Challenges Implementing an American Degree Program in China

Matilda Isaac Mustapha

Abstract—**The idea of establishing an American University degree program in China is impressive and highly welcomed by students in China. A reputable University in the United States has collaborated with a vocational College in China for such a program. The goal of the venture was to develop students in the area of Marketing and Management Sciences, by combining both Chinese and American business models in order to create versatility and exposure to the American way of study. Unfortunately, the program had not been without major limitations. The purpose of this study was to determine the effects of cultural differences, language barrier, and Confucian ideology on the program success. Subsequently, the findings will be used to create a process improvement plan. I believe this would be a significant first step in improving the sustainability of the program and others like it.**

Index Terms—**KPI, Pareto, process improvement, Confucius.**

I. Introduction

The present study examines the development of American Degree programs in China. In China today, many people view higher education as a quality investment, because it decreases the gap between the rich and the poor [1]. The increase in financial status also improves the ability to compete in an international platform. As a result, there has been a surge in the demand for foreign education. In 2004, the University of Nottingham opened up a prestigious campus in Ningbo China, therefore becoming the first foreign University in China to offer a degree program [1]. A recent study conducted by He&Banham [2], found that immigration and employment opportunities were among the motivating factors that encouraged Chinese students to choose such programs. However, there are some inherent problems that could hinder the success of such partnerships. Challenges range from communication issues, matching up colleges with the right program and resources, political issues, cultural issues and improper program design [3].

The Nottingham project gave light to some of the issues that we see occurring in similar ventures. The most important of which was the inability to deliver an equivalent American degree program in China [1]. This was because the majority of the students in the program were Chinese students with limited exposure to English which is also the language of study. Another issue was the introduction of the program to the students. The lacks of proper program objectives along with limited comprehension of English were major factors in functionality of most partnerships. It is important to note that such programs have great benefits that can only be materialized if proper care is taken to understand Chinese Culture, to explain the program objectives, to minimize the language barrier and to integrate the theological models of both countries represented. Gillentine, [4] emphasized the need to understand the culture of the Chinese people before venturing into business in China. The author indicated the importance of networking and building a close relationship with the Chinese in order to have a successful partnership in China. This could be deemed difficult because the Chinese believe in saving face, which means it is not easy to understand their true feelings unless you have built trust with them [5]. Societal values have been known to play a big role on how business opportunities are received in China. There are also important cultural differences that must be put into consideration when determining what motivates students in the classroom [6].

II. Influence of Culture on Education

The Chinese are backed by 5,000 years of history and their language is intertwined with hidden references that must be discovered, in order to prevent cultural misunderstanding. Respect for elders is prevalent in the culture and this transcends the walls of society into the classroom. Chinese perceive a huge gap between student-teacher power differences. The teacher is seen as the authority figure that holds the power in the classroom [7]. This could be interpreted as the reason why students often do not express any feelings of discouragement or dissatisfaction. It is important to know this, because it gives foreign instructors a better understanding of their students. What the western world might view as non-participation in the classroom, might just be respect for leadership. The study by Ying & Ying [8], observed that Chinese teachers were expected to be innovative in the classroom. Class was expected to be more relaxed and fun, by using movies, role playing and not lecture dominated [8]. While, there is nothing wrong in utilizing various teaching methods, the idea that University is expected to be more relaxing could minimize the focus and motivation to learn. This attitude of complacency might be the reason why theoretical lectures are frowned upon by students, creating a wider gap between foreign teachers expectation and student performance.

