

A Literature Review on College Choice and Marketing Strategies for Recruitment

Pingping Han

Auburn University

Recruiting enough qualified students is becoming an important topic for colleges and universities as the competition within the higher education market intensifies. Knowing the reasons prospective students choose which institution to attend is essential to develop effective marketing and recruiting strategies. The purpose of this study is to present current research and literature on the factors influencing the college choice process and marketing practices in recruiting.

Keywords: college choice; higher education marketing; student recruitment

Higher education has become increasingly diverse and competitive in the 21st century. Students in the United States have a wide range of options to choose from for postsecondary education: public or private 4-year institutions, 2-year institutions, for-profit institutions, community, technical and vocational schools, or virtual universities offering only online courses (Anctil, 2008; Kinzie et al., 2004). Also, American higher education institutions are facing challenges from universities in other countries (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). In addition, the prolonged period of state funding cuts has led to heavy reliance on tuition as a significant revenue source for public colleges and universities (Hiltonsmith & Draut, 2014; Ikenberry, 2009; Kinzie et al., 2004). According to a report by Hiltonsmith and Draut (2014), American public universities and colleges used tuition revenue to cover 44% of their operating expenses in 2012, compared with only 20% in 1987 (which was 25 years ago).

Some private universities and colleges, especially those that are less selective, tuition-driven, and with smaller endowments, also are suffering from a financial crisis as a result of the recession (Fischer, 2011; Selingo, 2013). Meanwhile, the economic downturn has had an impact on household wealth and the ability to pay for college tuition. According to the 2013 CIRP Freshman Survey, there is a trend for students to submit applications to more than four colleges (Eagan, Lozano, Hurtado, & Case, 2013). Therefore, attracting enough eligible high school graduates who are willing to pay full tuition becomes a difficult task for many colleges and universities. To achieve enrollment success, it is essential for

Author's Note: Pingping Han, MS, is a graduate student in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at Auburn University. Please address correspondence to Ms. Pingping Han, 221 Parker, Mathematics & Statistics, Auburn University College of Sciences and Mathematics, Auburn, AL 36849; e-mail: pzh0015@auburn.edu. Her research interests include applied statistics and data analytics. The author would like to thank Professor DeVaney for her advice and encouragement.

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the recruitment officers to understand the characteristics of the prospective students, how to reach them, and what they seek as they search for colleges and universities (Hossler & Bean, 1990).

FACTORS INFLUENCING COLLEGE CHOICE

In American society, it is widely believed that higher education is a valuable long-term investment (Anctil, 2008; Kinzie et al., 2004). However, the process of deciding which college to attend is complicated and comprehensive (Bergerson, 2009; Braxton, 1990; Litten, 1982; McDonough, 1997). For college-bound students and their families, college choice can be an important, difficult, and stressful life decision (Galotti, 1995; Kinzie et al., 2004). Researchers have developed conceptual models to illuminate this process. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) proposed a three-stage behavioral model to describe the stages that students pass through to make the college selection. They separated the process into three stages: predisposition, search, and choice. In the first stage, students develop an aspiration to attend college. The second stage involves students' gathering information, taking entrance examinations, and selecting one or more institutions. In the last stage, students decide which institution to attend and finish the enrollment process. Hossler and Gallagher's model has provided a conceptual framework for many studies of college choice. This study primarily focuses on the choice phase because the focus of this study is how institutions can effectively influence students' college choice.

To identify the factors that affect the decision to enroll at an institution, Chapman (1981) presented a model that included influential factors and how they were interrelated to shape the student's college choice decision. Based on Chapman's model, many studies have identified numerous factors that influence the decision for choosing a specific institution. Some factors are associated with the student characteristics and some factors are associated with the institution characteristics. As a follow-up, Paulsen (1990) proposed that the student characteristics interacting with the institutional characteristics would determine the college decision process.

Students' Characteristics

Institutions can target desirable students who possess characteristics that are similar to the students who are most likely to enroll in their institutions by understanding the effect of students' attributes on the decision process (Paulsen, 1990). As a critical component of socioeconomic status, family income plays an important role in the college choice decision (Chapman, 1981; Griffith & Rothstein, 2009; Jez, 2014; Kinsler & Pavan, 2011; Kinzie et al., 2004; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). Chapman (1981) pointed out that family income combined with institutional cost and financial aid tends to constrain prospective students' realistic options. Paulsen and St. John's cross-social class study (2002) showed that students from high-income backgrounds were more likely to attend private colleges and 4-year colleges than students from low-income backgrounds. Jez (2014) considered the role of wealth in the college choice process and concluded that wealth was a more significant predictor than income.

