

Armenian Students and Faculty Perceptions of Education in the United States

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Abstract

This study explores the assumptions held by Armenian students and faculty concerning their perceptions of the United States and its education system. A single-stage cluster survey was distributed to students and faculty from two universities located in Yerevan, Armenia. Eighty-four students and nine faculty participated in the study, all studying English as a subject major. The most important results of the study revealed students and faculty overwhelmingly (92.71%) expressed a desire to study/work in the United States. The most noted barriers that influenced the decision to study abroad included financial concerns, family, culture, language, and visa issues. The perceived benefits of studying/working in the United States included increased opportunities, financial gain, education, and language acquisition. The need to assist Armenian citizens in their desire for more opportunities may be found in supporting opportunities to study and work abroad in the United States.

Keywords: Armenian, student perceptions, study abroad

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Introduction

University students and faculty decide to study abroad based on a number of factors. The most commonly reported factor involved in deciding to study abroad is to advance career opportunities (Franklin, 2010; Potts, 2015; Yepiskoposyan, 2023). Factors such as financial constraints and previous travel experiences also influence participants (Naffziger et al., 2008). Participants' concept of family and their support can influence the decision to study abroad (Salisbury et al., 2009). Perceived support and resources from their university is additionally noted by students and faculty as deciding factors (Maringe & Carter, 2007). Yet, no matter what particular factors play in making the decision to study abroad, the final decision is based on the perception of benefits versus sacrifices (Naffziger et al., 2008).

In the Republic of Armenia, higher education remains highly entrenched in Soviet pedagogy and traditional teaching methodology. Study/teaching opportunities for students and faculty are generally supported more for the purpose of acquiring language skills than cultural exploration. As teaching methodology begins to embrace a more student-centered approach, study and teaching abroad opportunities are becoming more acceptable. With support offered by a Fulbright Scholarship, research was conducted on the perceptions of Armenian students and faculty concerning studying or teaching abroad in the United States. To explore the benefits versus sacrifices of Armenian students and faculty, this study collected data in Armenia aiming to determine the perceptions of studying/working abroad in the United States.

Armenia, like most post-Soviet nations after separating from the Soviet Union in 1991, is seeking to change and update their higher education system. Armenia remained under Soviet rule for 68 years adopting the Soviet mentality of the purpose of education. This mentality supported "curriculum and instructional practices that were (are) not geared towards developing individuals" (Terzian, 2016, p. 283). Armenia joined the Bologna Process in 2005, collaborating with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in hopes of moving higher education toward a more student-focused mind set. This was also the era Armenian Ministry of Education and Science created the Armenian National Curriculum and State Standards for Secondary Education, focusing on international influenced pedagogy.

According to Karakhanyan et al. (2011), "teachers found themselves caught between the world of prevailing Soviet practices and the world dictated by globalization process and Western countries in particular" (p. 509). Greater opportunities for improvement can be seen as a "new system offering more opportunities via greater mobility at the national and international level" (Karakhanyan et al. 2011, p. 516). One opportunity for improvement and growth for the Armenian students and faculty would be in studying/working abroad thereby broadening their cultural awareness and global knowledge. "Most Armenian adolescents have never traveled outside of their country (which is the size of Maryland) and therefore, have had few opportunities for first-hand contacts with people from other cultures (Huntsigner et al., 2019, p. 68).

Studying/working abroad has numerous advantages and challenges. Research exploring the advantages and challenges of studying/working abroad is fairly minimal, with most focus

being on student perceptions and decision-making processes. Students decide to study abroad based on their perceptions of benefits versus sacrifices. One of the most common reasons to study abroad is to further one's careers (Crossman & Clark, 2010; Potts, 2015; Shinn et al., 2009; Yepiskoposyan, 2023). Multi-national companies deem study abroad experiences as an asset to the workplace and give preferential treatment and opportunities to those who have international experience (Kratz & Netz, 2016; Petzold, 2017; Potts, 2015). Shinn et al. (2009) completed a study examining the perceptions of Armenian students on the topic of studying abroad. Within the finding of the study, 61% of students reported advancing their professional career was the main reason to study abroad.

