

A Case Study of the Search Phase of College Choice as Experienced Prospective Students Visiting a Midwest College of Agriculture

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Abstract

Each year higher education institutions seek to recruit and attract high school graduates to their institutions. Millions of high school seniors each year are in the midst of the college choice process, attempting to determine which institution is “right” for them. This study explored college choice factors important to high school seniors in the search phase of the college choice process. To carry out this study purposeful sampling was used to select 11 high school seniors participating in individually scheduled campus visits. An interview process was used to investigate what college choice factors were important to them when choosing a university/college. Student responses were ultimately categorized into six areas: interest in a specific major/program area, reputation, ideal distance from home, family interaction with institution, factors related to paying for college and campus environment.

Introduction

In 2008, 2.1 million high school graduates (68% of all high school graduates) nationwide enrolled in post-secondary education for the fall semester immediately following their high school graduation or GED completion (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Each of these students made the choice of which institution they would attend. In 2008-2009 this meant choosing from over four thousand degree granting institutions (U.S. Department of Education National Center for Educational Statistics, 2009). Deciding where to attend college can be a confusing and overwhelming process. For the discerning student taking in all the information of recruitment materials, college visits, admissions requirements, financial aid, etc.; the goal of finding the institution that is the “perfect fit” is a formidable task.

Within the world of higher education lays the related challenge of effectively attracting and recruiting students. In the name of recruitment, colleges and universities disseminate information highlighting the best they have to offer; focusing on general collegiate concepts including campus features/characteristics, academics/faculty, co-curricular opportunities, mission/purpose and prestige/value (Hartley and Morphew, 2008; Harris, 2009). Moving beyond the general college choice factors, marketing materials tout school accolades: strong traditions of excellence, national successes, prestigious alumni, personal successes, athletic accomplishments, university mantras and other notable attributes (Harris, 2008) all in the name of attracting new applicants. Raising the stakes of effective institutional marketing and recruiting efforts is the number of first-time college and university freshman indicating they applied to four or more institutions, which reached a record high of over 60% in 2008 (Pryor et al., 2008).

Marketing an educational institution is complex and multifaceted: the college choice process involves all aspects of an institution, from athletics to faculty to student life, as well as family members, social climate, economic factors and even public policy (Kinzie et al., 2004). Hossler and Gallagher’s (1987) “Three Phase Model of College Choice” is widely used as a lens through which to study the college choice process (Bateman and Hossler, 1996; Mooney, 2007; Urbanski, 2000). Hossler and Gallagher assert that prospective students move through three phases throughout the college choice process (1987). Phase 1: Predisposition is described by the authors as “a developmental phase in which students determine whether or not they would like to continue their education beyond high school” (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987, p. 209). Factors that contribute to a student’s decision to attend a postsecond-

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A Case Study of the Search Phase

ary institution include socioeconomic status, parental expectations, career opportunities, financial aid and potential income differentials (Bateman and Hossler, 1996; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Maringe, 2006; Urbanski, 2000). Which variable is most important to any given student is highly subjective and specific to a particular student's personal identity (gender, ethnicity, personal experiences, educational activities, significant others etc.) (Bateman and Hossler, 1996; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Urbanski, 2000). The predisposition stage, although fluid and complex, is key to progressing to Phase 2: Search (Bateman and Hossler, 1996; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987).

While students entering phase two have some accrued knowledge of colleges and universities, they continue to compile and consider the factors most important to them throughout the search phase, eventually forming a "choice set" (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). According to survey and diary research, choice set formation begins as early as students' freshman year in high school and continues through the application process (Rosen et al., 1998). Students spend phase two reading promotional materials, visiting their choice set institutions and weighing the factors most important to them, which as in phase one, are highly specific to the individual (Mooney, 2007; Rosen et al., 1998; Urbanski, 2000). Factors most often include criteria based on academic (test scores, reputation of program, etc.), social (size, location, amenities, etc.) and cost (tuition, financial assistance, etc.) elements (DesJardens et al., 1999; Mooney, 2007; Urbanski, 2000).

As students gather this information in the search phase and deliberate their decision, they move into phase three: choice. It is in the choice phase that a student makes the decision of which institution they plan to attend (Hossler and Gallagher, 1987). Although this choice is often driven by a consensus of multiple factors specific to the individual, research indicates that a connection or relationship between an institution and student can be a driving factor, as can financial assistance, size and location of the institution (Acker et al., 2004; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Nafukho and Burnett, 2002).

The three phases of the college choice process offered by Hossler and Gallagher, provide a framework from which to view this complex and highly individual specific deliberation process.

