Portal); ¹ Across campuses included in this study; ² For first-time, full-time degree-seeking students receiving Title IV aid or any grant aid

the strongest ways to appeal international students or they highlight their presence worldwide to appeal to domestic students to study abroad. For example, AAU and SVA highlight their locations in San Francisco and New York City, respectively, which provide students with access to vibrant art scenes and professional opportunities.

These institutions also highlight career opportunities and industry connections, in some cases referring to student and alumni success stories. For example, AAU highlights projects

involving graduates that received prestigious nominations, MAS showcases alumni success in prominent global companies, L3 Academy highlights success in placing graduates with Federal Aviation Administration-approved commercial airlines, and SSU showcases student and alumni profiles detailing experiences and benefits of choosing the institution. Most institutions tailor admissions information to international students' needs (e.g., visa requirements, English proficiency) and provide tailored support services for international students. In some cases, such as SSU, the website advertises English language learning programs. AAU offers visa assistance and cultural integration programs for international students.

Institutions employ a range of strategies to promote study abroad programs, including leveraging global campus networks, offering diverse and specialized study abroad options, and highlighting the global career prospects of their alumni. In some cases, they highlight global campus networks. For example, MAS leverages their multiple international campuses to offer flexible study abroad opportunities, allowing students to experience different cultures while staying within the same educational system. Others highlight diverse and specialized programs abroad. For instance, AAU and SVA provide a variety of study abroad options tailored to different interests and fields, from short-term summer programs to exchange programs in prestigious locations, appealing to students' academic and career aspirations.

Institutional Market Niche and International Student Mobility (RQ4)

All but two (SSU and DeVry) of the institutions analyzed carved out a distinct niche in the international student market. These specialized niches seem to give them a competitive advantage over more comprehensive institutions in other sectors. L3's niche is providing specialized, career-oriented training for the aviation industry, attracting international students who aim for careers as pilots and aviation professionals in the US and globally. MAS's niche is in creative arts education with a strong global network, offering students opportunities to study in various international locations and connect with global industry leaders. AAU markets itself as a premier destination for art and design education, emphasizing its industry connections, prestigious projects, and diverse program offerings. SVA's niche positions the institution as a leader in art and design education in New York City, leveraging the city's cultural vibrancy and professional opportunities to attract international students. SSU serves a business and IT niche while also positioning itself as a welcoming and supportive environment for international students, focusing on integrating them into the US education system and providing extensive resources tailored to their needs.

Discussion

Our mixed-methods approach revealed descriptive profiles of US for-profit HEIs that enroll a high number or percentage of international students and/or offer study abroad and explored how these institutions market themselves and their programs to recruit international students and/or internationally inclined domestic students. Table 3 integrates this study's quantitative and qualitative findings to show how our theoretical framework (Fig. 1) helps explain what types of for-profit HEIs are pursuing student mobility activities and why they are pursuing them. More specifically, this table indicates which cases display behaviors described by

neo-institutional theory, market imperfection theory, and/or niche market theory regarding their online marketing efforts in promoting study abroad programming, appealing to prospective international students, and/or their recruitment of the institution's general domestic student target market.

As can be observed in the table, the online marketing of every case institution exhibited behavior described by theories from the business and economics literature pertaining to their niche focus that causes low local demand (while also creating an globally attractive expertise) and efforts to peer-mimic, but the cases varied in which activities and target audiences they exhibited this behavior towards. The two cases selected due to their international student enrollment, Southern States University and L3 Commercial Training Solutions, both geared their marketing messaging to attract international students to overcome the local market imperfection of few prospective students, to be seen in the eyes of prospective students as legitimate global institutions in comparison to peer HEIs, and to exploit their discipline-specific niches (business and IT for SSU; aviation for L3). The online marketing of Miami Ad School, which reported widespread study abroad programming, prominently featured their study abroad offer in a way that also matched all three business and economics theoretical observations. The two institutions we selected from our quantitative analysis because of their descriptive statistics in both study abroad offering and international student recruitment, Academy of Art University and the School of Visual Art, also engaged in online marketing toward international audiences and in promotion of their study abroad programming that matched the theories from our framework.

However, Table 3 also highlights two anomalies. First, our theoretical framework suggests that the organizational form that is common to each of our case institutions (for-profit, niche market oriented HEIs) would lead all of them to exhibit behaviors described by all three business and economic theories in their online marketing to general prospective domestic students as well. This was true for all but one, Southern States University. This anomaly can be explained by the fact that this institution does not market to US domestic students at all, but instead strictly focuses on international student recruitment in their online marketing. This international student-focused marketing does display behavior described by all three business and economic theories and results in the enrollment of a student body that is 100% international. Our critical observations of their online marketing suggest that the institution may further define their niche orientation not only as focusing on business and IT studies, but also as business and IT studies for international students who are willing to pay tuition fees to access US degree programs and optional practical training (OPT).

Second, there is the case of DeVry University, which reports having study abroad programming at multiple locations but exhibited no online marketing efforts which promoted these programs, breaking from our framework. Our investigation calls into question whether study abroad programming is indeed offered at any of the DeVry University locations. A thorough review of all of DeVry University's webpages reveals not a single mention of study abroad programming, which suggests that the reporting that was submitted to IPEDS by the institution may be incorrect. If so, it then makes sense that the institution's marketing of study abroad programming does not match behavior described our three selected theories.