Another reason often noted in the motivation to study abroad is the acquisition of language. Shinn and colleagues (2009) found learning a new language was chosen by 50% of Armenian students when asked what motivated them to want to study abroad. Study abroad is also often associated with academic needs to learn a new language motivated by a students' major area of study (Doppen et al., 2016). Haisley et al. (2021) found language learning to be a distinct motivation to studying abroad. Students considering studying abroad will weigh the value of the experience more favorably if the experience fits with degree progress (Naffziger et al., 2008). Originally, study abroad was considered a requirement for students studying a foreign language and it wasn't until the mid-1970's that study abroad opportunities became more mainstreamed for all students with an eye on cultural enrichment, particularly in the United States (Themudo et al., 2007).

Studying abroad to expand one's world view and global perspectives is an often-noted factor in deciding to study abroad (Curtis & Ledgerwood, 2018; Doppen et al. 2016; Zimmermann & Neyer, 2013). Shin et al. (2009) shared the intentions of Armenian students to study abroad due to personal growth and was noted in 47% of the participants sharing their views of study abroad. Another 45% of Armenian students included the concept of traveling and immersing in another culture as a motivator and learning experience. According to Doppen et al. (2016) acquiring a "broader view of the world" (p. 86) was a major consideration in deciding to study abroad for students.

The majority of studies defining the reasons why students study abroad includes the concern for finances in the decision-making process (Curtis & Ledgerwood, 2018; Naffzier et al., 2008; Shinn et al., 2008). In a study completed by Shinn et al. (2008) of Armenian university students, the top challenge when considering studying abroad was financial concerns. The decision to go abroad for Armenian students is often affected by economic factors (Han & Zhang, 2020). "One of the main economic motives for emigration (in Armenia) is insufficiently high wages and the low standard of living in Armenia" (Yepiskoposyan, 2023, p. 3). Not only was the cost of the schooling considered, but also that of housing, living expenses and other financial constraints. Many students need to work during their college experience to offset rising education costs (Hanson, 2021). Missing the earned income during the study abroad experience, combined with the expense of the study abroad experience itself often leaves a study abroad experience out of a student's reach (Reardon et al. 2022). Even when supported emotionally by family, affordability is a major consideration for students and their families when considering study abroad (Naffziger et al., 2018).

In Armenia the concept of family is viewed as a major component in a student's life and decisions. "Armenia has historically been an interdependent culture with strong closely knit families, which transmit powerful values and traditions to their children" (Kalayjian et al. 2007, p. 16). Armenian students consider the family and their support as a crucial decision-making component. The family unit in Armenia is viewed as a more nuclear entity than in many other areas in the world. Salisbury et al. (2009) found parents' attitudes and willingness to support the idea of study abroad contributed to a students' decision to study abroad. The decision for Armenian student to go abroad is often affected by the student's commitment to family and friends (Han & Zhang, 2020). Sargsyan & Cairns (2020) note the emotional connections to family and friends may outweigh their desire to be employed in their desired area.

Method

The survey methods and instrument (see Appendix A) were duly evaluated and approved by Human Subjects in Review protocol for both the United States university and Armenian university. The intent of the study was to answer the following questions:

1. What are the benefits and deficits as perceived by Armenian students and faculty of studying/working abroad in the U.S.?
2. What factors impact Armenian students and faculty's decision to study/work abroad in the U.S.?

The expectation of findings in this study are that Armenian students and faculty find a number of benefits in studying/working abroad, but variables such as finances and family commitment make this a difficult endeavor. Survey research methods were used to collect data from students and faculty at the Armenian State Teachers Training University (ASPU), also known as the Armenian State Pedagogical University and from students at Yerevan State University. Paper surveys were distributed to faculty and students due to limitations surrounding electronic availability and usage.

Participants

A single-stage cluster sample was used including students from both universities and faculty from ASPU, as well as students from Yerevan State University. The participants were enrolled or teaching graduate study courses in the subject area of English Language. This was a convenience sampling due to the limitations of language. Access to this particular group of faculty and students was aided due to the researcher's proximity as a Fulbright Scholar during the academic year. Contacts and introductions were made via this opportunity. By narrowing the population to this area of study, no need for translation or language decoding prohibited data collection. Eighty-four students and nine faculty members participated. Although gender was not accounted for on the survey, all but two participants of faculty were female. The gender of student participants was not collected or noted.