The present study investigated the college choice factors of prospective students in the search phase of the college choice process as they participated in a campus visit in the college of agriculture at a land grant university in the mid-west region of the United States.

Methods

In order to allow students to use their own words in describing what has influenced their decisions regarding college choice, a qualitative constructionist approach was utilized for this study. The constructionist epistemology asserts understanding of the world is derived and constructed through one's personal experiences and interactions (Crotty, 1998). Interviews were used to facilitate student reflection of their constructed wants/needs for certain characteristics of higher education. More specifically, eleven interviews were used to allow students to identify college choice factors they considered most important when selecting a college through a dialogue of students' personal experiences while in the search phase of their college choice process.

Purposeful sampling, a method of selecting "individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem," and convenience sampling, using those participants that are readily available, were used in this study (Creswell, 2007, p. 125). Participants were selected from a pool of high school seniors participating in an official visit to the Kansas State University College of Agriculture during the fall or spring of their senior year in high school.

Participants were initially contacted via email to explain the purpose of the study, the collection methods, the importance of their participation and their protected rights under informed consent. Students were then interviewed on the date of their individually scheduled campus visit. The content of the initial contact email, informed consent document and interview guide were submitted to and approved by the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board. Permission to contact and interview prospective students was also given by the Kansas State University admissions office. The participant pool consisted of eleven traditionally-aged high school seniors planning to continue their education after high school. Though diversity in terms of gender, state of residence and interest area was represented, this study did not attempt to make connections between any aspect of diversity and subjects' responses. For the purposes of discussion participants in this study were assigned pseudonyms. Participant pseudonym, gender, major of interest, home state and age is presented in Table 1.

Each interview was conducted in a quiet location without time restrictions. The interview was structured with open-ended questions aimed at eliciting the subject's perspective of his/her own college choice experiences. Interview questions included:

Table 1. Participant Information

Participant	Gender	Major of Interest	Home State	Age
Adam	Male	Agribusiness	Missouri	18
Brittany	Female	Animal Sciences and Industry	Kansas	18
Elizabeth	Female	Pre-veterinary studies	Kansas	18
Hallie	Female	Pre-veterinary studies	Missouri	18
Jane	Female	Animal Sciences and Industry	Kansas	17
Lance	Male	Agriculture Education	Kansas	17
Mandi	Female	Animal Sciences and Industry	California	18
Nick	Male	Agribusiness	Kansas	18
Randy	Male	Milling Science and Management	Kansas	18
Rheba	Female	Pre-veterinary studies	Kansas	17
Travis	Male	Milling Science and Management	Texas	18

Specific Major/Program of Study

The category specific major/program of study represents student responses that their area of study was an important factor in considering which college or university they would attend. Noting that each of the students in the study were on an official campus visit to a college of agriculture provides some indication that they had already put at least a minimal degree of thought to their possible interests. Nick is an example of this broad interest that led students to visit campus: *“Agriculture is my interest and*

I looked up online and K-State is right up there in the top three colleges in the nation. [student reference – authors unaware of the ranking to which the student refers] I was hoping to learn about different careers you can go into with Ag Business. Texas A&M, Iowa State, Nebraska – I got letters from all those places. They are all agricultural based colleges.”

Randy shared, *“I’ve always been kind of interested in agriculture.”* This general interest in a program area prompted these students to pursue more information through a campus visit. Other participants had more specific major interests. Travis provided an example of how a specific major led him to this visit: *“I’m really interested in the Milling program. My counselors in school, in Texas, have been talking about it and it sounds interesting and my grandparents have been talking about it so I just kind of want to see what it is about. I’m really interested here because it is an exclusive program here and there’s nothing like it in the U.S. and I’m interested in how things like that work, the whole milling process. I decided based on the programs I want to go into. I want to go into engineering and agriculture and this school is good in both.”*

Travis was drawn to this college by his specific interest in two programs, as well as by unique programs at this particular institution. While Travis was seeking and factoring in information regarding undergraduate programs, some participants were looking beyond undergraduate study. Hallie states, *“Probably the most important thing is the major itself and how I can learn about it. Well, I just, I looked at what colleges had both a “pre-vet” and a “vet” school. And because I didn’t want to transfer to somewhere that only had a vet school.”*

Other participants likewise shared *“I want to become a vet”* and *“I know that K-State has one of the top vet schools, so that is the main factor.”* Although some put more emphasis on it than others, each participant made some reference to a specific major or area of study.

