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Why Students Choose a Small Rural State-Owned Institution of Higher Education

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the

Department of Public Policy and Administration

West Chester University

West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Public Administration

By

Emmalyn Myra Borst Conti

May 2022

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my maternal grandmother, Myra Rosselet Culhane, and the 3Ds (Donna, Diane, and Dale). Without the “Ladies” I would not be who I am today.

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I would first like to thank my dissertation chair, Dr. Mark Davis, for all his support and guidance throughout this process. I certainly would not have completed this without him. Also, thank you to Dr. Wade for being a genuinely helpful committee member and Dr. Crossney for stepping in as the third committee member so I could finish.

I have been lucky enough to be supported by my family and a tribe of friends and colleagues throughout the last four years of this journey. To my husband, Jared, thank you for always picking up the slack at home and for your constant love and support even when it was frustrating. To my two beautiful children, Harrison and Ida Mae, thank you for the snuggles and for always asking, “when are you going to be a doctor”, that was more motivation than you will ever know. To my parents, Greg and Diane, thank you for always supporting all of my endeavors and for all of the extra babysitting over the past four years. To my in-laws, thank you for the last minute crunch time babysitting and child entertaining. To my big brother, Allan, thank you for being my best friend and role model.

To all my friends and colleagues, I can not thank you all enough for your encouragement, support, and prodding. There are a few specific people that I would remiss if I didn't not include them individually. Dr. Amy Downes, this would never have been completed without you. Dr. Dwayne Allison, I ignored you and went qualitative, but thank you for always reminding me it was an academic exercise and for all the years of mentoring. To all of my students over the years, thank you for always keeping me honest.

This experience has taught my about myself, my love of learning, and shown me what determination really means. I hope to pass these lessons on to my children and all the students I haven't met yet.

Abstract

Why students select the institution of higher education they choose, is becoming even more important through nationwide enrollment declines and the COVID-19 pandemic prompted economic crisis. Much of the existing research in the area of college choice, focuses on individual factors as opposed to the combination of factors that lead students to their choice of higher education institution. This study provides higher education administrators a clear view of how those factors work together and are connected. Through the use of focus groups, the study allowed for new students to share their experiences and how they approached the application and decision-making processes. In response to the overarching question, why do students choose a small rural state-owned institution of higher education for their collegiate experience, the study found participants cited five main factors in their college choice as: community and campus life, affordability, communication, academics, and distance from home.

The data collected during the focus groups provided insights to the individual experiences of each of the participants and the analysis of the data provided clear connections between the factors cited. Participants shared their experiences and many described how the individual interactions with faculty and staff at the study institution led them to feel supported and *like part of a family*. As higher education administrators seek to improve enrollment and attract more students, the results of this study provides important insights and recommendations to aid in future recruitment efforts.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Today's institutions of higher education are facing dramatic changes in the face of COVID-19, enrollment decline, and economic pressures (Bezuidenhout et al., 2013; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Hemelt & Marcotte, 2020; McManus et al., 2017). Enrollment numbers are diminishing across the United States as the population of high school seniors lessens and the expense of attending an institute of higher education rises. One of the biggest changes over the last decade has been the view of students as consumers and discerning consumers at that (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; McManus et al., 2017). Students and those who impact their lives, have the extremely difficult decision of which institution to attend to pursue their higher education. When making that determination, students have many choices: public, state-owned public, private, non-profit, for-profit, online, residential, hybrid, etc. Throughout the decision-making process, many students weigh a variety of options, and priorities (Benzuidenhout, de Jager, & Naido, 2013; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Hemelt & Marcotte, 2020; McManus, Haddock-Fraser, & Rand, 2017).

Background

Understanding why prospective students choose the institutions they choose is becoming increasingly more important. Many students no longer feel the need to *stick it out* at an institution they are not happy with. Approximately 28% of students at four-year institutions do not continue past their first year (Berger & Braxton, 1998). When enrollment numbers are being scrutinized at the highest levels, administrators need to determine how to attract and retain more students. Administrators at colleges and universities continually crunch numbers and know that the cost of retaining a student is much less than the cost of attracting and enrolling a new student. Which makes it all the more important for admissions teams to be sure they are attracting and

enrolling students who really want to be at their institution and those who have the highest likelihood of being retained through graduation.

Those working within higher education understand that many institutions focus solely on the academic offerings to attract students. While academic offerings and rankings are important when students consider attending top ranked or elite institutions, there is little evidence that they are important for less prestigious schools. Additionally, there is very little information regarding how students choose between similarly situated institutions or state-owned institutions.

Outline of the Study

The research question being posed in this dissertation is: why do students choose a small rural state-owned institution to attend for their collegiate experience? While cost and geographic location are discussed within literature, it does not seem to get to the heart of why students choose the specific institution. Especially if prospective students are looking at schools in similar regions and states, with similar cost and aid offerings. In order to begin examining this question more deeply, the literature review, Chapter 2, will focus on several factors that have been explored in an effort to explain student choice. These areas will include: financial aid and costs, campus life, match, institutional reputation, academics, post-graduation job prospects, work while studying, geographic location/distance from home, information, and peer and family influence. While these are broad factors, the review will include how these factors interplay throughout the student choice process and may ultimately impact student choice.

Chapter 3 will provide the method used to collect the data for the study. The data will be collected primarily through semi-structured focus groups at a small rural state-owned university located in Pennsylvania. Participants will be first-time traditional aged (18-24 year old) students enrolled at the study institution. Prior to participating in the focus groups, participants will

complete a pre-focus group questionnaire with demographics information and some information that could be useful (how far do they live from campus, are they athletes/were they recruited to participate in athletics, financial aid package offered, what other institutions did they apply to, major, etc). The University Institutional Research Department provided data from the incoming class with no identifying information. This data provided the researcher the ability to compare demographic information of the participants to the rest of the incoming class. The target goal was to have 3-5 focus groups with 5-7 students per group, ideally 5 focus groups with 5 participants each. The final total was 4 focus groups with 17 students participating. Through the use of focus groups and their open-ended question nature, this study provided participants an opportunity to tell their story of university choice without limiting their answers to predetermined choices. The researcher transcribed each focus group.

In order to analyze the data, the researcher used the transcripts of the focus groups, to employ coding methods within excerpts in Dedoose Qualitative Data Analysis software as well as manually. The researcher coded the transcripts of each focus group twice using different methods explained in Chapter 3. The coding and analysis was completed using grounded theory methods as well as consulting a conceptual framework for college choice designed by Laura Perna (2006). The analysis and findings are presented in Chapter 4.

Based on the data and findings provided in Chapter 4, the researcher identified five main themes in the data. The five main themes that answer the research question, why do students choose a small rural state-owned institution of higher education for their collegiate experience are: affordability, communication, community and campus life, academics, and distance from home. The researcher then provides a discussion of the findings and their importance. Concluding the dissertation with Chapter 5 containing: the limitations of the study,

recommendations for future research, recommendations for higher education practitioners, and a final conclusion.

Significance of the study

While the topic of student choice and institutional choice has been researched many times, in many ways, over many years, it is a topic that needs to be continually researched due to the changing landscape of higher education. Policies and best practices from ten or fifteen years ago are out of date and may do more harm than good in today's changing situation. In order to continue to attract new students and market the quality experiences they've come to expect from colleges and universities, more specific research is needed, especially to set the public state-owned institutions apart from private institutions. Institutions of higher education are competing to attract students from a smaller pool, especially in Pennsylvania and this issue will only continue to get worse as the population of high school graduates declines.

We know that key factors impact students' decisions about which college or university to attend, the problem becomes which ones are factors for most students and which factors tend to be of more importance. How do institutions, especially state owned Pennsylvania schools, compete and set themselves apart to attract more students? It is even more important that schools can identify what sets them apart and why students choose to attend their institution specifically. Much of the literature discusses what impacts whether students choose to pursue higher education at all or why students choose elite institutions over others, but very little is specific to public institutions and almost no literature deals specifically with state owned or rural institutions. The literature also tends to focus on academic prowess of programs, cost, and geographic location as determining factors for students choosing institutions of higher education and skips looking at the *average university*.

This study focused on a small rural state-owned institution, so the reasons for why a student chose this school over others available provides very useful information for future recruiting of students. The researcher found 5 main themes that the participants identified as factors that led to their decision to attend the study institution. The five main themes that were found as a result of the study are: community and campus life, academics, communication, affordability, and distance from home. For example the academics theme was described by participants through words and phrases such as: small class size, opportunities to get to know faculty, and academic reputation of specific majors or programs. By understanding who is entering the institution and why, the institution can choose to employ specific recruitment and retention efforts offered in Chapter 5 to better serve students and retain them through graduation aiding in overall enrollment. In an era of significant enrollment decline and financial crisis at many of the country's institutions of higher education, this study provides useful techniques and considerable future research ideas. The results of this study will be most important to higher education administrators to help to provide a road map for successful recruitment of new students.

The researcher provides a comprehensive literature review in Chapter 2. The literature review presents the reader an understanding of research currently available surrounding college choice and what factors influence prospective students when they choose an institution of higher education. Chapter 2 also highlights the gaps in the research that led to this dissertation. The research design is discussed and described throughout Chapter 3. The primary method of utilizing focus groups for this research is explained and detailed as well. In Chapter 4 the data analysis and findings are described in great detail, highlighting the five major themes that were discovered throughout the study. Finally, in Chapter 5, the researcher provides recommendations

for future research on college choice and recommendations for higher education administrators to aid in recruitment efforts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

This chapter will serve to provide the literature currently discussing student college choice and the factors that prospective students use when making the decision of which college to attend. The factors discussed throughout this chapter are: cost and financial aid, campus life, match, institutional reputation, academics, post-graduation job prospects, work while studying, geographic location/distance from home, information, and finally, peer and family influence. This literature review will serve to provide a deeper understanding of each factor and how prospective students use them in their decision making process. Finally, gaps in the current literature will be identified in the last section of the chapter.

Much of the literature suggests that students are becoming more strategic and calculating when making the choice of which institution of higher education to attend (Benzuidenhout et al., 2016; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Hemelt & Marcotte, 2020; McManus et al., 2017). Many students have begun to realize they are the consumer and can make the decision based mainly around what is best for them, not just what schools accept them. From 1992 to 2004, states that increased costs to students through decreasing funding, show the number of students choosing public in-state four-year institutions declined (Hemelt & Marcotte, 2020). Students are choosing to attend private institutions that often cost more and may be less reputable, but often are less selective and easier to access for students from all backgrounds (Benzuidenhout et al., 2016; Chung, 2012). This provides an issue for institutions attempting to determine how to best recruit students, especially as students' expectations and needs have changed over the past few decades.

As the number of institutions of higher education have increased, the types of institutions have changed and the options for students have increased, it becomes even more important for

institutions to understand why students make the choices they make for which institution to pursue (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). The literature identifies several main factors for students' choice of institution: costs, institutional reputation, information available, peer and family influence, post-graduation job prospects, campus life, academic match, the ability to work and study; and geographic distance from home (Godrick-Rab, 2006; Hemelt & Marcotte, 2020; McManus et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2016; Pigni & Staffolani, 2016). Many of the articles found were concerning schools outside of the United States and discussed the differences between those situations and the situation within the United States. However, much of the information provided within these articles are still extremely useful when covering the topic of student choice of higher education institutions.

Laura Perna (2006) provides the conceptual model for research into college choice and access. Perna (2006) discusses the importance of updating the framework for researching college access and choice from the previous literature of the late 1980s and early 1990s, due mostly to the fact that the landscape has changed. Using similar reasoning, this study was based on the changing needs of students and how they make their decision about what college to attend. Additionally, Perna discusses the importance of shrinking the gap in access to higher education. This continues to be an issue for students, that needs to be addressed. Many believe that the decision of where to attend an institution of higher education should be a completely rational one, meaning the highest benefit with the lowest cost, Perna's model hinges on the fact that students make the choice to attend and where through a multifaceted approach combining sociological and economic factors. The results of this study, confirm Perna's thoughts as well as further emphasizing the need to understand the combination of factors that lead to students choosing an institution of higher education.

Throughout the literature there are many references to parents and families; for the purposes of this study, the common terms *parents* and *families* will be used to encompass all types of family units, guardianships, and student supporters. Many institutions are beginning to move away from using terms like parents to utilize the more inclusive term of *supporter*, but much of the literature has not yet caught up. This literature review will look at each choice factor separately to explain more fully how each factor works within student choice. To complete the literature review section, gaps in the existing literature will be identified. This study fills in at least some of those gaps in order to provide a clearer understanding as to why students choose the institution they choose.

Costs and Financial Aid

As with many choices throughout life, cost is a major factor to consider when students are looking at higher education institutions (Bezuidenhout et al., 2013; Brown et al., 2020; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Lee et al., 2013; McManus et al., 2017; Menon et al., 2006; Pigini & Staffolani, 2016; Scott-Clayton & Zafar, 2019; Spight, 2020). Herzog (2017) indicated that the debt accumulated by college graduates rose by about 56% from 2004 to 2014, over the same time frame, the federal student loan amount rose to \$1.3 trillion. Hemelt and Marcotte (2016) discuss the impact of dramatic increase in tuition and fees at underfunded 4-year public institutions. While, according to their study, the number of students choosing to enroll in higher education institutions has not dramatically declined, there has been a stark contrast in the type of institution students are choosing in states where higher education has become underfunded. In those states, students are turning towards 2 and 4-year private institutions as well as 2-year public institutions and cite cost being the largest impact on that decision (Hemelt & Marcotte, 2016). Additionally, states that are funding higher education at lower levels are

pushing the cost, at a higher rate, onto students and their supporters. Those funding levels are in turn decreasing the amount of needs-based aid that institutions have available to provide students (DeBerard et al., 2004).