Instrument

The instrument, found in Appendix A, included Likert-type scale items designed to measure participants' perceptions of the United States and the concept of studying/teaching abroad. The descriptors were numbered 5 to 1 with 5 being strongly agree; 4 agree; 3 neither; 2 disagree; and 1 strongly disagree. Eight questions were included in the survey as noted on the following data analysis, followed by 3 open-ended questions intended to triangulate data collected from the Likert scale questions.

Procedures

Surveys were collected from students and faculty from the Armenian State Pedagogical University and students at Yerevan State University. Due to the limited availability of electronic devices and computers, paper surveys were used and collected by the researcher. Students were approached during a common course time in which instruction was provided in English. Students were asked to complete the survey but were not obligated and could opt out if desired.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted by importing questions and answers into Qualtrics. Answers to open ended questions were grouped into like categories of barriers, benefits, and important factors to consider. The open-ended question section of the survey was further grouped into the following categories under the barriers section: money, family, culture, language, and citizenship. The benefits section was grouped into education, financial, language (native speaker) and opportunity. Most import factors were grouped into education, housing, finance, language (native speaker) opportunity, and safety. The frequency and percentages were calculated using the FREQ Procedure in SAS to support the responses given by each sub-group (students and faculty) in the Likert-scale section of the survey. This served as a triangulation of data to ensure validity of answers.

Results

All distributed surveys were collected with 100% participation rate (n=93). The data results represented below have been divided into two pools depicting the student responses and the faculty responses. Data is further delineated by the multiple-choice questions and Likert-scale response section with the open-ended response section intended to triangulate and further validate respondent's answers.

The first three tables represent the actual number of responses with the overall percentage of responses indicated in parenthesis. The first table indicates the overall combined data from both students and faculty from the multiple-choice questions and questions represented in the Likert-scale section of the survey.

Table 1*Combined Open-ended Question Responses from Faculty and Students*

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
I have an interest in visiting the United States.	3 (3.13)	4 (4.17)	89 (92.71)
I am familiar with the culture of the United States.	12 (12.90)	24 (25.81)	57 (61.29)
I am familiar with the school systems in the United States.	29 (30.53)	34 (35.79)	32 (33.68)
I would feel safe visiting the United States.	21 (22.34)	34 (36.17)	39 (41.49)
I believe the Armenian education system is superior to the U.S. system.	49 (51.04)	31 (32.29)	16 (16.67)
I believe a degree issued from an Armenian university has the same value as a degree issued from a U.S. university.	52 (54.17)	30 (31.25)	14 (14.58)
I believe there are adequate opportunities presented to me for studying/working abroad in the United States.	8 (8.42)	23 (24.21)	64 (67.37)
I would consider studying/working in the U.S. if given the opportunity.	6 (6.38)	9 (9.57)	79 (84.04)

The data indicates students and faculty show interest in visiting the U.S.A. (92.71 collectively with 91.67% of students and 100% of faculty). This high percentage of interest in the U.S.A. would suggest perceptions of the U.S.A. and studying abroad must be considered favorable in answer to Research Question #1. Further support of this notion is found in answer to questioning if students and faculty would consider studying/working in the U.S with 84.04 collectively and 81.74% of students and 100% of faculty responding they would come to the U.S.A. This is in somewhat of a contrast to the data concerning feeling safe in the U.S.A. by students with 41.49% collectively and 34.5% of students indicated they would feel safe, while 100% of faculty indicated feeling safe.

Results concerning the value of the education system in the U.S. were also calculated. Results indicated 30.12% of students and 66.67% of faculty with 33.68 collectively claiming to be familiar with the U.S. system of education. When comparing the value of education received in Armenia to that of the U.S.A., 48.81% of students and 77.78% of faculty (51.04 collectively) felt the Armenian education system was inferior to that found in the U.S.A. The perception of a superior education in the U.S.A. was also found in the response to the perceived value of a degree question (54.17% collectively) and 58.33% of students indicating a degree from the U.S.A. is superior to a degree earned in Armenia. Faculty indicated the same percentage (33.33%) for agreeing a degree from the U.S.A. being superior. The perceptions of students and faculty support an answer to the question, “What are the benefits and deficits as perceived by

Armenian students and faculty of studying abroad in the U.S.A.?” by acknowledging the value placed on studying abroad and earning a degree from the U.S.A.

Table 2 represents data collected from only students with the percentage of responses in parenthesis and the actual number of responses noted before the percentages.