By analyzing the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth (NLSY) for 1979 and 1997, Kinsler and Pavan (2011) examined the relationship of family income and college quality. The results indicated that family income significantly affected the likelihood of high-ability and average-ability students to attend high-quality colleges. In addition, the availability of need-based aid at top institutions increased the likelihood of high-ability students from low-income families to attend high-quality colleges. Interestingly, Toutkoushian (2001) found that low-income students showed no significant difference in selecting expensive institutions. This may be explained by their expectation of receiving financial aid if they were admitted.

Parental education, another component of socioeconomic status, has a strong influence through the college selection process, although it is often correlated with income. Several studies revealed that parents' expectations, experience of financing their own college study, involvement in information search, knowledge and understanding of college cost and aid, and willingness and ability to provide financial support to colleges, had a strong effect on students' college decisions (Bergerson, 2009; Chapman, 1981; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Kim & Gasman, 2011; Kinzie et al., 2004; Litten, 1982; Myers & Myers, 2012; Pampaloni, 2010; Paulsen & St. John, 2002). The results from Hossler et al. (1999) suggested that parent's educational experience greatly helped their children in college aspiration, preparation, and actualization of college plans. Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, and Perna (2008) did a case study using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) and found that parents' involvement in the college choice process was affected by the parents' economic status and educational attainment and also by high school resources and state policy.

Students' academic achievement, aspirations, and expectations were also associated with their enrollment decisions (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Kinzie et al., 2004). Students used academic performance to evaluate the probability of acceptance by particular institutions (Chapman, 1981). Students of higher academic ability tended to attain more information, make more complex decisions, and select more alternatives than lower academic ability students (Galotti, 1995). Griffith and Rothstein (2009) pointed out that good high schools can better prepare students for college and provide more information about the opportunities available in colleges. Thus, students who graduated from private high schools were more likely to consider selective colleges. Toutkoushian (2001) found that college-bound students were more likely to attend institutions where their academic ability matched that of currently enrolled students.

Institutional Characteristics

Learning how institutional characteristics affect the students' decision-making process can help higher education administrators develop more effective marketing strategies (DesJardins, Dundar, & Hendel, 1999). It is important to understand what prospective students expect from their institutions. Cost (including tuition, room, and board), financial aid, the distance from home, and reputation were consistently identified as important institutional attributes. Other factors such as major and/or programs offered and campus environment were often found to be relevant to college choice (Chapman, 1981; DesJardins et al., 1999; Henrickson, 2002; Hoyt & Brown, 2003; Paulsen, 1990).

Researchers have studied the effect of cost on students' decision-making process. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2013): "For the 2011–2012 academic year, annual current dollar prices for undergraduate tuition, room, and board were estimated to be \$14,300 at public institutions, \$37,800 at private nonprofit institutions, and \$23,300 at private for-profit institutions." Lillis and Tian (2008) conducted a case study in a small private college and found that tuition and location were the two most influential factors of college decision. One of their important findings was that the college decision of students, who were sensitive to cost, was interrelated to financial support from the institutions. Griffith and Rask (2007) found that net cost was a key factor in college choice for students who needed financial aid but not for those who could pay full price. Nurnberg, Schapiro, and Zimmerman (2012) analyzed students accepted by a prestigious college, and they identified net price (the sticker price minus financial aid provided by the institution) was one of the strong predictors of the enrollment decision.

Financial aid is a critical factor in students' college choice decisions. In 2013, over 40% of students rejected admissions from their first-choice institutions and enrolled somewhere else because they did not receive financial aid (Eagan et al., 2013). Tuition has increased dramatically over the past decades, but financial aid and grants have also increased (Kinsler & Pavan, 2011). To reduce the negative impact of rising tuition on college decisions, some institutions adopt a "high-tuition–high-aid policy" (Monks, 2009). Some financial aid (need-based) is intended to relieve the financial constraints for needy students, while other financial aid (merit-based) is designed to attract students who otherwise may not select their colleges (Avery & Hoxby, 2004).

This study also demonstrated that high-aptitude students were more attracted by grants if they were called "scholarships" and if they were front loaded and they were designed to cover a large proportion of the college cost (Avery & Hoxby, 2004). Astin, Henson, and Christian's (1980) empirical analysis on a large-scale longitudinal dataset showed that the amount of institutional grants strongly affected the behavior of students' college choice. Griffith and Rask (2007) showed that high-income, high-ability students preferred the most selective institutions even when offered merit aid by less-selective institutions.

The distance from home affected students' college decisions in two ways: (1) distance resulted in extra cost for traveling and renting and (2) students who lived closer to campus had more exposure to opportunities available at the institutions (DesJardins et al., 1999; Griffith & Rothstein, 2009). Several studies supported the belief that distance from home plays an important role in college choice process especially for financial considerations (Absher & Crawford, 1996; Angel & Barrera, 1991; Do, 2004; Turley, 2009).