A. Ambiguous Program Objectives/Communication

Communicating a clear objective is directly proportional to the success of any business venture. Blurred lines of communication can produce a lack of trust and consequently, stall the growth of a program. There are nuances within the Chinese culture that is reflected in communication and

information dissemination. The issue of language must be resolved in any partnership between two different cultures. This can create a loss of meaning and cause miscommunication of planned objectives. As such, the goal of the program becomes unclear [9]. This correlates to why the use of intermediaries in a joint program venture cannot be over emphasized. These intermediaries could be in the form of interpreters or agents who can help to establish and communicate achievable goals in the planning phase of joint programs. These goals must include the constant monitoring and proper management of the program [3]. The communication issue might account for why many students in the joint program cannot align their requirements to the program objective. Also, the lack of understanding between students and administrators has led to limited performance in similar programs. Ying, & Ying, [8], conducted an empirical study on intercultural communication for English majors in a Chinese University, and they discovered that many students relied greatly on their teachers to prepare them for the global world by helping them develop intercultural communication competence. This need was viewed as a tool for competitive advantage in the changing economy. In the partnership between the universities studied in this paper, the lack of clear program objectives created confusion, because the requirements of the student do not seem to match the realities that the program presented. Communication was not the only issue of concern in the program. As the study would find, other factors such as the role of Confucianism was evident in the overall assessment of the program success.

B. The Role of Confucius on Education

Confucius (551-479 BC) is one of the greatest philosophers and educator in Chinese history. His teachings are imbedded into the fabric of the Chinese educational system. His theory emphasized the benevolence of human behavior "Ren" [9]. His educational premise was that students are different, and teachers must teach based on the aptitude of their students. Teachers were expected to understand the weakness of a student and find ways to improve the skill level of that student [10]. The idea that students should be educated according to their individual aptitude has created a blurred line in establishing high educational standards in this Chinese/American University program. Zhang, citing Ozmon & Craver [11], stated that Confucius philosophies offer insight into resolving educational programs. Students are led to believe that failure is to be averted by the teacher regardless of the student performance. This is where motivation can be compromised. Students strongly believe in co-operating to work together to help their fellow mates. Though there is something to admire in group interaction and lending a helping hand, it also creates an ethical dilemma to foreign instructors who come from an individualistic society. This also raises the argument that it's not the lack of cognitive objectivity; rather, it's the subjectivity in thinking that inhibits cultural blending. The challenge for University partnership becomes how to blend the American culture of individualism and the Chinese culture of collectivism [9]. The Confucian philosophical views have been known to not only influence the Chinese student behavior but also the adults in general. A study conducted by Jaw, Ya-Hui, Wang, & Wen-Ching, [12], on employee work values, emphasized the fact that, Western influence on Chinese individuals created openness to change and ambitiousness. However, those without the Western influence were found to be less aggressive and more secure in their present state. These interesting facts can only help to bolster the reason why it is very difficult to establish western educational precepts in Chinese Universities. Though in the recent years we have seen success but not without great mastery of the Chinese educational culture. The society seems to welcome the idea of western influence, but one cannot truly say if accepting the idea is the same as adopting its principles. However, the constant presence of western Universities in China will slowly create an avenue for cultural assimilation.

III. THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: POPULATION SAMPLE/HYPOTHESIS

A. Research Questions/Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: Cultural misunderstanding will have a significant limitation on student's satisfaction in the US/China degreeprograms.

Hypothesis 2: The lack of proper communication (language barrier) will hinder student satisfaction in US/China degree programs.

Hypothesis 3: The proper understanding of Confucian ideology will have a significant relationship to student satisfaction in the US/China degree programs.

Hypothesis 4: The lack of clear program objective willhinder the student satisfaction in a US/China degree program.

A. Variables

Independent Variables: Language proficiency, culture, Confucius ideology, ambiguous program objective/communication.

Dependent Variables: Success of American university degree program offerings in China.

B. Population Information

For this study a primary research was conducted of an American institution in a joint venture with a Chinese institution. The aim of both institutions was to develop successful entrepreneurs and business managers for the 21st century. The American Institution is located in the mid-western region of the United States and its home to about 5,000 undergraduate and graduate students, while the Chinese institution (Host) is located in Mainland China its home to 5,000 undergraduate students. A random sample of 10-20 students of 100 current Students in the joint degree program participated in the focus group sessions and another 50 students participated in the survey. The Students ages ranged from 18-21 and consisted of both male and female. It is important to note that most of the participants were from affluent families, so their futures were financially secured regardless of their academic performance.