Due to the continuing increase in the costs to attend an institution of higher education, policymakers in many states and the federal government are focusing higher education policy around affordability (Davies et al., 2014; Eichenberger et al., 2019; von Keyserlingk et al., 2020). Skinner (2018) posits that through state and federal policies, lower-cost regional and community colleges provide additional student higher education options. Additionally, universities are facing the pressures from policymakers to grow enrollments through corporate partnerships, private donors, and even research opportunities to entice students to attend (Davies et al., 2014). These efforts are often not aiding students in lowering the cost of attending the university, even if the opportunities being provided are valuable. Additionally, Hemelt and Marcotte (2016) indicate that these tuition increases are further narrowing students of low-socioeconomic (SES), minority students, and those students who will not meet eligibility at elite institutions. The costs students assume they will need to pay has an extreme impact on college choice (Flaster, 2018). Students are beginning to show that they are determining their choice of institution at the application stage which for most institutions, means without all of the financial information that could impact their decision (Skinner, 2018).

Costs to attend an institution are vast and often difficult to determine in the choice phase. There are multiple factors students need to keep in mind when they are determining the cost they will pay, which often are not explained to students until after they have been admitted to the institution. Many students and their supporters overestimate the cost of attendance which negatively affects where the student chooses to apply, let alone attend (Chapman & Dickert-

Conlin, 2012; Cheng & Peterson, 2018; Kim, 2011). Even though institutions who receive federal aid are mandated to provide a net price calculator for students to access on their websites, there are not regulations that explain the net price is based on the average amount of grants and scholarships awarded and still may provide an overestimation of cost to the students (Dougherty & Callender, 2020). One of the biggest issues facing students and their supporters is how to accurately estimate the true cost to them of attending (Flaster, 2018). In order to form an accurate estimate, students and their supporters need to understand the differences between all of the different financial aid available.

There are several different types of aid that students utilize in order to attend a college or university. Grant aid is offered to students, which they do not need to repay. This type of aid is shown to be more valuable because it is not money earned through work or borrowed that needs to be paid back. The Pell Grant is a federal needs-based grant provided to students based on their income (Evans & Nguyen, 2019). One of the downfalls to needs-based aid is that the federal government assumes that parents will provide a percentage of funds to the student and often the aid is not equivalent to the actual need if parents do not plan to provide any financial assistance (Herzog, 2017). Students submit the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) which calculates, based on income, the Estimated Financial Contribution (EFC) (Hurwitz, 2012). In addition to needs-based aid, there are also merit-based grants provided based on student academic achievement. Institutional merit-based grants and scholarships are similar, in that scholarships are also not intended to be repaid, they may be provided based on a student's athletic participation or other criteria set by the institution (Hurwitz, 2012; Herzog, 2017). This is important for students when comparing institutions. One example shows that if a student receives an additional \$1,000 in grant aid, the probability of the student attending that institution increases

by approximately 1.6% (Hurwitz, 2012). Once these grant and scholarship aid options are exhausted, students may also receive federal loans in the form of subsidized and unsubsidized loans, often Perkins or Stafford loans (Hurwitz, 2012). While both loan types need to be repaid, there are substantial differences. Subsidized loans are needs based and do not accrue interest while actively enrolled, while unsubsidized do accrue interest while enrolled, among other differences. Additionally, students who find themselves in need of additional financial resources can apply for private loans which often provide loans at significantly higher interest rates as they are based on credit score (Herzog, 2017). While it may seem there are a variety of options for students to finance their higher education, students average approximately \$29,000 of debt after four years (Despard et al., 2016). Merit aid seems to provide incentive for students to remain in-state for their college experience with the exception of those students looking at attending elite institutions out-of-state (Sjoquist & Winters, 2016). Different groups of students respond differently to the financial aid packages offered. Low-income students, for example, have been shown to enroll in higher numbers at 2 year colleges and private competitive colleges when their grant aid packages have been increased (Kim, 2011). Asian students were more likely to enroll in a public competitive institution as opposed to white students being less likely if their grant aid was higher (Kim, 2011).

The importance of understanding financial options is critically important to the college choice process. Students from high income families are more likely to know how to successfully navigate the financial aid processes, including applying early which at many institutions affords students with better financial aid packaging due to the limited funds available (Chapman & Dickert-Conlin, 2012). When comparing the cost of institutions, students must factor in all the variables to have an accurate accounting of the cost to attend each institution. This can be a

confusing and painstaking process. It becomes one of the major disparities among prospective students. The complicated process of applying for aid may deter students from applying for aid and selecting more expensive schools (Andrews et al., 2016). This was confirmed by participants of this study. When asked during focus groups if there were any barriers to their decision process, many participants shared that the financial aid and FAFSA processes were in fact barriers. This could be even more impactful if the student is first generation, the first in their family to attend an institution of higher education, or has no one to help guide them through the selection process, they may become misinformed about the cost of higher education (Chung, 2012; Grodsky & Jones, 2007; Helland & Heggen, 2017; Hemelt & Marcotte, 2016; Turley, 2006).

First generation college students, low socio-economic status (SES), and those residing in low-income or rural areas, are often at a great disadvantage when it comes to navigating the costs associated with higher education. These students are often ill-informed, unable to identify the questions to ask, are unaware of financial aid processes and scholarship opportunities (Chung, 2012; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Helland & Heggen, 2017; Hemelt & Marcotte, 2016; Turley, 2006). Additionally, if students do not understand the process for applying for the different aid types, they may accrue more debt. Yu (2016) indicates that for-profit institutions provide better services to students, helping to walk them through the financial aid application process which leads to more students receiving aid. These types of services can be extremely helpful for students with the greatest need, especially because oftentimes even if aid packages cover most of the cost of attending, students from low SES families still have need beyond the aid packages offered (Eichenberger et al., 2019; Hurwitz, 2012). Goldrick-Rab (2006) discusses that many of the students who fall into the aforementioned categories fail to compare institutions due to the costs

of application fees or lack of general knowledge about the processes like financial aid leveraging. Many times this can lead to disadvantaged students failing to make the right choice of institution from the start and can result in already disadvantaged students bouncing from one institution to another or just dropping out altogether (Hurwitz, 2012; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Kutty, 2014). Additionally, when a student is not retained through graduation, the institution stands to lose thousands of dollars (DeBerard et al., 2004). Institutions spend significantly more money per student in order to recruit the student as opposed to retaining them from year to year. There are significant costs associated with the marketing materials, the travel for admissions staff, recruitment events, and other aspects of the recruitment of new students. Whereas, the costs associated with most retention efforts are often seen as the cost of operating an institution of higher education. While this is not directly related to the process students go through to choose their institution of higher education, it is an important aspect to keep in mind throughout the study due to the impact that recruiting can have on the overall enrollment of an institution.

When looking at cost there are several key aspects to keep in mind. Not only are students and their families looking specifically at the cost of tuition, fees, and oftentimes room and board, but they are also considering the additional costs of transportation to and from home, and the cost to the family if the student has provided funds to support the home (Bezuidenhout et al., 2016; Chung, 2012; Helland & Heggen, 2017; Hemelt & Marcotte, 2016). Students begin their assessment based on the tuition and fees that institutions publish on their websites, but the calculations go far beyond those straight numbers. Additionally, students from low SES families are also the most price sensitive when looking at all the costs associated with attending an institution of higher education (Chung, 2012). These students may also be limited in the

institutions they choose to apply to due to the price sensitivity and debt-aversion (Bergerson, 2009; Tamtekin Aydin, 2015).

Further information is discussed surrounding the costs associated for students who must travel from home to get to their institution of choice. For many students living in rural areas, they may find a large cost associated with travel to and from their homes which could impede their choice of institution (Brown et al., 2020; Parker et al., 2015; Pigni & Staffolani, 2016). On the other hand, students from metropolitan areas may need to factor in travel costs to attend an institution in a more remote location due to limited mass-transit options near the institution (Parker et al., 2015). As Turley (2006) and Goldrick-Rab (2006) discuss, family resources may impact the costs incurred due to travel to and from institutions. Those families who have the financial means may not need to factor in travel costs, while those lower-income families may need to limit which schools to which they will apply based on the costs associated with travel (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Turley, 2006).

Another cost that could be overlooked by students and families as they navigate the choice of institution is the cost to the family financial situation. Many students with low-SES contribute financially to the family household through part-time work while they are in high school (Scott-Clayton & Zafar, 2019). This can be interrupted by the students' enrollment at an institution of higher education for several reasons. Some financial aid packages are awarded based on household income and therefore if the student were to make too much additional income, it could increase the cost to the student (Parker et al., 2015; Scott-Clayton & Zafar, 2019). These additional costs due to familial situations can also add a level of emotional and logistical cost for both the families and the student (Parker et al., 2016). Additionally, if the student works around their own home or at the family business, this could be a cost that needs to

be associated with the student's choice of institution if they choose to move further away than a commutable distance from home (Brown et al., 2020; Chung, 2012; Turley, 2006). While all of the factors discussed above can be difficult to address when assessing the cost of attending, through diligent research and mapping out the options, students can estimate their costs to attend the variety of institutions to which they apply (Helland & Heggen, 2017; Mcmanus et al., 2017; Menon et al., 2006; Parker, et al., 2015). While cost is seen as having the largest impact on student choice of institution, it is not the only factor.

Campus life

There is some literature that speaks to the fact that campus life and the college experience will impact a student's decision on where to attend (Davies et al., 2014; Hagel & Shaw, 2010; Henchy, 2013; Knight, 2016). Everything from inviting study spaces, comfortable and accommodating residence halls to student recreation centers and intramural sports opportunities can help to influence their choice of institution (Baum & McPherson, 2011; Burke, 2019; Henchy, 2013). It is important that students have opportunities presented to them that help them improve their social skills during college as well as their academic abilities (Aljohani, 2016; Henchy, 2013; Lee et al., 2013). Approximately 36% of undergraduates in Henchy's (2013) study specifically referenced the influence student recreation centers have and were used to help determine if a campus is the one in which they want to enroll. Student activities and other social opportunities advertised help to allow prospective students to see themselves and their peers interacting outside of the classroom, which is a major part of the college experience and important to choosing the right institution (Belfield et al., 2020; Kutty, 2014). Additionally, opportunities for international exchange can provide important influence on students making their decision of institution. Female students tend to hold international exchange as more

influential than male students (Tamtekin Aydin & Bayir, 2016). Along the same lines, the diversity found on campus in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status are found to be factors that impact students' choice of institution (Michalski et al., 2017; Munsch, 2019). Students are looking to enjoy their social experience on campus in addition to their academic experiences. While academics may be an important component of college life, students spend more hours outside of the classroom during their time on campus than in the classroom.

Match

Students often look for academic match when choosing an institution of higher education. Academic match refers to comparing the quality of academic institutions to the academic achievement levels of students, disregarding all other factors. An example of match would be when a high achieving high school student attends a top tier institution, or an average performing high school student attends an average institution (Hudes & Aquino, 2019). Institutions are rated in tiers through rankings available in U.S. News and World Report. Match is an interesting factor due to the variety of perspectives on it for students. Elite institutions, for example, may claim to only accept the best of the best students, but that is not always the case (Brezis & Hellier, 2018). The students of high-SES families have extensive resources to provide their children the best academic tutors as well as provide legacy status at elite institutions. Legacy status provides a greater opportunity for admittance into elite institutions and often is not a measure of academic achievement. Students from low-SES families represent only approximately 14% of the population in prestigious institutions (Brezis & Hellier, 2018).

Often, students with more financial resources are able to understand admissions processes, including the importance of early decision opportunities. Socioeconomic status plays

a large role in academic match due to the differences in who understands the admissions processes better. Typically, early decision provides students with financial resources and lower academic achievement the opportunity to lock in their admission decision prior to knowing the final cost of attendance (Chapman & Dickert-Conlin, 2012). This opportunity is often not an option for lower-SES students due to the lack of financial aid information, which means that students who apply to more prestigious institutions or try to take advantage of early decision, are often white and from higher-SES families.

Students from lower-SES families are more likely to choose less prestigious institutions even when they have extremely high academic ability and achievement (Cheng & Peterson, 2018; Klasik et al., 2018). One reason for this is that students choose not to apply because they are not connected to the world of prestigious institutions and are unable to think they deserve to attend such institutions. Students from low-SES families tend to not be as concerned about match when they make their final decision of where to attend college (Skinner, 2018). Additionally, students from lower income areas are not as prepared to score as well on SAT or ACT exams even when their academic abilities are clear through GPA (Chapman & Dickert-Conlin, 2012; Cheng & Peterson, 2018; Klasik et al., 2018).