College rankings are widely accepted as indicators of academic quality and the reputation of institutions. It is widely believed that the best college ranking is conducted by *U.S. News and World Report* (Anctil, 2008). The college rankings are popular among administrators, policy makers, and students and their families. Many prospective students use the rankings to evaluate institutional quality.

Monks and Ehrenberg (1999) analyzed 16 top-ranking private institutions and pointed out that a decline in rank results in a lower matriculation rate and lower average SAT scores of incoming classes. Meredith (2004) expanded Monks

and Ehrenberg's (1999) study using a larger sample and including both public and private universities. The results revealed that changes in the *USNWR* rankings had different effects at public and private institutions. Also, the rankings had a stronger impact at public institutions than private institutions partly because private institutions could more quickly adjust their tuition when the rankings changed. Obtaining data from Colgate University admitted student questionnaire surveys, Griffith and Rask (2007) found that full-pay students were more sensitive to changes in the *USNWR* rankings than students with financial aid. Bowman and Bastedo (2009) found that being ranked as "top-tier" institutions greatly improved the admission outcomes of the following year for both national universities and liberal arts colleges.

APPLYING MARKETING STRATEGIES IN RECRUITMENT

Despite the debate whether higher education should employ marketing strategies, the institutions of higher education in the U.S. have been aggressively engaged in marketing practices to adapt to the changing environment. During the past 40 years, "marketing efforts at many higher education institutions became highly organized and tightly controlled by entirely new marketing units that were established to create, maintain, and promote school's image" (Anctil, 2008, p. 19). Clark and Hossler (1990) pointed out that the basic principles of marketing are the foundation of marketing in higher education. Newman (2002) did an empirical survey of 1000 randomly selected 4-year universities about their use of marketing techniques. The results revealed that the most common marketing activities that were engaged in by institutions were strategic planning, advertising, marketing planning, and target marketing.

The challenge of marketing for higher education lies in the intangible nature of education (Anctil, 2008). Education is not a product that consumers can see, touch, and use. The benefits of education are not available immediately after the purchase. Therefore, successful marketing for higher education requires identifying tangible characteristics of an institution and distinguishing them from the tangible characteristics of competitors (Anctil, 2008). Researchers have suggested that colleges and universities can provide tangible indicators in these areas: academics; campus appearance and social life; alumni and current students (showing the benefits of attending this school); outcomes of attending a college (the job placement rate, the acceptance rate to graduate schools, and the average earnings of alumni); and athletics (Anctil, 2008; Clark & Hossler, 1990). The process of identifying the characteristics of a specific institution and comparing them with those of competing institutions is called positioning (Kemerer, Baldrige, & Green, 1982). Positioning is a fundamental technique to develop marketing and recruiting plans, and it involves developing an institutional image, market segmentation, and communication to targeted markets (Maringe, 2006).

Image of Colleges and Universities

Image helps institutions of higher education create a positive view that can attract prospective students to enroll (Pampaloni, 2010). Topor (1986) proposed four R's to build institutional image: research, recognition, repetition, and

recollection. A positive image of a college or university is a valuable intangible asset making the institution stand out from the crowded marketplace and obtaining attention from prospective students and their families. As Landrum, Turrisi, and Harless (1998, p. 66) said: "the strength of (the) academic program and the appropriate emphasis on athletics are significant components of the image model. Reputation or image then plays a significant role in the implementation or practical application of that image construct, namely, whether a person would send their son or daughter to the university."

The purpose of colleges and universities is not only to frame a clear image in the mind of prospective students but to elevate the image to brand status. Branding is image construction, management, and makeover (Anctil, 2008). The value of a brand name in higher education includes (Toma, Dubrow, & Hartley, 2005, p. 4) "awareness of an institution, recognition of what an institution is known for, a sense of loyalty toward the institution, an understanding of the institution's worth, and the desire to pay a premium price to be associated with it." Sevier (2001) has proposed a seven-step branding strategy to help colleges and universities to create brands.

Market Segmentation

Kotler (1986, p. 263) defined market segmentation as "dividing a market into distinct groups of buyers who might require separate product or marketing mixes." When applied to higher education, market segmentation divides prospective students into different groups based on specific characteristics (Paulsen, 1990). Litten (1982) believed that recruitment marketing activities based on segmentation could better meet the different needs of particular applicant pools. For segmentation research, Braxton (1990) recommended techniques such as survey instruments, perceptual analysis, point preference model, the expectancy value model, and focus-group interviews.

Market segmentation allows administrators to identify student groups who are more likely to enroll in their schools. After market segments are identified, institutions can develop strategies to focus on the target market and encourage matriculation. Admission officers can consider reaching out to different segments through different media techniques and providing information and services tailored to the needs of different student groups (Litten, 1982). Administrators should also evaluate if the benefits of differentiation outweigh the cost.