Table 2

Open-ended Question Responses from Students

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
I have an interest in visiting the United States.	3 (3.57)	4 (4.76)	77 (91.67)
I am familiar with the culture of the United States.	11 (13.41)	23 (28.05)	48 (58.54)
I am familiar with the school systems in the United States.	27 (32.53)	31 (37.35)	25 (30.12)
I would feel safe visiting the United States.	21 (25.61)	33 (40.24)	28 (34.15)
I believe the Armenian education system is superior to the U.S. system.	41 (48.81)	29 (34.52)	14 (16.67)
I believe a degree issued from an Armenian university has the same value as a degree issued from a U.S. university.	49 (58.33)	26 (30.95)	9 (10.71)
I believe there are adequate opportunities presented to me for studying/working abroad in the United States.	6 (7.23)	21 (25.30)	56 (67.47)
I would consider studying/working in the U.S. if given the opportunity.	6 (7.32)	9 (10.98)	67 (81.71)

Table 3 represents data collected from only faculty with the percentage of responses in parenthesis and the actual number of responses noted before the percentages.

Table 3

Open-ended Question Responses from Faculty

	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
I have an interest in visiting the United States.	. (.)	. (.)	9 (100.00)
I am familiar with the culture of the United States.	. (.)	. (.)	9 (100.00)
I am familiar with the school systems in the United States.	1 (11.11)	2 (22.22)	6 (66.67)
I would feel safe visiting the United States.	. (.)	. (.)	9 (100.00)
I believe the Armenian education system is superior to the U.S. system.	7 (77.78)	2 (22.22)	. (.)
I believe a degree issued from an Armenian university has the same value as a degree issued from a U.S. university.	3 (33.33)	3 (33.33)	3 (33.33)
I believe there are adequate opportunities presented to me for studying/working abroad in the United States.	2 (22.22)	1 (11.11)	6 (66.67)
I would consider studying/working in the U.S. if given the opportunity.	. (.)	. (.)	9 (100.00)

Data intended to answer the second research question, “What factors impact Armenian students and faculty’s decision to study/work abroad in the U.S.?” were also collected. The survey asked the open-ended question; “list the greatest barriers in studying/working abroad in the U.S.” Data were analyzed and compiled into the following themes for students: money, family, culture, language, citizenship/visas. Faculty themes included like categories except for language and money. Once themes were established the frequency in which they appeared in student and faculty responses were indicated by Figures 1 and 2. It should be noted that all faculty participants spoke and/or taught English language courses. Therefore, the concern for language barriers in the U.S.A. was not relevant.

The greatest barrier for students was money with 39 of 84 (46.43%) participants listing money as a barrier to study abroad. This is consistent with findings from a plethora of literature in identifying barriers to study abroad. The concept of family appears as the next highest barrier

with 34.52%, or 29 of students, identifying this concept. Faculty responded with one participant identifying family as a deterrent. The cultural dynamics of the importance of family in the Armenian culture certainly impacts this category. Student responses included references to not wanting to leave or be far away from family members. Numerous responses specifically named approval of parents or reluctance to be away from parents. This ties with the notion of cultural difference and the fact 22.62% of students noted their fear or resistance to learning another culture's expectations. This suggests overall Armenian students are more comfortable in their own culture and families. Additionally, two faculty members cited cultural differences and expectations as a barrier in teaching abroad.

The language barrier was a greater concern for students with 13 (15.48%) students listing it as a concern. No faculty cited language as a concern, but as mentioned above, all faculty were currently fluent in English. The final theme that emerged as a barrier was citizenship issues and/or visa acquisition. Armenian citizens have greater restrictions on travel outside of the region and those coming to the U.S. need to hold a visa for permission to enter the U.S.

Figure 1 indicates the frequency of themed answers reported by students as to the barriers perceived in studying abroad in the U.S.