The social connections and understanding how the academic processes work at more selective institutions factor in when students are determining where to attend (Davies et al., 2014). Clarke (2007) explains that minority and low-SES students are more likely to attend less prestigious institutions. Approximately 63% of low-income students choose academically undermatched institutions, while approximately 59% of middle SES students and only 32% of high SES students attend undermatched institutions (Hudes & Aquino, 2019). There are similar patterns for match when looking at race or ethnicity. White and Asian students are both matched

at about 32% while under matched at 41%. This is in contrast to Black and Hispanic students, who are matched at only 15% and 18% respectively and under matched at 68% and 73% respectively (Hudes & Aquino, 2019). Students with less academic ability are restricted when it comes to choosing an institution (Getz & Lev-Ari, 2017). Klasik et al. (2018) describe that about 15% of high school students live in a match desert, which indicates geographic areas where students do not live near an institution of higher education that provides an academic match option. Additionally, those who live in match deserts are less likely to enroll in a match institution (59%) than those who do not live in a match desert (70%) (Klasik et al., 2018).

Match looks at the type of institution, typically elite or selective institutions, public four-year institutions, private four-year institutions, and community colleges (Kurlaender, 2006). Latino students are the most likely to attend community colleges regardless of their academic ability (Kurlaender, 2006). Many times, match is also associated with social standing and how students perceive themselves. Mangan et al., (2010) explain that how students perceive themselves socially and their ability to fit in at the institution often impacts where students choose to attend college. Students also may be high academic achievers among others from their high school, but not as academically prepared to attend a more selective institution (Getz & Lev-Ari, 2017; Helland & Heggen, 2018; Lee et al., 2013; Liu, 2019; Mangan et al., 2010). Match is predicated on institutional reputation, which is the next factor discussed that impacts student choice of institution.

Institutional Reputation

Institutional reputation is covered by much of the literature when looking at students' choice of higher education institution (Bezuidenhout et al., 2016; Burke, 2019; Helland & Heggen, 2017; McManus et al., 2017; Obermeit, 2012; Spight, 2020). However, it is described in

various ways. For the purposes of this study, institutional reputation will look at institutional ranking in the U.S. News & World report ranking along with specific program rankings. U.S. News & World report utilizes seven categories to determine institutional reputation: student retention, faculty resources, student selectivity, financial resources, graduation rate performance, and alumni giving rate (Clarke, 2007). This area of the literature also looks at graduation and persistence rates as well as enrollment growth (Bezuidenhout et al., 2016; Burke, 2019; Helland & Heggen, 2017; McManus et al., 2017; Spight, 2020). Much of the literature discusses the need for better institutional reputation among elite students, however, there is a gap in the literature comparing average students and average institutions. Additionally, the literature speaks to high achieving students and international students being more inclined to factor in institutional reputation when making the choice between higher ranked institutions (Anderson, 2016; Davies et al., 2014; Obermeit, 2012). In some cases, the overall reputation of the institution is less impactful than the specific program of study, for example specialties like nursing or dentistry (Bezuidenhout et al., 2016; McManus et al., 2017). Bringula and Basa's (2010) study showed that all of the student respondents believed that what courses are offered and the level of faculty teaching, which are part of institutional reputation, impacted their choice of institution to attend.

As discussed by Turley (2006) most parents, even those of poor academically performing students, want their children to attend college. However, those students who are high academic achievers from high-income, well-educated families, are more likely to find rankings important in the decision process (Bergerson, 2009; Clarke, 2007; Skinner, 2018; Teranishi et al., 2004). Teranishi et al. (2004) have shown that ethnicity may play into how important institutional rankings are to the students' decisions. For example, Chinese, Filipino, and Korean Americans were shown to utilize college rankings in their choice of institution to attend at higher rates than

other Asian American and Pacific Islander Americans (Tamtekin Aydin, 2015). In many instances, students who fall within low-SES are forced to enroll in lower ranked institutions due to less high school preparation or lower standardized test scores (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Scott-Clayton & Zafar, 2019). Institutional reputation is closely linked in the literature to the overall academics and how students factor in academics to their choice process.

Academics

Academics covers several bases for students. Certainly, the course and degree array are a part of the picture, but so are study mode, and quality of faculty and teaching style. For example, Hagel and Shaw (2010) found that 71% of the student respondents in their study indicated that study mode was the most important factor in their decision process. Study mode refers to how the majority of courses are delivered, face-to-face is the traditional mode, online only, or hybrid which offers a combination of face-to-face and online (Hagel & Shaw, 2010). This factor outpaced institutional reputation and geographic location for level of importance to the cohort studied. Additionally, Hagel and Shaw (2010) show that students may be willing to pay more in order to attend an institution with their preferred study mode. Institutions that offer particular courses of interest or major areas often provide students one way to narrow their choice of institution (Goenner & Pauls, 2006; Obermeit, 2012; Pixten et al., 2014). Additionally, the ability to choose a major from the start of their schooling and ease of changing majors can factor into the academic aspect of choosing an institution (Spight, 2020).

The quality of the faculty at an institution is the most important factor for some students when choosing an institution (Obermeit, 2012; Sjoquist & Winters, 2016; Skinner, 2018; Tamtekin Aydin & Bayir, 2016). Additionally, higher achieving students are found to be retained at higher rates, which is important to understand through the admissions recruiting process

(DeBerard et al., 2014). In addition to overall academics, how easily a student obtains a job post-graduation is of great importance to many prospective students.

Post-graduation job prospects

Many students attend institutions of higher education to improve their financial futures and to secure a future career (Bezuidenhout et al., 2016; Han, 2018; Kutty, 2014; McManus et al., 2017). Degree recognition and the employment prospects post-graduation are indicated as one of the top three factors that impact students' choice of institution (Bezuidenhout et al., 2016; Popov, 2019). Liu's (2019) study shows that approximately 85% of students indicate that the usefulness of their degree is an important factor to consider while choosing an institution to attend. Attending and graduating from an institution of higher education, students are able to feel reasonably sure of a future in the middle class and their future career prospects (Belfield et al., 2020; Serna & Woulfe, 2017; Tamtekin Aydin, 2015). In order to reach those goals, students are increasingly selective about the majors they choose and the institutions at which they study. Some majors that have been shown to increase the ability to provide a job in a short time frame after graduation are: vocational majors, business, social sciences, and engineering (Goyette & Mullen, 2006; Mabel et al., 2019). Institutions of higher education are the pathway to a better future for many students, especially first generation and low-SES students. When students look at institutions to attend, they are looking at the institution to all but guarantee a job in their chosen field, post-graduation (Bezuidenhout et al., 2016; Han, 2018; Kutty, 2014; McManus et al., 2017). Students who are motivated to enter higher education by the prospect of earning more at a better job are more likely to attend a non-selective school (Teranishi et al., 2004). Additionally, they want assurances that the job will not take an exorbitant amount of time to secure. Students can no longer afford to move back home in order to wait for their career to

begin (Turley, 2006). This adds to institutions being able to leverage relationships and partnerships with local companies, nationwide corporations, etc. to provide students internships, externships, and experiential learning opportunities (Bezuidenhout et al., 2016; McManus et al., 2017).

Work while studying

While post-graduation job prospects are extremely important to many students in their decision-making process, many also look at the ability and opportunity to work while they study at the institution in which they enroll (Bergerson, 2009; Han, 2018; Lee et al., 2013; Tamtekin Aydin & Bayir, 2016). In 2007 approximately 80% of part-time and 45% of full-time traditional undergraduate students worked while also pursuing their higher education (Tamtekin Aydin & Bayir, 2016). The literature indicates this is a trend that is growing among students and the ability to obtain jobs while studying is a factor when choosing an institution (Aljohani, 2016; Alsharari & Alshurideh, 2021; Bergerson, 2009; Lee et al., 2013). Students that are White or Asian and from higher-SES families are less likely to factor in the ability to obtain work during their schooling. Additionally, when parents have higher educational expectations for their students, students tend to work less while attending an institution of higher education which can impact which school they select (Lee et al., 2013). Whether students need to work while attending their institution may limit where students are able to study.

Geographic location/Distance from home

Turley (2006) discusses the geographic location of institutions and how parents put an emphasis on this aspect of choice of institution. Much of the literature that discusses the impact of geographic location and institution choice, deals with distance from home (Gibbons & Vignoles, 2012; Liu, 2019). Not only does distance from home impact the choice of institution,

but also can impact the student's experience, leaving home and beginning to experience life as an adult is a crucial piece of the college experience (Teranishi et al., 2004). Klasik et al. (2018) utilize *commuting zones* to determine if an institution is close to home for a student. Commuting zones are the counties that are linked through transportation infrastructure and labor markets that indicate where people live and work. When students have funding available, they are more likely to expand the geographic area in which they are choosing schools, which can limit the options of those from lower SES families (Skinner, 2018). Often the amount of cost associated with choosing an institution further from home in addition to the financial stability and resources of the students' family, have a direct impact on how distance from home influences students' choice (Parker et al., 2016; Pigni & Staffolani, 2016). Throughout the literature, how geographic location factors into student choice varies based on hometown area, rural vs urban, socioeconomic status, familial and community relationships, peer influence, job opportunities near the institution for college students, and even students who are single parent's vs those who are not (Bezuidenhout et al., 2016; Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Han, 2018; McManus et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2016; Pigni & Staffolani, 2015; Scott-Clayton & Zafar, 2019). Helland and Heggen (2018) discuss that institutions that are close to a student's home are more likely to be known by the student. Therefore, as institutions are further away, students may be less inclined to apply because they do not know much if anything about those institutions.

There have been studies that show the impact of students who live in *access deserts* and *education deserts* (Hillman, 2016; Klasik et al., 2018). Education deserts are areas in which there are no higher education institutions with the exception of possibly one community college (Hillman, 2016). Access deserts are areas in which low-cost, accessible institutions of higher education within a commuting zone are not available, whereas education deserts look at the

academic reputation of those institutions within a commuting zone (Klasik et al., 2018). Students who live in access deserts are approximately 14% more likely to apply to schools further from home due to the fact that there are less options close to home. Those who do not live in an access desert are 12% more likely to enroll in institutions close to home (Klasik et al., 2018).

Additionally, those students who have a child of their own or are extremely connected to their community and the comforts of home, are more likely to stay within commuting distance which may severely limit their institutional options (Brown et al., 2020; Chung, 2012; Spight, 2020).

Rural areas are more often than not, either an access desert or an education desert or both.

Students who come from rural areas often look to stay closer to home for a myriad of reasons. Several reasons that rural students stay closer to home include: accessibility, technology, the additional costs associated with transportation due to the lack of mass transit options, academic achievement, among others (Brown et al., 2020; Davies et al., 2014; Getz & Lev-Ari, 2017). Students from rural areas often find relocating and traveling a far distance from home to attend college a specific barrier to their educational pursuits (Gibbons & Vignoles, 2012; Klasik et al., 2018). Additionally, institutions that are more nationally recognized and elite are more likely to be located in or near urban areas where many state or regional institutions are located in more suburban or rural areas. Due in part to the distance from home, there is a lower population of students from rural areas, regardless of academic achievement, at the more elite or well-known institutions (Helland & Heggan, 2018; Klasik et al., 2018). The public institutions that are situated in rural areas and are attracting rural students, have continued to face funding challenges which limit the academic offerings at those institutions. Students from rural areas are less likely to pursue higher education and those that do are more likely to withdraw prior to graduation (Koricich et al., 2018). However, approximately 60 million people live in rural areas

of America making those areas prime recruiting areas for colleges and universities looking to grow enrollment (Koricich et al., 2018).

Geographic location is a multifaceted factor in students' choice of institution. One aspect of considering geographic location is if the student is responsible for working at the family business or caring for siblings (Klasik et al., 2018). For these students, staying closer to home is a must. However, there is also the ease of securing work while attending college. Many students are forced to work part-time or even full-time jobs while they attend school, so the likelihood of work can be dependent on geographic location and even on the distance from home as well (Chung, 2006; Han, 2018; Spight, 2020). Students who are able to attend an institution close to an already established working situation may be more inclined to weed out institution options away from home (Brown et al., 2020; Gibbons & Vignoles, 2012). Many of the students with the concerns listed above are from lower SES families and are more likely to be conscious of the impact of distance on their choice of institution (Gibbons & Vignoles, 2012). On the other hand, students with financially stable home lives, those whose parents have attended college, and who have a strong extended support system may be more inclined to move further away from home (Brown et al., 2020; Chung, 2012; Spight, 2020; Turley, 2006).

Geographic location, while a large factor for most students when they are choosing which institution to attend, does not lend itself to being easily understood. Increasing the distance from home to institution often leads to lower enrollment from areas further away from the institution (Gibbons & Vignoles, 2012; Goenner & Pauls, 2006). However, when looking at the literature regarding higher SES and academically performing students, distance is not as impactful on the choice of institution (Parker et al., 2016; Pigni & Staffolani, 2016; & Turley, 2006). While Goenner and Pauls (2006) found that students whose homes were 300 to 500 miles from the

institution were most likely to attend, this is not replicated in other findings. The variations of geographic location on student choice are too great to make predictions strictly on this factor alone; deeper conversations with students would be needed to understand this aspect more fully.