Thus, for the selected cases, our theoretical framework is generally applicable, as the online marketing of their student mobility activities confirms the influence of their for-profit nature as motivation for exploiting the economic rationales of internationalization as a financial viability strategy. Namely, the pursuit of these initiatives helps improve the finan-

Table 3 Theoretical Framework Matching to Observations from Selected Cases

	Neo-Institutional Theory			Market Imperfection Theory			Niche Market Theory		
	Study Abroad Promotion	International Student Recruitment	Domestic Student Recruitment	Study Abroad Promotion	International Student Recruitment	Domestic Student Recruitment	Study Abroad Promotion	International Student Recruitment	Domestic Student Recruitment
Southern States University	X				X				X
L3 Commercial Training Solutions		X	X		X				X
DeVry University			X			X			X
Miami Ad School	X		X	X		X	X		X
Academy of Art University	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
School of Visual Arts	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

cial status of these institutions via the increased enrollment of international students and internationally inclined domestic students, helping these for-profit HEIs to overcome marketing imperfections, leverage their niche focus and expertise, and to establish legitimacy.

Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Outlook

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of how for-profit higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States engage in internationalization through student mobility. Through a mixed-methods approach, we reveal that while international engagement in this sector is uneven, some for-profit HEIs strategically deploy international student recruitment and study abroad programs to achieve legitimacy, market differentiation, and financial viability. These behaviors align closely with patterns theorized by neo-institutionalism, market imperfection theory, and niche market theory.

Our findings show that institutions with high levels of international student enrollment or robust study abroad offerings tend to operate within specialized market niches—such as aviation, arts, or business—and leverage these identities in their marketing to attract students. These institutions use student mobility not simply as an educational offering but as a core component of their business model, branding, and institutional legitimacy. For example, institutions like Southern States University and L3 Commercial Training Solutions exemplify how international student recruitment can offset domestic market limitations, while others like Miami Ad School use global campus networks to enhance their appeal to both domestic and international students.

Importantly, our study highlights the risks and ambiguities inherent in this model. The questionable accuracy of reported study abroad programs and the potential for visa exploitation underscore the need for stronger oversight. These concerns are not exclusive to the for-profit sector, but they are heightened by the sector's profit motives and often limited external accountability.

Our research carries several implications for multiple stakeholders, including domestic and international students who make decisions about where to pursue their post-secondary education, as well as for policymakers and regulators working with the US HE sector. Our study shows that for-profit HEIs tend to exhibit similar internationalization behaviors to their counterparts in other areas of private sector business; therefore, they may focus on student mobility as a means of driving revenue and establishing legitimacy at the center of their internationalization strategies. This emphasis is notably revealed in some of the observations in the qualitative portion of our study, for example DeVry University's IPEDS reporting which claims they have study abroad programming, when it appears that they do not, and Southern States University's international student-exclusive recruitment practices, which raises questions about why they neglect, or do not seek, domestic students.

Domestic students who are interested in enrolling at for-profit HEIs because of their study abroad opportunities should investigate closely to make certain that the institution does in fact have study abroad programs, and if it does, if they enable the positive benefits traditionally associated with such programming or if the institution is only running them to be seen as having the programmatic trimmings that legitimate institutions are expected to have. However, these cautions are not exclusive to the for-profit sector. Similar scrutiny should be applied to nonprofit and public institutions, particularly in cases where student

mobility programs are underused, under-resourced, or overstated in public reporting. This may also serve as a warning to US regulators that the reports submitted to IPEDS may require periodic or random auditing to verify accuracy. Such audits should apply across all institutional types.

For international students considering for-profit HEIs in the US, they may want to be wary of institutions that attempt to profit by exploiting international student demand to study in the US – as evidenced by prior examples elucidated in our introduction. However, a high proportion of international students may also reflect a legitimate institutional niche or specialization in global education, particularly for institutions offering programs aligned with international labor markets or creative industries. In these cases, students will want to be careful to check that quality assurance measures that verify the standard of the degrees/certificates being offered are met. US policymakers may also view the results of this study as an indicator that for-profit HEIs should be assessed with more scrutiny before being approved to enroll international students for visas, due to their profit motivation which may lead them to exploit international students in an environment with extensive information asymmetry. That said, increased oversight may also benefit public and nonprofit institutions, especially as all sectors respond to shifting financial pressures through expanded internationalization strategies.

The overall applicability of our findings is best understood while keeping the study's limitations in mind. While the findings bare tangible, actionable insights for policy and practice, it is important to remember that the second stage of our analysis focused on a deeper investigation of specific outliers in the for-profit HE landscape which are particularly active in the student mobility space. Although this produced valuable findings that warrant future studies on the rest of the for-profit field, it would be a misrepresentation to suggest this study's findings are indicative of all for-profit HEIs that engage in student mobility activities. Future studies could address this limitation by carrying out robust quantitative modeling to produce further empirical analyses which could establish more sector-wide findings to complement the mixed-methods approach which we employed. These future studies would benefit from data that represents international student enrollment specifically rather than the proxy, non-resident enrollment variable that we had to use in this study, as well as actual outbound study abroad participation numbers rather than the proxy of offering study abroad programs. We urge data gatekeeping entities, such as the Institute of International Education, to make their data more available for research purposes.

In this manner, our study lays the groundwork for future research testing hypotheses that logically stem from our findings. Testing these hypotheses could help explain the phenomena we have observed in the present study:

1. Neo-institutionalism internationalization hypothesis (H1)

- a For-profit HEIs build legitimacy by imitating the internationalization student mobility activities at institutions that they perceive to be their peers and/or competition.

2. Imperfect market internationalization hypothesis (H2)

- a For-profit HEIs with specialized, niche programs engage in internationalization student mobility activities due to limited demand in their local geographic market.

3. Niche market internationalization hypothesis (H3)

- a For-profit HEIs with specialized, niche programs engage in internationalization student mobility activities due to limited supply in their global niche market.

Further exploration of these hypotheses would provide deeper insights into the student mobility behaviors of for-profit HEIs and should guide future research in this area.

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