IV. THE METHODOLOGY

The overall framework of this study was both qualitative

and quantitative. We tested qualitatively for Hypothesis 1 &3 and quantitatively for Hypothesis 2 &4. The qualitative data source was a focus group consisting of 2 groups of 5-10 students, who helped shed light on some of the concerns about the program. The groups met in a classroom for a round table style discussion. The moderator along with an interpreter helped to clarify questions and ambiguities. The first group met for 30 minutes. The second group also met for 30minutes. The Session began by introducing to the groups the importance of each participant. Participants were informed of the purpose of the meeting, and of plans to improve the program. The participants were assured that their confidentiality would be maintained. Participant wasasked to introduce themselves and their attributes to the focus groups. The moderator asked open ended explorative questions about participant's assessment of the program, their notion of education in China and how foreign teachers align to their cultural ideologies, their thoughts on the teaching instruments and style and language of study, and their impression of the staff and faculty. Other questions included knowledge of the program objective and ideas on program improvement. The results from the sessions was instrumental in determining other variables that might influence the programs, such as, student expectations, student preferences, and student concerns. This was subsequently used to create a pretest survey for a quantitative study. Upon the completion of the pretest survey, the information discovered was used to develop a final survey. A next meeting date was determined to administer the survey to students in the program. Survey questions consisted of 20 multiple choice pretested questions, which ranged from personal identifier such as questions on age and program ID, to questions directly related to the program. Some questions spoke to student expectation and satisfaction, while others addressed the issue of understanding of program objectives, ease of understanding textbook language and any difficulties experienced throughout the program. Furthermore, questions on cultural views and possible influence on their understanding of educational goals were included in the survey.

V. Data Analysis Method

For this study, the Pearson Correlation analysis was conducive, because it measured the weight of each performance variable to the overall student satisfaction, and program success. Variables such as, Culture, language proficiency/barrier, ambiguous program objective, and understanding of Confucian ideology. It was equally important to use a t- statistics for chance occurrence, for determining if the correlation between the test expectation and the variables was significant. A Likert scale of 1-5 was used to rate the questions. With 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree. All correlating questions and responses were transposed into a spread sheet. Questions that correlated to certain variables were noted for significance. For example, questions on teacher's readiness, or perception of staff or understanding of program objective were used to measure the clarity of communication. Such questions were correlated with the mean value of the high scores, and measured against the mean value of the low scores, in order

to determine their relationship if any does exist. Simple mean, median, mode, were used to determine the average number of students who responded with highest scores and those that responded with the lowest scores in the survey. Those numbers were computed to create a Pareto Chart to identify Key Performance Indicators (KPI's) and to help distinguish the major issues [14]. A Pareto chart as shown in Fig. 1, was crucial in identifying the least amount of factor causing the most problems in the program. The reason I chose these methods was because, there were so many variables to consider. Furthermore, if one were to begin the process of improvement, a strong focus must be given to those variables responsible for limiting the program success. This data analysis later became the foundation on how to begin a process improvement plan for this program.

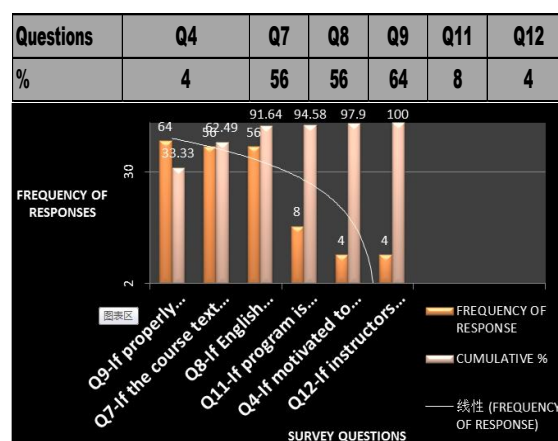| Questions	Q4	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q11	Q12
%	4	56	56	64	8	4

Fig. 1. Pareto chat analysis.