1. Why did you decide to visit the Kansas State University College of Agriculture?
2. When you came on your visit today what did you hope to learn?
3. When you think about your future college, what factors are important to you?
4. What would you say is the most important factor influencing your decision on what college/university to attend?
5. How did you decide what colleges/universities you were interested in finding out more about?

In addition to these foundational questions, probing questions were used to encourage participants to fully consider the questions posed to them.

Using these questions to illicit a variety of responses, the researchers collapsed the data into emergent themes and categories. To maximize objectivity, the data were analyzed using several strategies. First the interviews were transcribed and member checks were utilized by contacting participants via email to verify the accuracy of transcripts. The data were then evaluated using open coding to categorize emerging themes, first independently by two parties, then by triangulating the independent results. Denzin (1978) defines triangulation as “the combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon” (p. 291). Triangulation may be used to “examine the same phenomenon from multiple perspectives” (Jick, 1979, p. 603) and was utilized in the present study to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

Results and Discussion

From the data, six categories of factors related to college choice emerged; interest in a specific major/program area, reputation, ideal distance from home, family interaction with institution, factors related to paying for college and campus environment. Specific details of these findings are as follows.

A Case Study of the Search Phase

Reputation

The reputation of the institution, college, or program was stated as an important factor to many of the participants of this study. Randy shared, “Kinda like... academics, a rich tradition and good reputation.” Some of the participants gauged the reputation through feedback from others. Hallie shared, “*I heard from a vet that I shadowed that they [Kansas State University] had a really good exotic animal [program] and that is what I want to go into.*” Similarly Adam stated, “*I’ve always heard from a lot of people that K-State is a good ag school. I want to major in Ag Business and go back and manage the family farm and I want to have the business background so I know the decisions and can make educated guesses on how to make the best decision for the operation. People that talked about it range from colleagues of mine that show cattle around the country to older people, alumni from K-State, teachers, most of my teachers went to school around Missouri, but most older people talk about how K-State is a good school.*”

Many participants in this study cited sources they considered to be trustworthy, seen as friends, mentors, etc. who spoke about the reputation of institutions in which the participant was interested. Nick shares, “I’ve had some relatives graduate here and all my relatives liked it.” Other participants who reported valuing the reputation of a university also gathered information from other sources. Brittany seemed to sum up the thoughts of many participants with her comment, “[I am looking for] *just a program that I can take to any place around and say I got a degree from ‘there’ and they will say ‘oh, that’s a great place to have a degree from.’*”

Although the importance of reputation was expressed differently among the participants, the shared concept of wanting to attend an institution that was seen favorably by those around them and/or the industry/career to which they aspire was seen as an important factor in choosing a college by the participants of this study.

Ideal Distance from Home

For many students, attending an institution of higher education means moving away from home and living on their own. In this study the participants identified the “ideal distance from home” an important factor they considered when making choices regarding higher education. Many participants shared the sentiment that an institution “close to home” was desirable and that “convenience and location is a factor”. Hallie shared, “*Of course distance from home played a really big factor. And so I just looked at the*

distance from home and the majors they had and that is what I decided on.” Similarly, Elizabeth shared, “*I want to be a vet, so really the only place nearby to go and K-State being not far away from home, it’s about an hour and 45 minute drive, so I can still see my family and everything when I want.*”

Other participants were also looking for an experience further from home. Adam shared, “*I just kind of always wanted to be different in school. There was a kid who went to Hawaii and he’s still there, but most kids go right around home, to Mizzou, or just kind of stay in the Missouri area. I thought about looking a little broader, keeping my options open around home, but also just looking a little broader of where everyone else goes.*”

Family Interaction with Institution

While discussing what was important to them when choosing an institution, many of the participants mentioned family members in connection with their deliberations. For many students in the study, family history with given institutions was a contributing factor to choosing a college. Many participants shared “my family went here.” Rheba said “*I didn’t decide too much. I’ve basically known my whole life I wanted to go here. Both my sisters go here and I’ve been up here a lot and its basically like I really want to go here.*” Lance shared his family connections to multiple universities and the impact it has had on his choice process, “*Both of my parents are K-State alumni and my sister was going to school up here and I’ve been up here quite a few times for State FFA Convention and State FFA contests and I’ve got a lot of family that has gone to school up here. I grew up involved in K-State and K-State sports...so a lot of family interests. K-State has always been an interest for me because of my family and I never really thought of going to Oklahoma State until my sister went down there.*”

Jane’s previous family interaction was more prominent than most, “*A lot of different reasons, I’ve grown up in the area and my dad works here so I’ve been on campus a lot and I like it, it’s a really friendly community, you know, like everybody is nice.*” Previous family interaction with universities was a contributing factor in the college choice process for many of the participants.