Figure 1

Frequency of Barriers as Perceived by Students

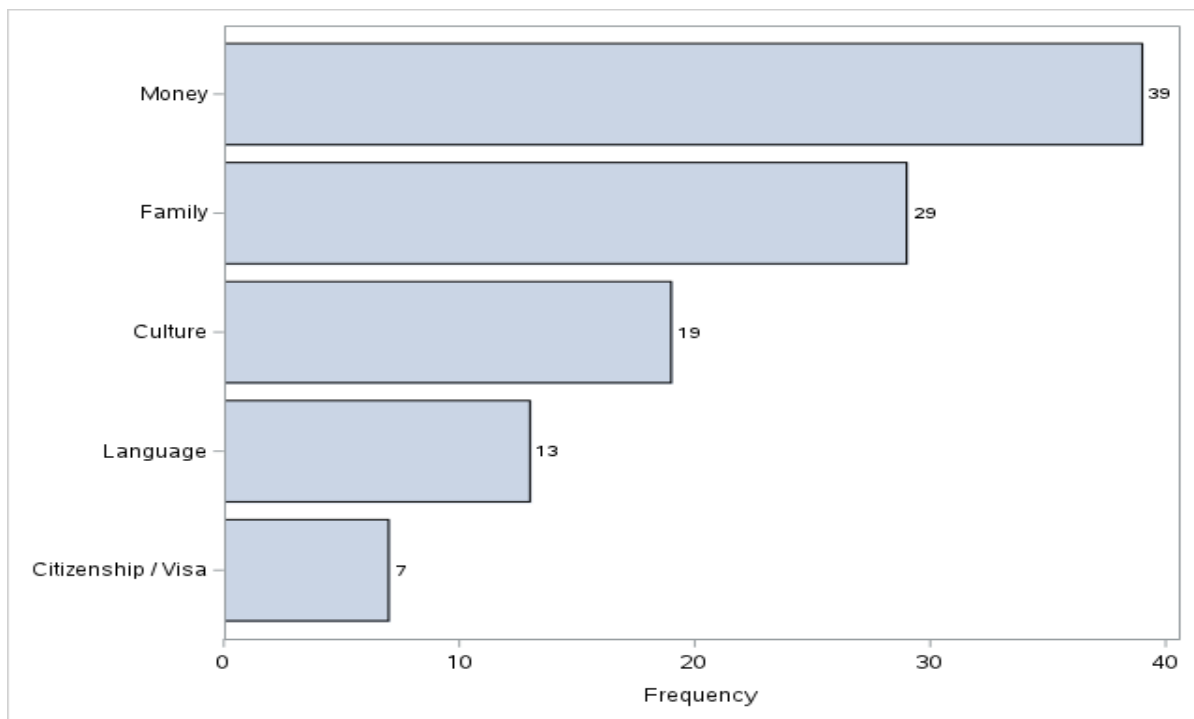
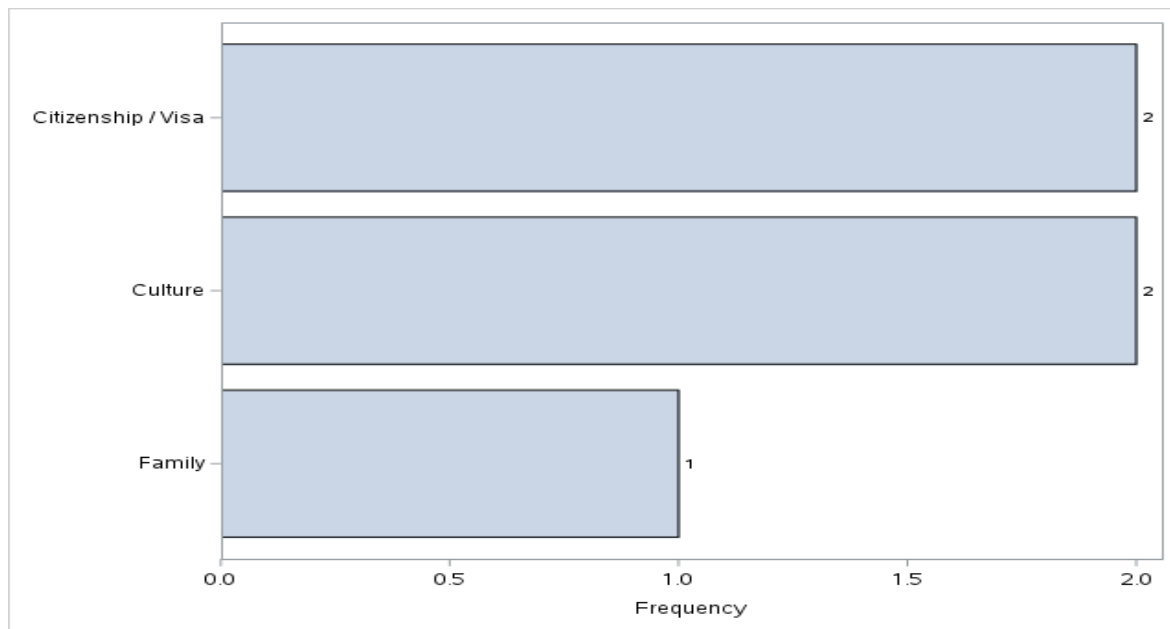