VI. Findings

In this study we found three prevalent issues and they were; the lack of clear program objectives, lack of proper communication and difficulties understanding the text books/course material due to language barrier. The data presented a framework for process improvement plans. The t-stats helped us to determine if the questions asked correlated to the satisfaction of the students in the program. The level of satisfaction/ dissatisfaction was also a great way of understanding the level of performance of the students, because the students that did poorly in the class were dissatisfied with the variables listed in this study. Though we did not test for performance level, instructors within the program did observe a great amount of students needed more help than their American counterparts, considering the instructors had taught the same program in the home University. In an attempt to measure the impact of language barrier on student competence and how all of this relates to the objective of the program and student satisfaction, it was discovered that though language had no bearing on student competence but so much more on their ability to adapt to the course terminologies. Fig. 2 shows the dissatisfaction as a result of language. This wasevident in how the students interpreted course materials and often times their inability to understand the instructors.A histogram was developed to graphically expose the need for a well-planned program and curriculum design. As in Fig. 1, the Pareto Chart was the

biggest indicator of concern within the program. It concluded that 92% of the problems were as a result of three major factors, Ambiguity in program objective, difficulty with course materials and language barrier in communication. It must be noted that attempting to design a study for determining the possible limitations in American University program offerings in China was a first step in understanding ways to measure the program success. A further analysisof student satisfactionhighlighted a significant gap between the program objective and the student expectation. The study showed dissatisfaction on how student viewed the significance of the program to their future plans. Though many of their future aspirations fit into the program, they could not see the connection. This could have been as a result of lack of clarity in program objective. Students a times could not really decipher if the home or the host University was responsible for the affairs of the program. Again this also tied into a gap in communication between both institutions. This is why further analysis was neededto determine the role of culture and Confucian ideology on how Chinese students perceive education. In the focus group it was evident that Confucian ideology andcultural misunderstanding played a convergent role in the program success. There was a unanimous sentiment voiced by students in the program, that there was a gap in perception of their culture by foreign instructors and student expectation. They thought the foreign instructors could use some mandarin lessons to better understand their views on issues in and out of the classroom. The study found that this negatively affected student performance and motivation. One prevalent factor was that students had the potential to do well, however there were foundational issues that were not properly addressed in order to properly asses student competence from the program inception.This variable must be put into consideration when deciding such programs ventures. It is my hope that this study will serve as a template not only for the program Success but also for similar ventures.
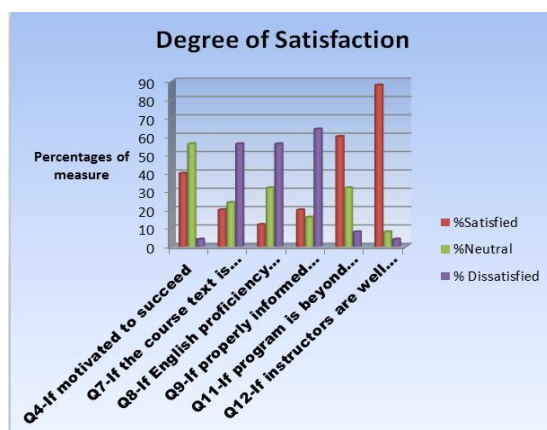

Fig. 2. Histogram indicating the degree of student satisfaction.

VII. LIMITATIONS

The fact that the interviewer is also an instructor in the program could have altered the way students answered the questions. Students were given a little briefing in their native tongue by a fellow Chinese instructor and this might create apprehension about what to disclose. Meaning, there was a possibility that during interpretation, emphases on certain question might have depicted a need for limited disclosure. The student's inability to speak their minds within their environment might have given them room to divulge more than necessary or only what they thought was paramount. One cannot say for sure if affluence and the guaranteed security had an effect on the student motivation to work harder than normal considering the difficulties within the program. This could affect reliability of the study. A pretest was administered in order to increase reliability and validity. However, there is no guarantee that students were objective in their answers. The brevity of the survey questions in order to simplify its content might have limited the content of the survey. Finally we didn't test confounding factors such as English proficiency level to see if that commensurate with the minimum requirements for the program nor did we observe student's study habits.

TABLE I: MAJOR FACTORS AFFECTING STUDENT PERFORMANCE.