Factors Related to Paying for College

The financial aspect of higher education also emerged as an important factor for the participants. Participants shared that they were influenced by “in-state tuition” and “what scholarships I can get in different areas.” Adam shared, “*I want to find the*

cheapest way to go. I don't want to be in debt going through. I feel like there are so many people that say 'oh I can get these student loans and it will all be good', but you still have to pay for them later and that gets a lot of people in trouble. I want to, hopefully, be able to go through without any debt, which I should be able to, but I want to find the best options for me."

Mandi also reflected the importance of cost in her statement, *"Um, well price kind of has to do with some of [choosing a college], just because out-of-state prices are more expensive than in-state."* Like Mandi and Adam, many of the participants indicated they were considering factors related to paying for college when choosing what college they would attend.

Campus Environment

Of all the factors discussed, participants in this study spent the most time talking about campus environment. The category, campus environment, is comprised of five subcategories including prior campus experience, friendly people, clubs and activities, size of the institution and atmosphere.

Prior Campus Experience

Participants in this study reflected the importance of campus atmosphere in their college choice process. They conveyed a sense that the familiarity of having been on campus provided a sense of comfort in knowing what to expect. Mandi was making her first visit to campus the day of the interview, she shared why being on campus was valuable to her, *"Since I'm out of state, I'm not really sure how everything works, which I know is kind of similar to everywhere else. But I just wanted to get a feel for how everything was."* These statements from Mandi explaining why prior campus experience was important to her, supports other participants' statements of familiarity. Elizabeth shared *"Decent environment, I mean I'm sort of used to the environment anyway"* in the same spirit of wanting to have a sense of what to expect. Lance and Jane also referenced prior campus experiences.

Friendly People

"Friendly people" at the institution was another college choice factor identified by participants. All the participants shared a common sentiment: they wanted to attend an institution where "everybody is friendly." According to participant Hallie, friendly people was an important factor in feeling welcome at in institution. *"I'm just a big friendly person, I really like it when everyone is friendly and welcoming. I've been to colleges that aren't and it definitely shows. But at some colleges they've been like 'hi how are you'*

and just random people will be like, 'hi, can I help you?'" and it's really great to be able to feel welcome." Similarly, Lance shared, *"Something that is really big for me is the people. How the people accept you – how comfortable you feel. I feel extremely comfortable in both Stillwater and Manhattan, so that is the big thing for me."* Nick seemed to succinctly sum up the thoughts of the participants with his comment, *"The people have to be friendly, that is what I like."*

Clubs and Activities

The clubs and activities available for students were a factor that many of the participants considered in their college choice process. Some participants had ideas of specific groups or activities in which they wanted to participate, others were more general. Nick shared, *"I want to join intramural sports. I played lacrosse in high school so I want to do that here, probably. I'm thinking of going into AGR or FarmHouse because they are ag fraternities. My first year I'd probably go into a dorm, there might be like a fishing club or hunting club. I like those things, so I'll definitely join some clubs to get to meet people."* Other participants mentioned interests in "greek life", "being involved", and "campus activities". Rheba shared, *"I like all the different clubs and stuff, they have like so many clubs it's not hard to find one."* Travis shared, *"I think it'd be cool to get involved in campus activities and be around people a lot and not feel alone, because I'm [from] out of state."* For many of the participants clubs and activities were an important component to their choice of institution.

Size of the Institution

Size of the institution, both in terms of student population and physical size, was considered an important factor to the participants. Adam shared, *"I just want to see how many kids are on campus. I'm from a very small town and I just want to see basically what the faculty to student ratio is and if it has kind of a small town feel to it because I just want to have a small town feel and personal experience."* Similarly, Nick shared, *"Also, size. K-State is like the perfect size. Lawrence is a lot bigger and I don't like that. This seems like it is a lot smaller and there is not as many people, it seems a lot smaller. I like where Manhattan is located, not in the city but rural a little bit."*

Not all the participants were looking for a small town environment, Hallie shared, *"Mostly like a friendly atmosphere, I like a big campus, but not so big it feels like 'oh my goodness I'm overwhelmed,' ya know. And I would also like to have the smaller classes like one on one with like the professors and*

A Case Study of the Search Phase

stuff.” Taking yet another approach on size, Mandi shared, “Um, kinda, well the college kind of needs to be close together; like not super far. Like things can’t be miles apart because that would be hard because I don’t really have transportation to get to those places.” Although expressed in different ways and in varying opinions, the size of the institution was an important factor for many of the participants.