Communicating with the Millennial Generation

Successful student marketing and recruitment requires that the most valuable attributes of institutions be clearly and effectively communicated to the desired targeted students (Paulsen, 1990). The common communication practices used to reach the targeted students include print publications, advertising publications, network marketing, direct mail, electronic media, telemarketing, marketing in the field, and campus visits (Abrahamson & Hossler, 1990; Anctil, 2008; Armstrong & Lumsden, 2000; Hossler, 1999).

The millennial generation constitutes the current college-age and precollege-age students. Born between 1982 and 2002, the millennial generation grew up with the rapid development of internet technology, and they rely heavily on the

web for information search (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007). As a result, colleges and universities have adopted their recruiting strategies to meet the demand of college-bound students. Taking advantage of the Web-based technology, colleges and universities engage in e-recruiting tactics like E-mail communications, recruiting pages on Web sites, online net price calculators, campaign videos, and social networking (E-Expectations Report, 2010; Noel-Levitz, 2012).

An institution's Web sites are the main source for prospective students to get to know schools and decide where to apply (E-Expectations Report, 2012). According to a survey of 2,000 junior and senior high school students, 52% of the students thought campus Web sites played a significant role in assessing alternative schools (E-Expectations Report, 2012). Also, students believed that the most important elements of Web sites were ease of browsing and the value of the content (E-Expectations Report, 2012). Pooch and Lefond (2001, p. 20) found that "slow download, elaborate graphics and pictures, not providing desired content, ineffective search functions, and excessive levels of information" discouraged students when they were browsing college Web sites.

Effective Web-based marketing requires institutions to identify and provide the information that prospective students want from the Web sites. Information about academics, cost, and aid was considered to be the most valuable Web content (E-Expectations Report, 2012). Mentz and Whiteside (2003) gave suggestions for developing an appealing Web site such as "Layout the admission process information from a student's perspective, focus on benefits, value and success, and integration of price, scholarship, grant, and financial aid information" (pp. 11–12). A survey of high school students also showed that a well-organized Web site with easy access to application information and appropriate proportion of graphic and text increased the likelihood of application (Pooch & Lefond, 2001). Utilizing Web sites as a successful marketing tool requires good maintenance and strategic operation (Klassen, 2002).

"Desire for collaboration and connecting with others" are two distinctive characteristics of the millennial generation (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2010). The millennial students are not content to simply read information from the Web sites of colleges and universities. Instead, prospective students crave more interaction with institutions (Gordon & Berhow, 2009). To reach prospective millennial students and get their attention, institutions of higher education should apply social media in recruiting. A survey of 256 colleges and universities identified Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter as the most popular social media adopted by admission offices to communicate with and connect college-bound students (Noel-Levitz, 2012).

Barnes (2009) suggested that best practices for nonblog social networks should include (1) taking advantage of video to attract attention; (2) designing social networking sites should be consistent with their home page; (3) linking social media sites together; (4) mixing views from students, faculty, and staff; (5) publicizing achievements accomplished by faculty and students; (6) getting visitors involved and interacting with your page; (7) tracking visitors; and (8) updating frequently. To maximize the effectiveness, social networking tools should be integrated with other marketing plans and applied with a specific purpose (Hayes, Ruschman, & Walker, 2009).

IMPLICATIONS

Understanding the college choice process has implications for higher education recruiting practice. A lot of research has identified the factors influencing the college choice decision of college-bound students. Recruitment officers can use student characteristics as a guide to segment prospective students into groups. This helps institutions to target the groups possessing the attributes similar to those who are more likely to attend their schools. Significant factors associated with institutional characteristics enable administrators to develop an appropriate marketing mix to attract targeted students.

The second part of this article addressed how institutions of higher education can apply marketing practices in student recruiting. Market research based on the qualitative information and quantitative analysis of datasets can provide a better understanding of college choice behavior. According to Hoyt and Brown (1999), commonly used datasets include standardized instruments like CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey), ACT Profile (all high school students who complete ACT tests), ASQ Plus (Admitted Student Questionnaire), NESL (National Education Longitudinal Study) and SDQ (College Board's Student Descriptive Questionnaire).

This article was limited to a discussion of the most important factors influencing college choice and the most frequently used marketing strategies in recruitment. For individual institutions, it is necessary to develop a more comprehensive set of factors to predict the attributes affecting the students' decision to select their institutions. Institutions can obtain useful information about students' perception of their institutions from focus groups and student interviews. In addition to using one of the standardized instruments, an in-house survey could help individual institutions to better understand their target market. Hossler (1999) recommended that institutions should use new student information systems and multivariate statistical techniques to track and evaluate the efficacy of recruitment strategies.

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