Information

Information comes to students about the admissions processes, applications, requirements, and choices available in many different ways. Students who are actively seeking information about higher education institutions typically begin at least a year prior to when they would enroll at the institution (Obermeit, 2012). Bezuidenhout et al. (2016) discuss the importance of marketing on the part of the institution and how institutions need to understand that students are consumers. While the institution may have entrance criteria, institutions need to attract consumers of their product, namely higher education. Students often gain information directly from institutions when they receive targeted outreach, opportunities such as college fairs, one-on-one meetings with admissions counselors, college preparedness workshops, etc (Brown et al., 2020; Castleman & Goodman, 2014; Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Opportunities for students to understand the ins and outs of the admissions process is an important aspect of deciding which institution to attend. Given the proclivity of the current generation of high school students to interact via social media, institutions are expanding the information provided through various social media platforms. These web and social media efforts have been shown to have an impact on students' choice of institution, and have a stronger impact than some other ways of providing information (Jan & Ammri, 2016; Tamtekin Aydin, 2015). The importance of information provided to students to aid in their decision of which school to attend is shown by Menon et al. (2007) who show 75.9% of the respondents in their study did not visit any campus prior to making their decision of where to enroll. Information provided through other means, therefore, is

extremely important to give students and their families accurate and impactful information about the institution.

Often, the information available to students in different socioeconomic categories is very different (Castleman & Goodman, 2014; Cheng & Peterson, 2018; Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Some of the reasons for this are the lack of adequate information about processes and higher education among family members and even educational leaders in communities that are generally low-SES (Castleman & Goodman, 2014). Many of these students live within education deserts and only know about a few schools within close geographic proximity (Klasik et al., 2018). High schools that allow admissions counselors in-school opportunities to speak with students, as well as those that build relationships between high school administrators and college financial aid counselors provide students with direct information concerning how to apply for financial aid, when to apply, what things to consider when applying and finally making the choice of institution. Castleman and Goodman (2014) determined that students who participate in college preparedness workshops were able to utilize the information provided to enroll in institutions with prices approximately \$7,400 less than if they had not had the information from the intervention opportunity. Additionally, students who have high academic achievement but are of low-SES families, are in need of access to mentors and resources so they are able to understand the information needed to attend a more selective institution (Cheng & Peterson, 2018). Federally funded programs, such as Upward Bound, have been designed to assist low-SES students with gaining the information needed to be able to successfully choose an institution of higher education. These programs fill in the information gap when students do not have access or resources available to them through their own families or high schools (Dougherty & Callender, 2020).

Additionally, institutions provide access to information for prospective students and parents through their websites, mailings, and even social media (Dougherty & Callender, 2020). The information provided includes costs, average financial aid packages, course and degree offerings, residential opportunities, etc. Students and families are often also looking to know retention and graduation rates for the institutions. Institutions can also convey important information for students choosing to attend through on campus visits, which are shown to have significant positive influence on students choosing the institution visited (Goenner & Pauls, 2006).

While institutional marketing strategies are often geared towards students, it is important for institutions to also have marketing strategies that are targeted toward parents, families, and supporters. These groups have been shown to hold great influence over students' choice of institution, especially when finances are of importance (Bringula & Basa, 2010). When institutions provide cost information only as opposed to financial aid opportunities, students were found to choose the institution approximately 4% more often (Cheng & Peterson, 2018). Additionally, students may be less interested in seeking out information prior to making their decision of where to enroll and therefore providing the information to parents or families may prove more impactful (Menon et al., 2007). This can change depending on academic ability and socioeconomic status for students, where high achieving students are more likely to search out information for themselves, but low-SES and low achieving students are more likely to rely on information presented to them by families or peer groups (Menon et al., 2007; Obermeit, 2012).

Peer and family influence

Peer groups and family members, mostly parents, have immense influence over students and their ultimate choice of which institution to attend (Bergerson, 2009; Castro et al., 2016;

Watson et al., 2016). There are various types of influence on many of the different factors that impact students' choices. Peer groups and the communities that students grow up with provide students with additional areas to consider when determining which institution to attend (DeBerard et al., 2014; Flaster, 2018). Parents impact different areas of students' decisions, including: how their own educational achievement impacts their students, the socio-economic status of the family, familial needs, the weight of importance given to education, parental opinions about type or location of institution, and parental financial assistance estimates, among other areas (Castro et al., 2016; Castleman & Goodman, 2014; Cheng & Peterson, 2018; Chung, 2012).

The amount of education family members possess has been shown to impact students' decision not only to attend an institution of higher education but also what institution students choose (Bergerson, 2009; Castro et al., 2016; Chung, 2012). Specifically, in Peru, a student's father's level of education was shown to impact enrollment (Castro et al., 2016). Typically, less educated families also hold lower socio-economic status. This contributes to further disadvantages for students from lower-SES families who may not fully understand how to navigate the admissions processes or what to look for in an institution of higher education (Goldrick-Rab, 2006). Additionally, the number of applications a student submits has been shown to be connected to their father's level of education which can provide more options for students to choose from (Ampilogov et al., 2014). Students from families that are highly educated are more likely to apply to and attend more selective institutions (Baum & McPherson, 2011; Belfield et al., 2020).

While there seems to be a connection between parent education level and student's choice of institution, often this is connected to what assistance parents can provide their students

throughout the admissions process and the pursuit of higher education (Bergerson, 2009). Less educated parents and parents of first-generation students are often at a disadvantage when it comes to understanding all of the aspects of the admissions process and acclimating to college life (Chung, 2012). Students of highly educated parents are more likely to choose a higher ranked institution (Davies et al., 2014). This may be attributed to the likelihood that more educated parents may also be wealthier. Students who understand how to apply for and enroll at a higher ranked institution will be better suited to choose those institutions (Goldrick-Rab, 2006; Karimshah et al., 2013; Kim, 2011).

Additionally, the amount of importance that parents put on education throughout students' early education throughout the admissions process can impact students' choice of institution (Brown et al., 2020; Chung, 2012). When parents are involved and encourage educational achievement and advancement, their impact on student's choice of institution is high (Lee et al., 2013; Mullen, 2009). Additionally, the encouragement of parents throughout secondary education may increase a student's academic ambitions to improve their thoughts about which institution to attend, perhaps looking at a more selective institution as opposed to a less selective one (Liu, 2019). Interestingly, Ampilogov et al. (2014) show a correlation between the number of books in a family's house and a student's academic achievement and likelihood to enroll in an institution of higher education.

Parents often have desires for which type of post-secondary institution their student attends. The majority (79%) of parent respondents in Cheng and Peterson's (2018) study responded that they would prefer their student to attend a four-year institution while only 13% indicated wanting their student to attend a two-year community college. However, many lower-SES parents are more inclined to encourage their students to pursue higher education at a

community college as opposed to a four-year institution (Cheng & Peterson, 2018). Often, lower-SES parents are inclined to avoid debt or adding to the family debt to pursue a four-year degree (Flaster, 2018). On the other hand, students from higher-income families may feel pressured to attend more prestigious institutions to continue the family's social standing (Cheng & Peterson, 2018).

It is shown that it is important for students to understand what financial contributions their parents are able to make for their higher education (Flaster, 2018; Han, 2018). Flaster (2018) estimates that approximately 75% of students receive less financial assistance from their parents than FAFSA assumes. Of those students, more of them are from lower-SES families which may be explained in part by the lack of financial stability and resources to save for college. Students who face shouldering the burden of the financial aspect of college attendance may be more inclined to attend a community college as opposed to a four-year institution (Flaster, 2018). Not only is the financial burden a concern for lower-income students, but they often contribute to the overall family finances and are unable to stop working while pursuing higher education. This can limit the geographic radius that students intend to search for institutions and ultimately enroll. However, students from families that intend to pay for a significant portion of their higher education often feel pressure to follow their parents' suggestions of institution (Klasik et al., 2018; Liu, 2019). Financial contributions from parents can also contribute to the pool of institutions students are choosing from. Those from higher-SES families are able to apply to more schools potentially allowing them a larger pool of institutions to ultimately choose from which may increase the odds of selecting the right institution the first time (Ampilogov et al., 2014).

Peer groups and communities also provide a high level of influence over where students choose to enroll for higher education (Bergerson, 2009; Flaster, 2018; Tamtekin Aydin, 2015). Students from rural areas who choose to break away and move further from home often have the support of the community and others to do so, even if not their parents (Bergerson, 2009). The influence of teachers from a student's community are able to outweigh parental influence especially in students from lower-SES communities (Baum & McPherson, 2011; Teranishi et al., 2004; Watson et al., 2016). Additionally, if peers are higher achieving academically, there is an impact on decision to attend and where to attend college (Mullen, 2009; von Keyserlingk et al., 2020). Ultimately, peers and communities provide information to and influence over students' institutional choices.

Gaps in previous research

The previous sections provide many areas of overlap within the student choice process. While conducting the literature review, it became clear that a narrow view of the research topic, and the factors that may contribute to students' choice of institution, would have missed key potential insights. This is a main focus of the study based on the findings and information gathered throughout data collection and analysis.

One such potential oversight in the existing literature is the impact that first generation status has on students determining where to enroll for their higher education, is certainly intertwined in the other factors discussed above. First generation students are students who come from families where no one else has attended college (Michalski et al., 2017). While this study was not specifically targeted at first-generation students, the researcher did collect the status of each focus group participant. Unfortunately, no specific patterns were able to be discerned in this study regarding the impact of being a first-generation student on the college

choice process. However, there are a substantial number of first-generation students which can be an untapped pool of potential prospective students should institutions learn how to recruit and support them (Davies et al., 2014; Duggan, 2014; Michalski et al., 2017).

Additionally, the different perspectives of students who wish to move further from home versus looking to stay closer to home, for example, may have been overshadowed by cost and the other factors discussed in the literature. Some clarification of this topic was able to be provided by this study. The affordability of the study institution, for some participants, included being able to commute from their parents' home and not needing to pay for living on campus. While the desire of participants varied, some wanted to stay close to home while others were seeking the freedom of being further from home, this study provides more information regarding the impact of distance from home on the college choice process.

Another gap in the literature was identified as the impact of SES on how easy the application process and financial aid processes are to navigate, which impacts students' choices of institution. While SES is discussed throughout much of the literature, it is still not clear how SES may impact students' choices. SES was not specifically collected through this study, however many participants share their financial status and all shared the approximate amount of aid they received from the study institution on the pre-questionnaire. Due to the overall mission of PASSHE, to provide access to quality higher education to all Pennsylvania residents, SES was an underlying thought when building this study.

Additionally, research into how, even as high school students, institution choice is impacted by post-graduation job opportunities could be important to understanding why students choose the institution they choose to attend. The nature of the research design for this study was to allow participants to share their own experiences and what impacted their choice. No specific

question was designed to determine if post-graduation job opportunities impacted their choice, but it was a factor indicated by several students as they discussed how their major and program impacted their choice of institution.

There also has not been a deep dive to determine how impactful safety and security provided on a campus impacts choice, even in light of the Clery Act which ensures students and families are able to see the crimes that occur on each campus (Bezuidenhout et al., 2016; Bringula & Basa, 2010). Researchers have not identified how important campus climate, physical appearance, or environment are to the choice of institution of higher education (Bringula & Basa, 2010; Knight, 2016). While the idea of *fit* is discussed throughout the literature as a factor impacting student choice of institution, there has not been enough to determine how students decide where they fit (Goenner & Pauls, 2006). These three ideas all fell into participants discussing the community and campus life factor of their college choice. By leaving the questions open ended, participants identified how impactful it was for them to see the campus clean, feeling safe, and being able to walk around campus easily. Additionally, the idea of *fit* was clarified better through the students sharing why they chose the study institution.

A final key gap in the literature is an understanding of where students who attend one institution also apply and how that impacts their ultimate decision (Johnson, 2018). While the information regarding where else students applied was gathered on the pre-questionnaire, participants freely discussed how they compared different institutions and what ultimately led them to choose the study institution. This information could prove extremely useful especially for similarly situated institutions, to understand who their major competitors are in addition to why students choose their institution over others.

Based off of the information found throughout the literature review and recommendations from previous research designs, this study will take a qualitative approach to answering, why students choose a small rural state-owned institution of higher education. There is little qualitative research on the topic of college choice. This study used semi-structured focus groups with an open ended questioning route, so participants could explain their experiences in their own words. This study was driven by the desire to answer the question by the newest cohort of students who completed the application and decision process. By using a qualitative research design, the researcher was able to get more to the heart of the *why* and the focus groups were able to capture participants own words and experiences. The next chapter will provide the research design in detail.

Chapter 3: Methods

In order to answer the research question, why do students choose a rural state-owned institution of higher education for their collegiate experience, the researcher performed data collection using semi-structured focus groups. This research design, hinged on gathering the information directly from participants without limiting their response options, as was noted in previous literature as a limitation. This chapter will explain in detail the overall research design of the study including information about: the study location, the participants, recruitment, data collection, focus groups, data analysis, and theoretical framework. Throughout each section, details are provided in order to clearly show how the study was performed and why certain techniques were utilized.

Study Location

The study took place at a small rural state-owned university located in Pennsylvania. The study institution was chosen due to the overarching research question being, why do student choose a small rural state-owned institution of higher education for their collegiate experience. The study university is publicly owned and located in a small rural town.. The university employs approximately 500 faculty and staff to serve a student population of about 3,000 students. The student population is approximately 60% female and 40% male with the majority of students being traditional aged. Pennsylvania residents make up 93% of the students who attend the university. The diversity among students enrolled are approximately 7% African American, 3% Hispanic, 1% Asian, 93% Caucasian, and less than 1% of students are identified as international students. These percentages are similar to other rural Pennsylvania public institutions of higher education.