Figure 2 indicates the frequency of themed answers reported by faculty as to the barriers perceived in studying abroad in the U.S.A.

Figure 2

Frequency of Barriers as Perceived by Faculty



Adding to the data that answers the question, “What factors impact Armenian students and faculty’s decision to study abroad in the U.S.?” is an examination of the perceived benefits students and faculty have concerning teaching/studying abroad in the U.S.A. Both faculty and students noted opportunities as the top benefit in teaching/studying abroad with 41.67% of students 22.22% of faculty listing this option. Financial opportunities, or the perception of obtaining a better paying job, was the next identified category. Twenty-two students (26.19%) indicated they believed there would be greater opportunities for good-paying employment in the U.S.A. with one faculty member echoing the same sentiment. The collective data indicates 64% of those surveyed believe there are adequate opportunities of study/work abroad while 24.21% indicated a neutral response. This indicates a belief of benefits in studying/working abroad but may point to a limited number of opportunities.

The next closely identified benefit to teaching/studying abroad was issues surrounding the acquisition of the English language. Seventeen students (20.24%) identified the ability to practice and participate in conversation with native English speakers as a benefit. This may represent a skewed percentage as all student participants were enrolled in English of some degree as their education major. The percentage of faculty, one or 11.11%, may also represent a skewed data report as all faculty were teaching English or a subject in English. And finally, the benefit of education was represented by 19 students (22.62%) and one (11.11%) of faculty. This lends support to the positive perception of the U.S.A. education system as noted above.

Figure 3 below outlines the frequency of answers from students concerning perceived benefits of study abroad in the U.S.A.