QUESTIONS/RESPONSES	FREQUENCY OF RESPONS	CUMULATIVE %	%
Q9-If properly informed about program	64	33.33	33.33
Q7-If the course text is easy and suitable	56	62.49	29.16
Q8-If English proficiency is a limitation	56	91.64	29.16
Q11-If program is beyond level of	8	94.58	4.15
Q4-If motivated to succeed	4	97.9	2.1
Q12-If instructors are well prepared for class	4	100	2.1

TABLE II: THE DEGREE OF SATISFACTION/DISSATISFACTION

Questions	%Satisfied	% Neutral	%Dissatisfied
If Motivated to succeed Q4	40	56	4
If the course text was easy to read. Q7	20	24	56
If English proficiency was a problem. Q8	12	32	56
If properly informed about the program.Q9	20	16	64
If program was beyond their level.Q11	60	32	8
If instructors were well prepared for class.Q12	88	8	4

VIII. PLAN OF ACTION

1) To whom (by function) in the host organization should it report survey results and why?The survey should be reported to the school administration, consisting of the Dean, the Teaching co-coordinator, the records department and the parties involved in the joint program implementation.

2) How should it report results to these individuals?Reports should be in writing with a formal information meeting for instructors and those mentioned above. A virtual team can be created whereby the American University and the Chinese University can hold meetings of processed.

3) How should it report results to its students?All students should be made aware of the fact that their concerns are being addressed and solutions abound. As soon those solutions are discussed, students should be given continuous feedback on all parts of the process.

4) How and to whom (by function) should it assign

ownership of problems revealed by the survey? Ownership should be assigned to the Chair of the program who in turn will delegate the leadership functions of the improvement process. All plans must be documented and timely and measurable

5) How should it deal with real problems and problems of communication? The problem of communication can be addressed by creating an opportunity for monthly meetings. There should be a breakdown of the walls that prevent students from having the right to be heard and the right to choose a better mode of operation.

6) How should it get immediate assistance to students who are in need of help? The institution needs to begin a rigorous ESL teaching program and a plan for extracurricular sessions in business terminologies. At this point instructors might want to limit the use of the textbooks during lectures and use PowerPoint presentations and live simulation. Also staff may want to enroll in a Mandarin class to help reduce the stress of word repetition. In the future a better system of application must ensue. Test scores must be evaluated and the rule of engagement must be adhered to. The lack of clear objectives has created a gap between the customers (student) satisfaction and class performance. A virtual team should be created to ensure consistent and effective communication between the home and the host university. Feedback loop should be created to enable the administrators to understand the mindset of the students and how to determine a proactive way of dealing with issues. A step by step action plan with dates and timeline of completion should be created to maintain accountability in the program. The three aspects that seem to affect the program the most should be handled effectively in a timely manner. The plan should be sustainable, measurable applicable, and reliable.

7) How should it create a quality improvement team to deal with the CS survey results? Who (by function) should it include on this team?
   - The Registrar's office staff, who would handle the application process to make sure that English competency is a major function of the program.
   - The Dean of the faculty at both institutions, who would be in charge of setting the agenda and defining the goals and objectives of the programs.
   - The head of the Teaching staff, who sets the scheduling for the teachers and place students accordingly. This person will make sure that there is a schedule in place for English lessons and class time are assigned accordingly.
   - The teaching staff of the program to oversee immediate student responses to performance improvement. They would also help to determine a more suitable resource material for the students.
   - A student from the program who can represent the students.
   - An interpreter to help clarify ambiguity.

While these are plans to use the results of the survey, it will be used to create goals that would be sustainable, timely, and measurable. All actions will consist of individuals who would perform the task and tentative dates of task completion.

The one thing that interested me the most about the survey results was the fact that the students did not perceive that the course material was beyond their level of comprehension. This implied that under the right circumstances they would excel. Another train of thought would be that they felt if they said it was beyond their scope, then that directs the problem towards them and not the other issues expressed.

Finally the study hopes to accomplish the following:
1) To gain superior knowledge of Chinese students and their view of American Universities.
2) To better identify the factors that hinder the success of American University programs in China and its relationship to student satisfaction.
   3) To use this study to improve the professional environment of international Universities, and help in program design for similar ventures

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