Participants

The participants in the study are 18 to 25 years of age. This age range was selected as it has been established as the typical age range of traditional aged college students. Additionally, participants are first time college students enrolled at the institution. The study took place within the first two weeks of the Fall 2021 academic semester, which began on August 23, 2021.

Participants were enrolled in at least three credits at the time of participation to meet the criteria for the study. No other criteria needed to be met in order to participate in the study. The participant criteria was chosen as they were the last cohort of college students to go through the application and decision process.

Recruitment

In order to recruit participants, the researcher provided all students participating in Fall Orientation a brief overview of the research project. Students were informed that an email was sent from the Director of Outreach and Transition Programs to give them the opportunity to participate. The Coordinator of First-Year Seminar courses sent a very similar email to the students in first year seminar classes and encouraged the faculty teaching first year seminars to encourage their students to participate. The recruitment emails are attached in Appendix A. The researcher also worked with Student and Residence Life to post a flyer in each residence hall that houses first year students and had Resident Assistants and Residence Hall Directors mention the flyers and the forthcoming emails at their opening meetings for new students. In order to help entice student participation, the first 20 students who choose to participate in the survey and subsequent focus group received a \$10 Starbucks gift card. The researcher had both the Director of Outreach and Transition Programs and the Coordinator of First-Year Seminar continue to send emails out to students until at least 20 students participated in the survey and signed up for a

subsequent focus group, this allowed for some students who stated they would participate to not actually show up for the focus group sessions and still meet the minimum target of 15 participants.

Data Collection

In order to collect the data from participants, the researcher utilized a questionnaire (Appendix B) that was mostly demographic in nature in order to be sure that participants met the criteria needed for the study. As described and approved by the West Chester University Institutional Review Board (IRB) as well as the IRB at the university where the study took place. The West Chester IRB approval letter is attached as Appendix C. The questionnaire link was provided via email to prospective participants beginning at the start of the Fall 2021 academic semester. The email included the appropriate consent form from the IRB application. The email continued to be sent until enough participants had completed the questionnaire. The information gathered in the questionnaire was also helpful to the researcher as it identified other institutions the students were accepted at and information that was helpful in comparing the overall Fall 2021 cohort at the study institution to those who participated in the study.

Once a participant completed the initial questionnaire, the researcher reached out to them via the email address they provided in the questionnaire to determine an appropriate date and time for the focus groups to take place, based on participant schedules. The email provided the consent form that participants were asked to complete for a second time (Appendix, D). Participants were provided the date, time, and location of the focus group as soon as the researcher collected enough participants to divide into focus groups. The goal was to divide participants into 3-5 focus groups consisting of 5-7 participants per focus group. However, based on availability and willingness of the participants, 4 focus groups were held for a total of

17 participants. The focus groups were held on the university campus in a meeting room in the student union building. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all of the university safety protocols were followed, which included masking indoors for all participants and the researcher. The focus groups were audio and video recorded for the purposes of transcription. The researcher utilized a semi-structured approach to the focus groups with prompts to help guide the conversation. The questioning route that was used is attached as Appendix E. The researcher used the questioning route to keep the conversation on point, but most of the questions led the researcher to ask follow-up questions and provided the participants an opportunity to add to what others were sharing. Most of the questions in the questioning route were open ended to foster a more conversational feel to the data collection. Once the focus groups were completed the transcription was completed followed by analysis of the data, throughout the remainder of the Fall 2021 semester.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a qualitative method of data collection used to gather opinions and learn more about how people think or feel about the topic being studied. Typically focus groups are small enough that every participant has an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings, but large enough to provide diverse opinions and spur more conversation (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The prevailing thought being that most focus groups will utilize 5 to 8 participants with some as large as 12 or as small as 4. Additionally, focus group participants all share something in common, there needs to be a connection to the topic being discussed as well as some portion of similarity amongst the participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The researcher provided the groups with open-ended questions along a questioning route to guide the discussion and learn how the participants felt and thought about the topic being studied. The questions were designed to

prompt the participants in order to get participants talking with each other about the topic.

Participants in focus groups tend to feed off of each other which can lead to deeper understanding for the researcher through the data provided than individual interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2015). This idea of participants spurring other thoughts was the main reason that this study utilized focus groups.

Krueger and Casey (2015) explain that focus groups are useful for data collection when the researcher is looking to develop, strengthen, or change, policies and programs. For the purpose of this study the focus group may help to inform future recruitment programs and policies at institutions of higher education. By utilizing focus groups the researcher allowed an opportunity for more participant voices to be heard as well as more ideas to be shared through the nature of conversations in focus groups as opposed to more directed individual interviews. Especially with students new to a college campus, allowing their voices to be heard in a way that seemed less intimidating was extremely important. This method also allowed for students to reflect on, process, and share their own experiences through open dialogue with their peers. It allowed for the researcher to better understand the broader prospective student experience by allowing students to share their experience and compare it to others throughout the focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Additionally, since the participants were six months or longer away from their application and decision processes, the ability to have other participants remind them of their own experiences was extremely important to gathering as much data as possible.

Throughout the literature review, it was clear that much of the research previously conducted surrounding college choice was done via quantitative methods leaving a gap to fill with qualitative methods (Perna, 2006). Munsch (2019) states bluntly the need for qualitative research in the field of higher education institution choice in order to better gather insights and

information unable to be found through quantitative means. This can be accomplished through focus groups as a means to hear directly from participants without pre-assigned answer choices, using their own words and experiences (Munsch, 2019). Turley (2006) also discusses the importance of qualitative research to explain barriers for different groups of students. While focus groups are not the only qualitative method available, in an effort to make students more comfortable with the researcher and draw out as much information as possible, focus groups were chosen for this study (Perna, 2006). It was important to provide participants a setting with peers who had also completed the college choice process, so they would feel more comfortable using the opportunity to share their experiences with the group and the researcher. Participants were able to add to the thoughts of others and have a mechanism that aided in individuals remembering parts of the process they may not otherwise have thought to share. The focus group method was determined to be the best method to gather the information due to the open dialogue and conversational nature of focus groups.

Data Analysis Plan

The data were analyzed utilizing grounded theory techniques in an effort to produce a theory about why students choose a small rural state-owned institution of higher education. Data gathered through the pre-questionnaire better informed the description of the participants and were used to determine if there are patterns of answers found based on the demographic information provided. However, the majority of the data to be analyzed were gathered from the focus groups. The researcher employed several recording techniques utilizing Microsoft Word's audio recording and transcription software, audio recording using a digital recorder, and also video and audio recording using a camcorder. These three different recordings aided the researcher in accurately transcribing the focus groups in order to accurately analyze the data.

Once the researcher completed all focus groups, the three different recordings were utilized to make one accurate transcript of each focus group to be coded for analysis. The final transcripts of each focus group was individually uploaded into the Dedoose Software system.

The researcher employed memo writing during the focus groups as well as immediately following each group (Saldaña, 2016). As Saldaña (2016) suggests, memo writing is an important part of analysis from a grounded theory perspective. However, the researcher utilized the ability to audio record as opposed to manually writing thoughts immediately after each focus group. While the memos produced were not transcribed or coded, nor used for analysis purposes, the intention for the researcher was that there was a mechanism to begin to capture thoughts and build category ideas based on the information gathered from the participants through the focus groups (Saldaña, 2016). The memos were used as a mechanism to double check the accuracy of the transcripts as well.

In order to utilize the language, words and phrases, used by the participants throughout the focus groups, the In Vivo coding method was utilized for the first round of coding (Saldaña, 2016). This was particularly important to the researcher as administrators and students often do not use the same words and phrases. By utilizing the participants own language to build the first set of codes, the researcher was able to more clearly share the student prospective on the application and decision process. In addition to In Vivo coding, the researcher also utilized the coding technique described by Foss and Waters (2016) in which each excerpt that looks at a potential unit of analysis is determined and given a code word or phrase. The importance of this step was to identify codes using the participants' own language. The codes were used to identify and create excerpts in Dedoose. Once the excerpts were created, the researcher exported them to a Word Document. The excerpts were all cut into strips to re-arrange, evaluate, and analyze

again. The intention of re-arranging and evaluating the codes as individual pieces of the whole, was to better see connections and understand the coded excerpts.

For the second round of coding the researcher utilized focused coding which allowed the researcher to develop categories for the data (Saldaña, 2016). Focused coding is a type of coding that is often used within grounded theory research. Additionally, it typically follows In Vivo coding and is used mainly to take the initial round of codes and connect those codes from the first round into more clearly defined categories. The researcher then had a list of categories to work with once both round of coding were completed. Once the categories were determined, the researcher followed the technique described by Foss and Waters (2016) to list each category and rearrange them multiple times in order to look beyond the initial thoughts developed by the researcher during the coding process. This helped the researcher to identify connections that were not necessarily apparent from the coding processes alone. The researcher then utilized Dedoose Software in order to further analyze the data using the codes developed. Once the codes were in Dedoose, the researcher was able to use one of the analyze features, *Code Application*, in Dedoose which showed how many times each code was used in each transcript. The researcher used another analyze feature which produced a *Packed Code Cloud*, based on how many times each code and subcode was used (Appendix, G). The final analysis tool in Dedoose used by the researcher was *Code Co-Occurrence*, which showed which codes were used in the same excerpt. Once all of the steps above were performed, the researcher was able to provide findings and recommendations for practitioners in the higher education utilize.

Theoretical Framework

The researcher utilized the conceptual model described by Laura Perna (2006) which looked at college access and choice. As Perna (2006) points out, there are multiple approaches to

studying college choice. College choice is described as both the decision students make to attend college as well as where they choose to attend. The conceptual model indicates multiple layers of sociological and economic perspectives add to the decisions students make concerning college choice. While other research focuses on distinct perspectives, Perna (2006) brings both perspectives together to provide a more comprehensive look at college choice.

Additionally, the researcher used grounded theory as a means to analyze the data which allowed the researcher to provide new information and techniques for recruitment to administrators in higher education. As explained by Chun Tie et al. (2019), grounded theory uses multiple levels of coding to ultimately provide the researcher the ability to provide an explanation for the studied subject. Van De Ven (2007) presented grounded theory as useful when researchers look to build new notions or models. Throughout the steps involved in grounded theory, the initial data are divided into categories as observations and analysis continue throughout the process. Utilizing grounded theory in public administration is often the basis for new processes and procedures for practitioners to put into practice. Grounded theory is based on the idea that in order to provide for new processes to be developed, the researcher needs to dig deeper in the analysis process than just the cursory first round of coding. This study provides insight and concepts for practitioners to employ.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

Through the techniques described in Chapter 3, the researcher was able to collect data directly from students through the use of focus groups. This chapter will provide information about the specific students who participated in the study. Additionally, data collected from the Institutional Research department at the study institution provided an opportunity to compare the participants to the overall incoming Fall 2021 cohort. This chapter will also highlight updates to the methods described in Chapter 3 along with the reasoning behind any updates or changes. Finally, the chapter will provide the findings based on the analysis performed.

Institutional and Participant Data

The study institution provided the researcher with data specific to the first-time freshmen students enrolled in the Fall 2021 semester. The data is accurate based on the University census date of September 13, 2021 and does not account for students who enrolled but withdrew prior to or after the census date. Additionally, the data does not account for students who deposited with an intent to enroll but did not enroll in classes or arrive on campus. The Fall 2021 class of incoming first-time freshmen of the study institution saw an enrollment of 526 students. The top 6 majors of the class were: 19.39% health science, 11.03% undecided, 10.27% business administration, 6.27% criminal justice, 5.70% early childhood education, and 5.51% biology. 477 of the 526 students were in-state residents and 49 out-of-state residents. Additionally, the average distance from home to campus for students was 86 miles. 303 students were identified in the official records as female with 223 identified as male. The average amount of financial aid awarded to the first-time freshmen was \$3,572 excluding loans provided. The average amount of financial aid awarded including loans was \$8,031. 27% of the incoming class are listed as athletes with 55 of those students receiving athletic scholarships in varying amounts. This

information provided the baseline for the researcher to be able to compare the overall statistics of the incoming first-time freshmen to those who participated in the focus groups.

On August 21, 2021, participant recruitment for the study began. The researcher was able to have the Director of Orientation and the Director of the First Year Seminar classes send emails out to give students the information about the research project and the link to the pre-focus group questionnaire. One of the questions on the pre-questionnaire asked the participant to provide a pseudonym to allow the participants to remain anonymous and for use during the focus group and subsequent write-up. Fifty-six responses were collected on the pre-focus group questionnaire. From those fifty-six responses, thirteen were deemed not eligible due to not meeting the participant criteria. From the other forty-three responses, seventeen actually participated in focus groups. Twenty students responded to the pre-questionnaire and scheduled a time to participate in a focus group, but three students did not attend the scheduled focus group. Focus group one was held on August 24, 2021, at 8:30pm with six participants, focus group two was held on August 27, 2021, at 2pm with five participants, the third focus group was held on August 30, 2021, at 9:00pm with four participants, the last focus group was held on September 2, 2021, at 12:30pm with two participants. All focus groups were held in the same room in the student union building on campus, due to the COVID-19 restrictions on-campus, all participants and the interviewer wore face masks throughout the whole process. While the number of participants varied, each focus group was scheduled with five or more participants, but when participants did not show-up for the focus group, the researcher moved forward with those that were in attendance. Each focus group was distinctly different from each other, based on the pre-focus group questionnaire. The information gathered about each group will be identified throughout this section. This section will also compare the participants in each group to each

other as well as to the other students in the incoming class. The names utilized throughout this section are pseudonyms which were chosen by the participants prior to their participation in the focus group.