Figure 3

Frequency of Benefits as Perceived by Students

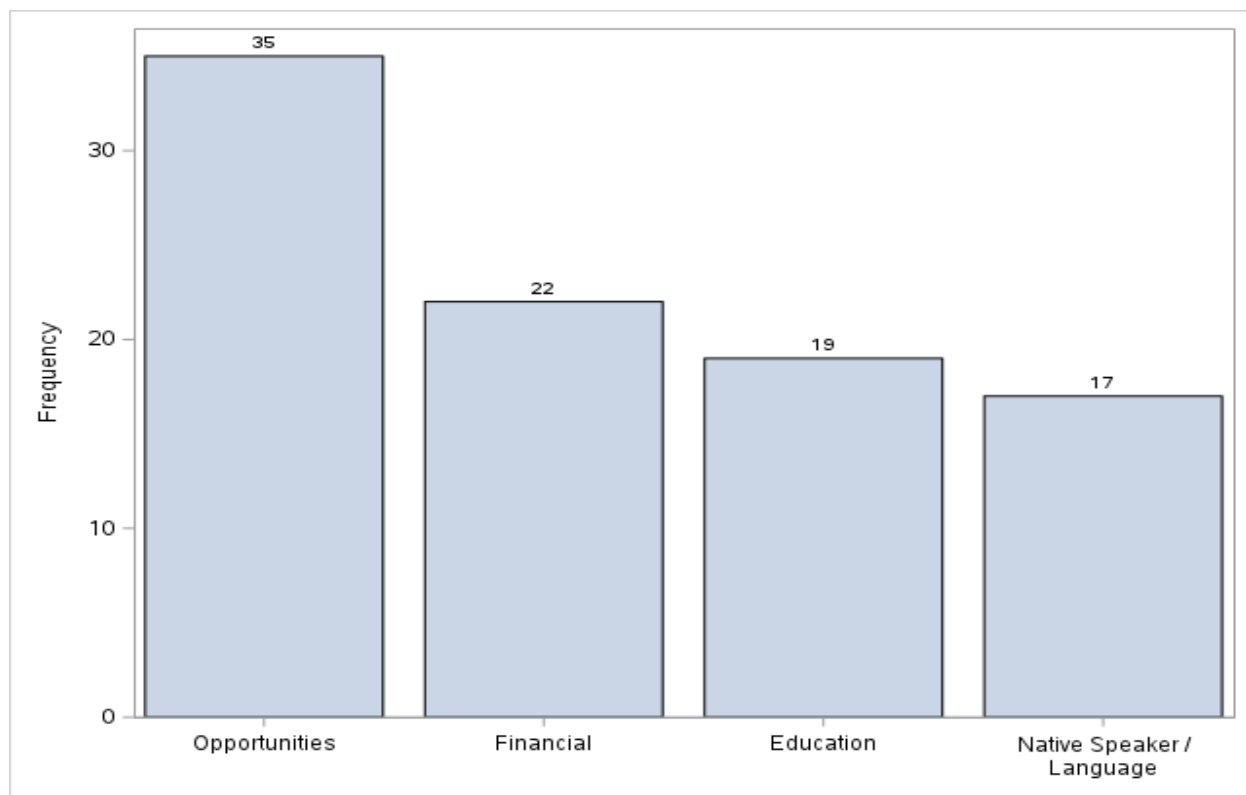
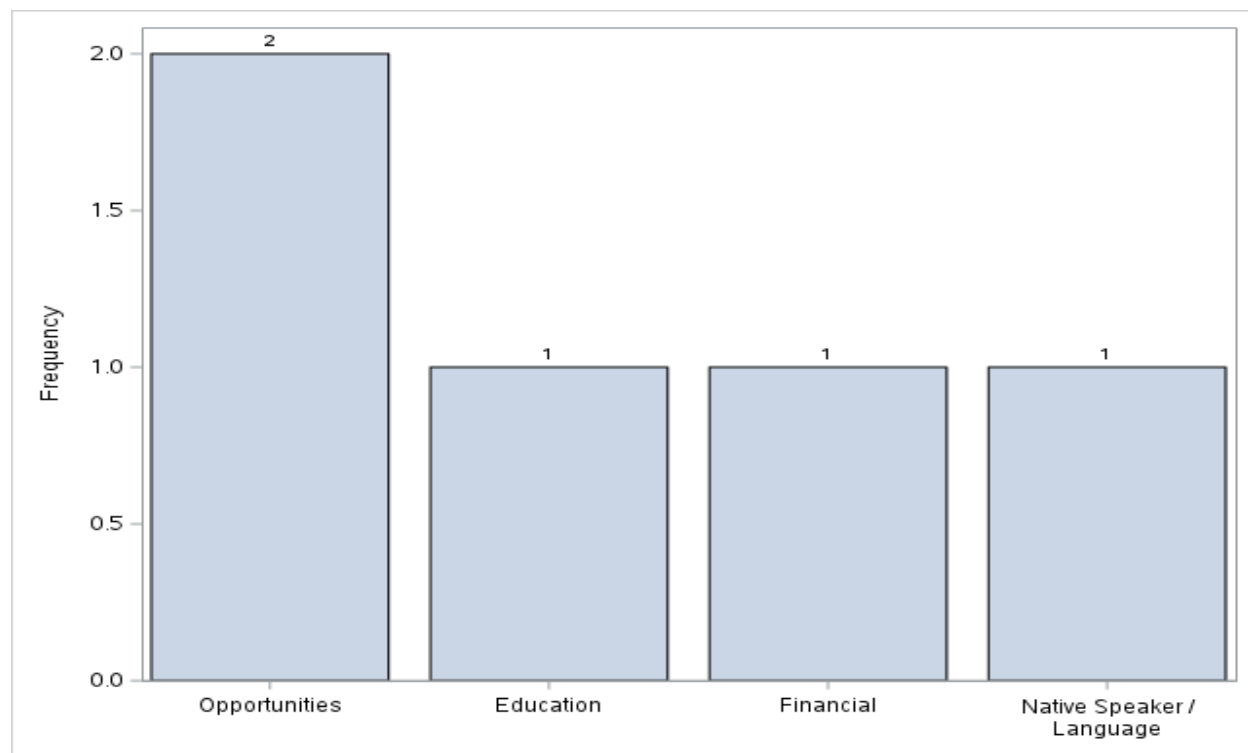


Figure 4 outlines the frequency of answers from faculty concerning perceived benefits of study abroad in the U.S.