Atmosphere

Overall “atmosphere” of the college or institution was a factor many of the participants discussed as being important. The most common sentiment shared was “how comfortable I feel” and “feeling like I belong.” Travis shared, “Um, feeling like I belong. Going out of state like this I’m 8 to 10 hours away from my family so I kind of have to feel good about being here. Biggest three [factors] are program of study, financial aid and sense of home, and of those three sense of home is the most important.” Brittany said, “I wanted to have good campus life and great classes, fun classes, small sizes where the teacher gets to know you and you can learn great stuff from them. Good campus life, being able to just talk to people and have fun in the dorms, it’s not just typical boring routine stuff in that every day.” Lance shared, “The number one factor is where I’m most comfortable at. [If] I’m not comfortable at the school I’m not going to do near as well. I’m not going to enjoy my college experience at all. So probably the number one thing for me is how comfortable it is for me and how much fun I’m having. So really, if the school fits my personality and the town fits my personality that is probably where I will end up.” One participant referred to atmosphere as the “x factor,” and the sentiment of the gut reaction to how they personally related to the overall atmosphere was shared among many of the participants.

Summary

This qualitative study sought to identify college choice factors as experienced and expressed by prospective students in the midst of the search phase in a college of agriculture. This study did not make attempts to generalize the results outside the population, however, implications for recruitment can be drawn with caution. The findings of this study are consistent with the literature base in finding that college choice factors are highly specific to the individual; no two participants having the exact same expectations for their future college or university (Bateman and Hossler, 1996; Hossler and Gallagher, 1987; Urbanski, 2000). Despite the unique set of characteristics each

participant shared, multiple commonalities were found among them.

In describing what college choice factors are important to them, participants of this study regarded three overarching and overlapping themes as important: institutional characteristics, participant background and personal impression. Efforts to maximize these areas can be made during the recruitment process with an emphasis on listening and speaking to the personal experience of the prospective student.

Institutional factors included programs offered, facilities, extracurricular opportunities and other experiences and services provided, organized or supported on the university, college or departmental level. Examples of institutional characteristics were shared by the participants when discussing specific programs and majors, clubs and organizations, etc. Other institutional characteristics, such as campus environment, are more abstract in nature. Campus environment is a broad concept that in this study encompassed prior campus experience, friendly people, clubs and activities, size of the institution and atmosphere. Although campus environment certainly contains a degree of personal interpretation, many factors stem from the institution or college level. Though none of the institutional factors can likely be drastically altered in any given direction overnight, the college and university certainly has the means to affect the overall culture of their institution and the factors discussed that students consider important. Students in this study highlighted the impact of university, college and department representatives they meet with and the interpreted personable/friendly nature of that interaction. Data gathered in this study suggest the university, etc. should continue to feature institutional factors in personal interactions, promotional materials, visits to campus, etc., focusing on accolades of specific majors and programs of study. Additionally, developing new means of highlighting the identified institutional factors and making them more visible to prospective students would target factors participants in this study deemed important.

Participant background primarily describes students’ previous interactions with the university’s campus, college, faculty, students, etc., either first hand or through family and friends. Institutions should emphasize events or activities that promote family experiences and participant interactions with the university, colleges and departments. Events held on campus or hosted by the university, which seek to create interactions with prospective students, build a connection between students and the institution.

Although “personal impression” is an abstract concept consisting of a student’s personal impression and attitude toward an institution based upon experiences, recommendations, observations, etc., study participants gave indications that it is one of the most important factors they are considering when selecting a university. Maximizing impact on personal impression is difficult because each student may interpret and reflect upon common experiences differently. The participants in the study, however, indicated a personable and friendly demeanor may have the largest impact. Institutions should work to promote a university/college/department culture of listening and responding in a respectful, friendly way, in addition to promoting a welcoming, friendly and fun campus environment through both words and actions. As study participants indicated, prospective students notice not only their personally scheduled interactions, but the overall atmosphere of a campus as well.

Future research opportunities in college choice are abundant. Conducting similar studies with students who visited a given institution, but who ultimately enrolled at another university may yield important findings. Follow-up investigations to studies such as this have the potential to follow participants from one phase of college choice to another, evaluating changes and consistencies. College choice factors described as being important by participants, such as “friendly people,” have the potential to themselves be studied and analyzed for what components, characteristics, etc, they consist of. Future research may also compare responses of students’ in predetermined demographic categories, i.e. children of parents with college degrees vs. first generation college-bound students. Replicating studies of past college choice research are also important as changes in society (technology, marketing, social networking, societal norms, etc) are likely to affect prospective students and their beliefs/opinions/expectations of higher education.

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A Case Study of the Search Phase

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