Focus group one consisted of Michael, Bianca, Rachel, Lucas, Lola and Stick. This focus group had three participants majoring in health sciences, one biomedical science, one early childhood education, and one student whose major is undecided at this point. The participants' distance from home to campus ranged from living in the same town as campus to 163 miles from campus, with an average of approximately 90 miles from campus. The amount of financial aid awarded to each participant for the academic year ranged from \$1,200 to \$8,000 with one participant not indicating an amount awarded. Four participants identified as female, one as male, and one as trans male. What other institutions of higher education, participants applied to was important to the researcher. Two participants indicated they did not apply to any other institution besides the study institution, two other participants indicated in addition to the study institution, they only applied to PASSHE schools, and the other two participants applied to private schools within Pennsylvania in addition to the study institution.

The focus group two consisted of Rhys, Candy, Mac, Heather, and Kit. This focus group had two participants majoring in criminal justice, one psychology, one biology, and one special education. The participants' distance from home to campus ranged from living in the same town as campus to 73 miles from campus, with an average of approximately 46 miles from campus. The amount of financial aid awarded to each participant for the academic year ranged from \$2,400 to \$21,000 with an average of \$8,680 awarded. All five participants identified as female. Three participants indicated they applied to at least one PASSHE school besides the study

institution, all five participants only applied to schools in Pennsylvania, and four of the five participants applied to private institutions in addition to the study institution.

Focus group three consisted of Kathleen, Neel, Marie, and Court. This focus group had three participants majoring in education (one special education, one secondary education social studies, and one elementary education), and one participant majoring in health science. The participants' distance from home to campus ranged from 13 miles from campus to 199 miles from campus, with an average of approximately 78 miles from campus. The amount of financial aid awarded to each participant for the academic year ranged from \$3,000 to \$18,000 with one participant not indicating an award amount. Three of the four participants identified as female and one as male. Two participants indicated they applied to at least one PASSHE school besides the study institution, all four participants only applied to schools in Pennsylvania, and three of the four participants applied to private institutions in addition to the study institution.

The fourth and final focus group consisted of Kay and Soren. This focus group had one participant with an undecided major and one participant majoring in secondary education, social studies. The participants' distance from home to campus was 25 miles from campus and 92 miles from campus, respectively. The amount of financial aid awarded to each participant for the academic year was \$0 and \$7,000, respectively. Both participants identified as female. One of the participants indicated they applied to at least one PASSHE school as well as private institutions in Pennsylvania, while the other participant did not apply anywhere besides the study institution.

The participants of the focus groups as compared to overall incoming first-time freshmen class of the study institution is described next. The focus group participants were all from Pennsylvania which represents 91% of first-time freshmen that entered the study institution in

Fall 2021. Additionally, the participants represented many of the most popular majors as well as some of the lower enrolled majors at the study institution. Four of the participants, 25%, were health science majors as compared to 19.39% of the incoming class, two participants, 12%, were criminal justice majors as compared to 6.27% of the incoming class, two participants, 12% were biology majors, as compared to 5.51% of the incoming class, one participant, 5.9%, was an early childhood major as compared to 5.7% of the incoming class, and two, 12% were undecided as compared to 11.03% of the incoming class. Two athletes, 12%, participated in the focus groups, both of whom received athletic scholarships as compared with 27% of the incoming class being athletes and 32% of the athletes received athletic scholarships. The average distance the participants live from campus is 71.25 miles as compared with the average distance for the incoming class being 86 miles away from campus. The average aid awarded to the participants was similar to the \$8,031 average of the incoming class. Additionally, the gender breakdown of the participants had 14 identified females, 82%, as compared with the 57.6% of the incoming class and 3 identified males, 18%, as compared to 42.3% of the incoming class. While the institution is not able to gather information about where else students apply, the overall information provided by the participants shows that 11 of the 17 participants applied to other PASSHE schools, 11 of the 17 participants applied to private institutions, and 3 of the 17 participants applied to only the study institution.

Updates to Methods

To begin the analysis of the data collected, the researcher reviewed each focus group transcript. The first step was to begin by finding responses that repeated throughout each focus group and by multiple participants to build the codes to use in the analysis. As discussed in

Chapter 3, this was the first round of coding using the In Vivo coding technique. Based on the responses from the participants, 50 codes were identified utilizing participant language.

The second coding was performed using the focused coding described in Chapter 3. Based on the second round of coding, the researcher organized the excerpts into 10 parent codes: affordability, current students or alumni, campus visits, communication, community, academics, distance from home, getting a job after school, help on campus, and parent/supporters. The parent codes were added to the codes in Dedoose. The code book containing the parent codes and their subsequent sub-codes are attached as Appendix F.

The three analysis tools in Dedoose were utilized to identify the five major themes and connections between the parent codes. These themes provided the researcher with the ability to answer the research question, why do students choose a small rural state-owned institution to attend for their collegiate experience.

Findings

To begin the conversation the researcher asked the participants to go around the room, introduce themselves using the pseudonym they chose for themselves on the pre-focus questionnaire, their major, and what they were most excited for about starting college. While there were some different answers, most of the participants, eleven in total, stated they were most excited about meeting new people and/or experiencing new things. A few, four total, mentioned that they were most excited about classes and learning about their chosen majors.

The researcher then began asking more questions surrounding the research question, why did the participants choose the study institution. The researcher reminded the participants to try to keep their time over the past few days on campus out of their answers. Below are the findings from those answers and the analysis performed.

Table 1 provides the number of times the parent codes (combined with their sub-codes) were found throughout the transcript excerpts.

Table 1

Code Occurrences

Code	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Total Occurrences
Affordability	16	31	18	6	55
Current Students or Alumni	7	7	6	1	21
Campus Visits	6	5	6	5	22
Communication	83	8	5	7	103
Community	70	92	47	31	240
Academics	33	20	31	21	105
Distance from Home	19	13	12	5	49
Future Jobs	4	1	2	0	7
Help on campus	8	8	5	0	21
Parents/Supporters	6	4	8	4	22

As seen in Table 1, the top referenced parent codes were: community, academics, communication, affordability, and distance from home. After reviewing the transcripts one last time prior to determining the five major themes, the researcher was able to combine parent codes through seeing when certain codes were referenced during the focus groups. Participants really discussed the help on campus, current students or alumni, and campus visits in the same vein as community:

“The first time I had communicated with anyone was orientation... and the people here are really nice... they don’t just, you know, say like “yeah, we all want to help you and we want to see you succeed” like they actually do” (Rachel, FG1).

“It was nice though to see the upperclassmen that walked us around and all that, just because we could see like what they were majoring in, talk to them, and then see where their favorite place on campus was” (Candy, FG2).

This combination lends to changing the code to be more inclusive of both community and campus life. Additionally, it made sense to link job prospects after school to academics because the participants mostly referenced their major or program when discussing their future jobs.

“I had asked my PA where she went and she said she went [to the study institution] and she got a job like right out of college, like she got hired like a month out of college. And same with my dermatologist PA, she also went [to the study institution] and she did the four plus two program and got a job where she wanted right away” (Stick, FG1).

Throughout the coding and analysis process, the researcher determined that the code parents/supporters was not a strong indicator of institutional choice. All the participants indicated that the decision to attend the study institution was theirs alone and no one else really influenced their decision. Based on the above joining and removing of codes, the five major themes that were identified as factors that impacted the participants’ choice of institution of higher education were: affordability, communication, community and campus life, academics, and distance from home. The remainder of this chapter will discuss the five major themes identified as a result of the analysis performed.

Theme 1: Community and Campus Life

Overwhelmingly, participants indicated that how they felt on campus and interacting with people on campus during their decision-making process was important. This was a theme that came up in each focus group and throughout different questions asked. Lola and Bianca, from focus group 1 and Kay and Soren from focus group 4 all used the phrase, “felt like home” or “homey” when discussing campus during visits. Mac, in focus group 2, used the phrase, “part of the family”. Court, Marie, and Neel from focus group 3 agreed that the “family” feel was an important part of their decision to attend the study institution. All four focus groups had

participants describe their interactions with staff from all over campus during their decision-making processes. Rachel put this concept the most succinctly and it was agreed to by all the focus group one participants:

“...because like, applying for other schools, and getting accepted like, it feels like they don’t care about you they care about your money. I never *ever* [emphasis inserted] felt that way about [the study institution] not *once* [emphasis inserted]... I don’t feel like another number that’s paying tuition, like I feel like, like people want me to succeed” (Rachel, FG1).

These types of statements were found throughout all four focus groups as participants answered a variety of questions about their decision and what drew them to enroll at the study institution.

Additionally, the extracurriculars offered on campus played a large part in the decision to attend for many of the participants. The importance of activities outside of the classrooms was indicated in each focus group.

“I personally wanted a school with a lot of extracurricular activities... I was actually set on marching band and color guard, and I’d heard [the study institution] had a good marching band. So that was kind of the decider for me when I decided” (Rhys, FG2).

“...probably like clubs and stuff because I like having the atmosphere of... doing a lot because I didn’t want to be bored” (Neel, FG3).

“...one of the biggest things that I looked at whenever I first applied here was all of the events that campus holds or like different clubs hold... they have quite a bit to choose from so having a lot of programs to look at and to see like what each one was about was definitely a huge contributing factor” (Michael, FG1).

This was shown when looking at the code application table in Dedoose, the top two codes under community were: nice people and people on campus care about you. The code of nice people was found in 27 excerpts, while people on campus care about you was found in 33 excerpts. After those two, the next most used code under community was look/size/walkability of campus being found in 26 excerpts. This code was discussed in all four focus groups as well, however, for varied reasons. Marie and Neel in focus group 3 discussed the “convenience factor” of being able to walk everywhere, while Mac in focus group 3 was drawn to the walkability of campus as a student with physical disability and difficulty walking. Kay from focus group 4 commented, “...it was small and not complicated to get around like some colleges”.

Additionally, many participants indicated that current students or alumni were large contributing factors to their choice of institution. Several participants: Mac, Neel, and Kit, indicated they had teachers in high school that had graduated from the study institution, highly recommended the institution, and how impactful that was. As quoted above, Stick from focus group 1 discussed how Physician Assistants she was a patient of highly recommended the study institution. Lucas from focus group 1 discussed how his sister had attended and was successful in finding jobs shortly after graduation as well as her friends in his major. Michael, Candy, Rhys, and Court as locals all discussed older friends who had attended and recommended the school and programs.

Finally, four codes under community were not mentioned in all four focus groups, however, they were each discussed in at least one group a few separate times throughout those conversations: having pets on campus, the safety of campus, not a party school, and the food. These sub-codes are more difficult to draw conclusions about due to the limited occurrences, but nonetheless were important enough for the participants to discuss throughout the process. These

also show that institutions will never be able to predict everything that impacts students' choice of institution.

Theme 2: Academics

Academics was identified as the second most mentioned factor in the participants' choice of institution. The code most frequently found throughout discussions around academics was program/major. Many of the participants shared that they began their college search based on which colleges had the program(s) they were interested in, then took those and narrowed down the options based on the other factors discussed throughout the focus groups. Kay, from focus group 4 stated, "I knew I wanted to go in for secondary education so if they were like, had a reputation of teaching schools." Court, Neel, and Marie from focus group 3, all agreed that their majors drew them to the study institution.

"I heard that from my teachers too, about like the student teachers that come out of [the study institution], are just surpassing everyone, like we have Penn State near my high school too, and they say, [the study institution], it just, has better student teachers than Penn State... if you can pump out better teachers that's where you want to go, you want to go to some small campus which is so much nicer" (Neel, FG3).

Rhys from focus group 2 stated, "Because, surprisingly, it was hard to find a college close by that has a criminal justice major, and the psychology minor available so". Major or program of study impacted the participants' choice to attend the study institution came up throughout all of the focus groups. Rachel from focus group 1 shared, "I was looking up more affordable schools that had like the same PA program, and I found [the study institution]." In addition to the influence of program/major the participants, also discussed the impact class size and student to faculty ratio had on their choices.

Both Kay and Soren from focus group 4 indicated that small class sizes and student to faculty ratio was important to their decision making. “I mainly wanted to go to a small school since I came from a small school so I could have more one on one learning” (Kay, FG4). When asked if there were other factors that impacted the participants’ choice of institution, Candy stated,

“Class sizes. I cannot learn in 80 people classes with one professor. It's nice, like a room this big there's about 30 to 40 of us here which is a lot better. And you can hear the professor, most of the time which is nice and then if you have a question, they're able to get to you quickly, [so] size of classes, definitely [was a factor]” (Candy, FG2).

Marie and Court from focus group 3 discussed how they were drawn to the study institution because the class sizes were small, and the institution had low student to faculty ratios. Kathleen from focus group 3 compared the classrooms, “I really liked how the classrooms look like a normal high school setting, not like a lecture hall. Like how small the classrooms were.” The topic of class size was discussed alongside the importance of faculty knowing students’ names and getting to know students, by Bianca as she compared the study institution to another institution,

“class size was another one [factor] because I'm, I like to interact a lot and I knew like right off the bat something like Penn State Main was, like, those lecture halls are huge and like you never would be able to raise your hand and like actually, like, get to know your professor” (Bianca, FG1).