Figure 4

Frequency of Benefits as Perceived by Faculty



Discussion

According to Han and Zhang (2020) “the problem of student and graduate mobility is a very new research issue” for the people of Armenia (p. 2). The current literature tends to focus on the mobility issue itself and less on why people move (Han & Zhang, 2020). Furthermore, the mobility of Armenian graduates is concentrated mostly in the United States and the European Union (Han & Zhang, 2020). One explanation of this phenomenon may be the concept of neighboring countries not being accessible due to political reasons (Sargsyan & Cairns, 2020; Yepiskoposyan, 2023). Further research on why those are the destinations of choice may help explain the perceptions of benefits and deficits for each destination.

Studying/working abroad is rich with numerous benefits for students and faculty alike. When surveyed, 89% of Armenian students expressed an interest in studying abroad with the U.S.A. being their first choice (Shinn et. al., 2009). Opportunities and advancement of one’s career is a benefit noted by Armenian faculty and students alike. In conjunction with the notion of advancing one’s career, the idea of being able to earn more money was identified as a major benefit to study/work abroad. This, coupled with the high unemployment rates in Armenia, may add to the desire to study/work abroad (Sargsyan & Cairns, 2020; Yepiskoposyan, 2023). The

acquisition of language and the ability to practice language with native speakers was an additional benefit for Armenian faculty and students seeking to improve their English-speaking skills. All of these identified benefits can be linked to expanding one's view of world and becoming a more aware global citizen.

However, there are obstacles involved in making the decision to study/teach abroad. In Armenia, with its post-soviet educational system, the obstacles may seem more pronounced than in Western culture such as the U.S.A. Financial concerns are noted as a major deterrent to seek a study abroad experience. Dedication to one's family and the concept of being away from home was a strong barrier to the decision to study/teach abroad. Armenia, with its rich culture of strong family ties and closely knit families, seems to be a more pronounced factor in the decision to study/work abroad than in Western culture. Unknown cultural expectations and the difference in cultural norms played a role in decision making for Armenian faculty and students as well. Additionally, the difficulty of securing permission or a visa for entry into the U.S.A. presents another obstacle to overcome when considering working/studying abroad.

Limitations of this study include the lack of data collected based on the language preference. Data were collected from students and faculty fluent in English and studying English in some capacity at a higher education level. Collection from all major areas of study would prove a more rounded collection of data. An even larger scope could be obtained by seeking perceptions from those outside of the world of academia, both professional and manual laborers. This could provide a wholistic measure of Armenia citizens as a whole. Additionally, much of the current literature focus' on studying/working abroad from a world view rather than specific to Armenian citizens. This study can add to the literature by specifically addressing the Armenian people and perspectives.

Conclusions

This study is relevant in addressing the gap in literature investigating the perceptions and intentions of faculty students in higher education in Armenia. Little research focuses directly on this population of students and faculty. Therefore, much of the literature makes assumptions and groups those of Armenian descent with other post-soviet or European countries.

In order to assist Armenian faculty and students in their desire to move forward in the evolution of their education system, support must be offered to those seeking international experiences. Namely, financial support and commitment from the education institutions and government sponsored programs should be considered. With the high percentage of all respondents at 92.71%; students at (91.67%) and faculty at (100%) found to have an interest in working/studying abroad in the U.S. more attention should be given to creating opportunities from both Armenian officials and U.S. officials. This high level of interest is also supported by Shinn, et al. (2009) in their study of Armenian college students, with 89% identifying a desire to study abroad in the U.S as their first choice of locations.

Additional opportunities for cross-cultural learning could also benefit Armenian faculty and students in considering studying/working abroad in the U.S.A. Both students and faculty noted cultural difference and uncertainties and a barrier to the decision to study abroad in the

U.S.A. By supporting more faculty/student exchanges and supporting the creation of relationships between faculty and students a deeper understanding of U.S.A. culture can be shared. This, in turn, would benefit the U.S.A. students who would come to learn cultural differences and similarities of the Armenian faculty and students. A two-way benefit for students and faculty would be eminent. The world is becoming a smaller place with the inclusion of a global mindset for all. By supporting the concept of studying/working abroad the beneficiaries of these activities will help move society forward as a whole.

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