The participants cited the prospect of getting to know their faculty members and building relationships with their faculty members as a large contributing factor when they chose the study institution. Soren, even referred to one of the phrases used in marketing the study institution,

“I think the biggest thing that stuck in my mind when searching for colleges, is I forget if it's on the website, but it says, ‘Where the professors know you by name.’ And I'm like, that kind of like helps me because I feel like it's more helpful to, not get attached to the professors but like, get to know them. And so, feel like if we have a connection and they know us by name, it would be easier for the students to pay attention in class and, like, want to be there” (Soren, FG4).

This quote also directly relates to the communication the participants focused on for the next theme.

Theme 3: Communication

Communication was the next most cited category to participants' choice of institution. Beginning with admissions recruiters at events, on campus, or in high schools, and including mailings to prospective students, participants in all four focus groups discussed the importance of communication to their decision-making processes. Candy, from focus group 2, specifically stated when asked how they chose where to apply, “If they contacted me before, like trying to reach out, figure out, ‘oh, you’re a senior this year in high school’”. Soren, from focus group 4 indicated, “I just feel like the people [in admissions] here are more friendly towards their applicants, so I was drawn here”. Lola from focus group 1 stated, “I was super excited because a college rep came to my school and as soon as she started talking, I was like ‘I love this college’... That representative that came in high school did it all.” Focus group 1 discussed at length how the graduation cards, birthday cards, and other personalized efforts really impacted their decision to attend the institution. The participants were all in agreement that it was nice to see things signed by a person and not just typed into a template. In addition to the admissions staff, each focus group discussed the application process itself as part of the communication category.

All four focus groups discussed how important it was that the application was easy to complete. In addition to the completion of the application, the quick response to the submitted application was referenced as a factor in deciding to attend the study institution. Bianca described her experience,

“I love rolling admissions, it keeps my anxiety down... I literally had submitted it like a week prior, and then I saw like I’d been accepted, and I was like, what, this is awesome. I didn’t have to wait months like my friends had to... so that was really nice” (Bianca, FG1).

All five participants in focus group 1 discussed how easy the application was compared to those schools using the CommonApp tool. They also described how nice it was that the study institution didn’t require an essay but allowed prospective students to add their resumes, SAT scores, and other supplemental materials of their own choosing. Participants from the other three focus groups also commented on how easy it was to complete the application and how fast they got their acceptance. Candy, from focus group 2, shared, “[another school] required me to answer a lot of questions about myself...but then [here] was like ‘okay, just fill this stuff out.’” Neel from focus group 3, shared his experience which was a bit different from the others, “my school... they kind of had a first like automatic acceptance, I was talking to someone [from admissions] and they accepted me”. Kay from focus group 4, discussed how early the application process opened and how easy it was compared to others she had applied to.

An overarching topic of conversation about communication that ran through focus group 1 more than the other 3 groups was how fast and helpful all the communication from the university was. Rachel remembered, “I’ve even gotten emails saying like, ‘I can’t answer this [question] tonight, but I will [answer] this [other question]’ ... the communication definitely

helps.” This sentiment was echoed by all four of the other participants in focus group 1. They all discussed how they received responses to emails very quickly, within a day or less, and how helpful the answers they received were, sometimes even providing answers the participants hadn’t thought to ask.

Theme 4: Affordability

Many would assume that affordability, or the cost associated with attending college, would be the main factor, the participants of this study certainly agreed that it was a major factor, but not necessarily the main factor.

Rachel stated, “for me it was definitely the combination of the same program that I wanted with the affordability. Not that any college is cheap, necessarily, but this is far cheaper than what I was looking at, with the same program with a stronger sense of community” (Rachel, FG1).

Lucas, Michael, Stick, and Lola from focus group 1, all agreed that affordability was important in their decision-making. Lucas, even described, “all you get for the price... I think I made the right choice.”

Kit stated, “it was between here and Marywood up in Scranton, and I did visit both of the schools, but Marywood was a lot of money and I did end up falling in love with this campus, so I did end up choosing to go here” (Kit, FG2).

While Heather from focus group 2 indicated, “I was researching state colleges because I wanted to go to a state college because it’d be way less expensive than going to a private, a private school”. The other two focus groups discussed the affordability aspect as well.

Kathleen from focus group 3 shared for her, finances was a top factor, “Like for me, I need to look for something that I could afford... And I want an affordable and good education.”

Kay and Soren from focus group 4 both talked about affordability being a consideration, “I compared a lot of it on aid, I didn't want to go into a lot of debt” (Kay, FG4). The fact that all of the support services were provided at no additional cost, factored into the affordability aspect for participants in focus groups 1 and 3, “I feel like I have the help that I deserve because I'm paying to come to school so I feel like I should have help available to me” (Court, FG3). In addition to services being available for free, participants also shared how easy it was to identify the costs associated with the study institution on the institution’s website. This allowed participants to easily determine whether the study institution was affordable based on their own definition. The participants who were local to campus indicated that being able to live at home was important in their choice because they were able to reduce costs by not paying to live on campus. This idea connects to the final theme that emerged, distance from home.

Theme 5: Distance from Home

Distance from home was discussed in all four focus groups. While each participant had a different take on the subject, all agreed that the distance from campus to home was influential in their choice of college. Most participants indicated they felt the distance from home was important because they were close enough to home to feel like they were able to get home if they needed to, but far enough away to feel independent.

“I just liked that, it’s in the state of Pennsylvania... It kind of gives me like a feeling of security, but I'm like, away from home, but I'm not like, cuz I like you said if I'm in like a different state, it just feels like you're too far away from home” (Lucas, FG1).

Some of the participants, Kit and Kathleen, indicated they wanted to be “far away from home” and the study institution fit the bill for those participants at about 3 or so hours from their home. The participants who are deemed *locals* were able to discuss how living near the study institution

assisted in their decision-making. The local participants cited being comfortable on campus because they were familiar with it, the lower cost due to not needing to pay for housing, and being able to maintain jobs from high school as benefits to being close to home at the study institution.

The data analysis performed provided 5 main themes or factors to answer why students chose the study institution. The participants cited most often that, community and campus life, communication, affordability, academics, and distance from home were influential aspects of their decision to attend the study institution. The findings provide a solid starting point, but can not be looked at in silos. In order to increase enrollment and recruitment, higher education administrators will need to understand how these factors work together to influence students decision to attend a certain institution. The next final chapter will provide a discussion of the findings along with recommendations for future research and higher education administrators.

Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusion

Summary

The aim of this dissertation was to answer: why do students choose a small rural state-owned institution of higher education for their collegiate experience. In order to answer this research question, the dissertation began with an extensive review of research available on the topic of college choice. Throughout the literature review, the researcher identified factors that influence students' choice of higher education institution. The main factors found throughout the literature and discussed throughout Chapter 2 are: costs, institutional reputation, information available, peer and family influence, post-graduation job prospects, campus life, academic match, the ability to work and study; and geographic distance from home (Godrick-Rabb, 2006; Hemelt & Marcotte, 2020; McManus et al., 2017; Parker et al., 2016; Pignini & Staffolani, 2016). This study reinforced several of these factors, identifying the following similar factors: community and campus life, academics, communication, affordability, and distance from home.

While this study reinforced some factors touched on in existing literature, the combination of those factors was not discussed in existing literature. Additionally, the themes of community and campus life combined with communication highlighted the gap in literature explaining some of how students decide if they fit at an institution (Bringula & Basa, 2010; Goenner & Pauls, 2006; Knight, 2016). Much of the previous literature failed to discuss the nuances of each of those factors. This study was able to get at the heart of why those factors were so instrumental in the college choice process because of the use of focus groups as the data collection tool.

The use of focus groups to gather information directly from new students was determined to be the best method based on the lack of focus group studies in the existing literature. Most of the existing research utilized quantitative methods like surveys or data analysis based on existing

institutional data. Once the data was collected from participants, the researcher transcribed each focus group recording then used several coding methods to be able to analyze the data found in the transcripts. The focus groups and the analysis produced the five factors of college choice identified by the participants in their own words: community and campus life, academics, communication, affordability, and distance from home.

Discussion

The combination of the five factors identified, becomes the true answer to the research question posed in this dissertation, why do students choose a small rural state-owned institution of higher education for their collegiate experience. The information gained, through the focus groups, highlights how prospective students are looking at the big picture, which most heavily includes: affordability, community and campus life, communication, academics, and distance from home. Participants in the study were able to pinpoint their personal reasons for their choice of institution to attend. Each factor is important, and the factors all work together to provide prospective students and their supporters with a broad view of the institution. Much of the existing literature discussed the factors as independent as opposed to discussing how they work together. For example, the literature discussed the importance of institutional aid and understanding financial aid but not the combination of the amount of aid and how the institution communicates about aid and assists in the process (Andrews et al., 2016; Helland & Heggen, 2017). The participants in this study connected communication from the financial aid and admissions departments about the cost and aid available, as instrumental in their decision to attend the study institution. Additionally, several participants indicated that their feelings about the factor of community and campus life was directly linked to the communication they experienced from the university staff and faculty. These factors were discussed separately

throughout the literature (Bezuidenhout et al., 2016; Clark, 2007; McManus et al., 2017). While no institution will be able to hit every mark for every prospective student, the focus group participants described how the factors are linked during the decision-making process. Through the data analysis performed, the researcher was able to glean patterns in the information presented by each participant. This information can be used by higher education administrators to focus their recruitment efforts.

While one of the final questions was more of a fun question to wrap up the focus group, it produced interesting results. Participants were asked if college was completely free and you were automatically accepted to every school, where would you choose to attend and why. 8 participants stated they would still come to the study institution, citing mostly the feelings they had about the campus community. Lucas, from focus group 1 stated, “it’s just tight knit.” Of those who said they would go elsewhere, one stated they would attend an ivy league institution due to the free cost of attendance, one stated an out of state institution they visited with Virtual Reality for education classes, two stated they would go out of the country, three stated they would go out of state. two participants did not answer the question. The answers to this seemingly innocuous question show that participants, even presented with their pick of any institution, were confident in their decision of higher education institution.

Validity

Keuger and Casey (2015) explain how focus groups still provide a valid research method. Steps were taken by the researcher to ensure that the findings present the participants thoughts and feelings about the application and decision process in order to add to the validity of this study. The researcher tried to provide a comfortable setting for the focus groups to take place and emphasized that participants anonymity was a priority. Additionally, the researcher reminded

participants that they were free to leave at any time during the conversation if they felt comfortable, no participant left early. When the researcher was unclear or unsure of a participant's answer, the researcher asked the participant to expand or clarify the answer given. The analysis techniques used were clearly explained and were specifically chosen to allow for participant voices to come through in the findings. While the findings in this research do not provide for overwhelming generalizability for all institutions of higher education, it does provide transferable information as described by Keuger and Casey (2015). Institutions can use the whole of this study to determine if portions can be used or compared to their particular situation or problem. Based on the findings of this study and its transferability, recommendations for other higher education administrators are found in the next section.

Recommendations for Higher Education Administrators

The main purpose of this study, aside from answering the research question, was to provide a tool for administrators in higher education. As the results have shown, there is valuable information for institutions of higher education to utilize as they move forward in their recruitment and retention efforts. The data coming from the study surrounding community and campus life provides for several easy to implement strategies.

Many of the participants indicated how they connected with campus while physically visiting. Improving efforts to bring more prospective students to campus to feel what was felt by the participants of the study can improve recruitment efforts. While local students often feel like they don't need to visit because they live in the community, the study shows how important it is to get prospective students on campus for a visit. Additionally, providing free or low-cost transportation for lower income prospective students or those who have transportation difficulty can increase on-campus exposure for those who would not normally visit campus.

Community and campus life data also showed the importance of connecting with alumni in positive ways to encourage them to talk to prospective students about the institution. Often, alumni relations and admissions departments are not housed within the same area of the institution, but it is vital that those areas partner intentionally to increase positive exposure of the institution. Especially for institutions that do not have national recognition or large-scale athletics that provide for fans or alumni to be easily spotted, having alumni be known to others can provide for additional recruitment with little cost to the institution.

With faculty playing a large role in the college experience, faculty need to be part of the larger recruitment plan. Allowing faculty to engage with prospective students and show their level of commitment to the students and their academic programs was cited as extremely important to the participants. Administrators will need to highlight the experiences students have in the classroom and the mentorship opportunities the faculty members provide for students. Impressing upon faculty how impactful they can be to the recruitment process, could be difficult but is important for higher education administrators.

How institutions communicate with prospective students can also increase recruitment. The communication discussed by the participants showed how all the little efforts have a significant impact on college choice. Efforts like sending personalized cards signed by a staff member or making sure that when staff interact, they are helpful and friendly are little efforts with big impact. While most participants indicated they found the application process easy, there were participants, mostly first-generation students, who felt confused by the whole process. One easy option would be to offer opportunities to have admissions staff assist prospective students in filling out their applications and have financial aid staff assist in the filing of their FAFSA. This connects the communication factor and the affordability factor.

The affordability theme was threaded through all the conversations during the focus groups. However, it was evident that each participant had a different view of what was affordable, this will be important for institution administrators to remember. To better entice students, administrators would do well to discuss potential financial barriers earlier in the college choice process. Providing one on one conversations with financial aid representatives during initial campus visits or even virtual visits may provide prospective students and their supporters enough information to sway their decision in favor of the institution. This would connect all the ideas of community, communication, and affordability.

Finally, institutions need to capitalize on the local pool of prospective students. Not all prospective students will want to stay within the same community for college that they were in for high school, but close surrounding communities may provide opportunities for enrollment growth. While keeping in mind the affordability component to attracting new students, perhaps providing small scholarship opportunities for those who are within driving distance of the institution. Providing incentives and highlighting the positives of staying local, through the application process and one on one financial aid counseling suggested earlier, may show an increase in local enrollment.

While all of these strategies may not be possible for every institution to put into practice, utilizing the information provided in this dissertation can provide institutions with a narrower focus on their recruitment efforts. Many of the strategies outlined would not cost large outlays of money to the institutions to implement and could be slowly implemented over the course of time.

Limitations

While the researcher tried to reduce the limitations of the study, several were evident throughout the process. All the limitations identified were based on dealing with participants in

general. As the study hinged on first time first-year students responding to a pre-focus group questionnaire and participating in a 60–90-minute focus group within the first few weeks of classes, participants were difficult to find. Even with the incentive of a \$5 Starbucks gift card, participants were not abundant. There were over fifty students who took the pre-questionnaire, however, only twenty actually responded to the email to schedule to participate in focus groups. Additionally, several participants who had scheduled to join the last focus group did not attend, so the final focus group only had 2 participants.

The researcher also found it difficult to focus the participants' answers on the decision-making process as opposed to their experiences since they arrived on campus as students. Several times throughout each focus group, the researcher needed to reframe questions to re-focus participant answers on their decision to attend the institution. While the information gathered about their early experiences on campus would be useful for administrators for future decisions, it was not helpful in answering the research question. The researcher attempted to mitigate this limitation by holding the focus groups as early in the Fall semester as possible, but this led to some of the other limitations discussed above.

The last limitation identified by the researcher of this particular study was the single institution focus of the data collection. The information collected was specific to the students who enrolled at the study institution. While the results are useful and can be utilized by those at similarly situated institutions, some administrators may find the information too specific to the study institution.

In addition to the limitations of the study itself, there are limitations based on the research design chosen for this study. Through the use focus groups, the researcher was dealing with a small representative population. The small number of participants does not allow for statistically

significant findings, which many administrators are looking for when determining future practices. Additionally, when dealing with a group, some of the answers from participants may not have been as clear to the researcher. have produced even more clear answers to the research question. Participants may not have felt comfortable sharing specific details about why they chose the study institution when sharing a space with their peers, so the information gathered may not have been as detailed as the researcher had hoped. Finally, the participants were asked to provide details about the application and decision process which they may not have been as prepared for. Both the limitations discussed above pertaining specifically to this study and those outlined based on the qualitative research design, lend to the future research recommendations outlined in the next section.

Recommendations for future research

Many of recommendations provided are for replication studies, however a discussion of different methods is provided to give future researchers a combination of recommendations. The first recommendation would be for future research into the topic of institutional choice, to be performed over the summer prior to students arriving on campus. Future data collection through focus groups could be done as a part of summer Orientation programs or even via Zoom over the summer. This will help to reduce the limitation discussed above of participants answering questions based on their early experiences on campus as enrolled students. Additionally, the incentive might be able to be a small book scholarship which could be more enticing to students prior to classes beginning.

The next recommendation would be to look at the previous year's demographic breakdown and attempt to recruit students in similar percentages to those breakdowns. For example, attempting to recruit a similar percentage of students from the 6 most dominant majors

on campus, similar gender percentages, and similar percentages of in-state versus out-of-state students could provide more useful information. By having similar demographic breakdowns, there may be more generalized information being presented. In addition to those breakdowns, looking at the breakdown of the overall EFCs of the incoming class and the EFCs of participants could be helpful as well. This might provide more usable information regarding the financial situation of students at the study institution as well as the participants themselves.

The third recommendation for future research would be to get current students to assist in identifying the best days and times to hold focus groups. This study found that better participation rates were during the later evening hours as opposed to afternoon hours. Holding focus groups during the week was more popular than on a weekend as well. By utilizing current students to assist in identifying the best times to hold focus groups, the researcher may find better participation rates which would help to mitigate the limitation concerning participation rates discussed above.

Additionally, as opposed to simply providing recommendations for replication studies, the following are recommendations to perform this type of study using different data collection and analysis methods. A survey tool may have provided an opportunity for many more participants to provide responses to better answer the research question. Also, a more structured individual interview tool may have produced even more clear answers to the research question. Individual interviews would allow for the researcher to drill deeper into the *why* for each participant by allowing for more specific follow-up as well as a more private space. Participants may feel more comfortable sharing specific details about why they chose the study institution when not sharing a space with their peers. Finally, a mixed methods approach of providing a much more substantive survey with follow-up interviews with questions based on the responses

to the survey would allow the participants more time to think about what factors really did play into their decision to attend the study institution as opposed to other institutions.

The final recommendation for future research would be to collect data at several similarly situated institutions. The student body at similarly situated institutions should, in theory, provide similar data. However, future study would be able to verify or disprove this thought.

Additionally, by collecting data at several institutions, the results may provide more generalizable results and results could be used more by many institutions and administrators. Also, by collecting data from multiple institutions, a comparative study would be possible, which could provide useful results.

Conclusion

Higher education is an ever changing market. Students' wants and needs change by the second, higher education needs to be able to change to meet those wants and needs. As the economic crisis continues as a fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, administrators will need to find new avenues to attract students and their supporters to enroll in their institutions. The answer to why students choose a small rural state owned institution of higher education for their collegiate experience, can aid administrators in those efforts. Existing research into the topic of college choice provides broad factors that influence college choice. This study helps to confirm many of the factors presented in existing research but also highlights specifically the importance of useful and helpful communication with prospective students. Through the use of focus groups with new students in their first two weeks on campus, the researcher was able to hear directly from the last cohort of students to go through the application and decision process at the study institution. The information was analyzed through two coding processes to provide five key

themes that led to the participants choosing the study institution: community and campus life, communication, affordability, academics, and distance from home.

Additionally, this study provides clear links among the themes, presenting college choice as a complex combination of factors as opposed to a decision that is based on one or a few standalone factors. While the five themes found could be seen as independent, the participants did not view them as such and shared those views during the focus groups. The participants described their experiences as a whole and not based on individual factors. The ability to discuss their experiences through the focus group process, many of the participants shared that the study institution felt like a family that they wanted to be a part of. The idea of all aspects of the institution working together to highlight the themes of: community and campus life, communication, academics, affordability, and distance from home, may just be what can turn the tide on declining enrollment.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Emails

Participant Email from Coordinator for FYE:

Attention First Year Seminar Students! We sincerely hope that you have enjoyed the start of the semester and our Welcome Week Activities. For those of you that participated in Fall Orientation, you may remember that Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti, one of our Assistant Directors of Student and Residence Life, mentioned her dissertation study. The rest of the email is from Emmy explaining the research project and how to participate if you are interested. This is a great opportunity to begin your collegiate career!

New Lock Haven Students, I am looking for your assistance with my dissertation research project. I am looking to identify why students choose the college or university they attend. This would be an opportunity for you to share why you chose Lock Haven. The hope for this project is to improve recruitment efforts as well as better support you all as new incoming students. If you are potentially interested in participating, please read the consent form below and proceed by taking the short survey (it should take no more than about 2 minutes to complete and can be completed on your cell phone or mobile device). Once you complete the survey I will contact you via email with the information about participating in a small focus group which will take approximately 90 minutes.

Thank you so much for your time, if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me via email at eborst@lockhaven.edu or at 570-484-2249. This study has been approved by the WCU IRB, protocol FY2021-226.

Sincerely,

Emmy

CONSENT FORM FOR ONLINE SURVEYS

Project Title: Why Students Choose a Rural State-Owned Institution of Higher Education

Investigator(s): Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti; Dr. Mark Davis

Project Overview:

Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti as part of her Doctoral Dissertation to provide information about why students choose to attend a specific institution of Higher Education, in this case, a small rural state-owned institution. The researcher would like to provide information to better recruit students in the future.

Participants will learn, through their participation, about research projects utilizing focus groups. Additionally, participants may aid in growing enrollment for Lock Haven University (LHU) which could add future opportunities and activities at LHU for students. The research may provide administrators and admissions counselors useful information to use for their future recruitment efforts. Additionally, faculty and staff at LHU may be better informed to provide additional support to current students.

If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree to this consent form.

You may ask Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti any questions to help you understand this study. If you don't want to be a part of this study, it won't affect any services from Lock Haven University or your student standing. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

1. **What is the purpose of this study?**
 - provide information about why students choose to attend a specific institution of Higher Education, in this case, a small rural state-owned institution. The researcher would like to provide information to better recruit students in the future
2. **If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:**
 - take a short questionnaire (2-5minutes) that will collect demographic information such as age, gender, and hometown.
 - take part in a focus group (90minutes) of 5-7 students.
 - This study will take about 95 minutes of your time.
3. **Are there any experimental medical treatments?**
 - No
4. **Is there any risk to me?**
 - None
5. **Is there any benefit to me?**
 - Benefits to you may include: Participants will learn through participation about research projects utilizing focus groups. Additionally, participants may aid in

growing enrollment for LHU which could add future opportunities and activities at LHU for the participants to utilize

- Other benefits may include: The research may provide administrators and admissions counselors useful information to use for their future recruitment efforts. Additionally, faculty and staff at LHU may be better informed to provide additional support to current students.
6. **How will you protect my privacy?**
- The session will be recorded.
 - The focus group sessions will be both audio and video recorded in order for the researcher to accurately identify speaker for transcription purposes.
 - Your records (consent forms, questionnaire, focus group responses, etc) will be private. Only Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti, Dr. Mark Davis, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
 - Your name will **not** be used in any reports.
 - Records will be stored:
 - Password Protected File/Computer
 - The researcher will not include any identifiable information in transcriptions, dissertation write-up, or any professional presentations. The researcher will use pseudonyms for participants throughout transcriptions, dissertation write-up, and professional presentations.
 - Records will be destroyed Three Years After Study Completion
7. **Do I get paid to take part in this study?**
- The first 20 full study participants will receive a \$10 Starbucks gift card.
8. **Who do I contact in case of research related injury?**
- For any questions with this study, contact:
 - **Primary Investigator:** Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti at 570-484-2249 or eborst@lockhaven.edu
 - **Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Mark Davis at 610-436-2017 or mdavis2@wcupa.edu
9. **What will you do with my Identifiable Information?**
- Your information will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the West Chester University of Pennsylvania Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 610-436-3557.

I have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I believe that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

I understand that if I click on the link below and submit a completed survey, I am indicating my agreement to participate based on reading and understanding this form.

- Based on the information above, I agree to participate in this study. [Click Here to Participate in the Questionnaire](#)

- If you do not wish to participate in this study, please delete this email

Participant Email from Director of Orientation:

Attention New Lock Haven University Students! We sincerely hope that you have enjoyed the start of the semester and our Welcome Week Activities. For those of you that participated in Fall Orientation, you may remember that Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti, one of our Assistant Directors of Student and Residence Life, mentioned her dissertation study. The rest of the email is from Emmy explaining the research project and how to participate if you are interested. This is a great opportunity to begin your collegiate career!

New Lock Haven Students, I am looking for your assistance with my dissertation research project. I am looking to identify why students choose the college or university they attend. This would be an opportunity for you to share why you chose Lock Haven. The hope for this project is to improve recruitment efforts as well as better support you all as new incoming students. If you are potentially interested in participating, please read the consent form below and proceed by taking the short survey (it should take no more than about 2 minutes to complete and can be completed on your cell phone or mobile device). Once you complete the survey I will contact you via email with the information about participating in a small focus group which will take approximately 90 minutes.

Thank you so much for your time, if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me via email at eborst@lockhaven.edu or at 570-484-2249. This study has been approved by the WCU IRB, protocol FY2021-226.

Sincerely,

Emmy

CONSENT FORM FOR ONLINE SURVEYS

Project Title: Why Students Choose a Rural State-Owned Institution of Higher Education

Investigator(s): Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti; Dr. Mark Davis

Project Overview:

Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti as part of her Doctoral Dissertation to provide information about why students choose to attend a specific institution of Higher Education, in this case, a small rural state-owned institution. The researcher would like to provide information to better recruit students in the future.

Participants will learn, through their participation, about research projects utilizing focus groups. Additionally, participants may aid in growing enrollment for Lock Haven University (LHU) which could add future opportunities and activities at LHU for students. The research may provide administrators and admissions counselors useful information to use for their future recruitment efforts. Additionally, faculty and staff at LHU may be better informed to provide additional support to current students.

If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree to this consent form.

You may ask Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti any questions to help you understand this study. If you don't want to be a part of this study, it won't affect any services from Lock Haven University or your student standing. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

10. What is the purpose of this study?

- provide information about why students choose to attend a specific institution of Higher Education, in this case, a small rural state-owned institution. The researcher would like to provide information to better recruit students in the future

11. If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- take a short questionnaire (2-5minutes) that will collect demographic information such as age, gender, and hometown.
- take part in a focus group (90minutes) of 5-7 students.
- This study will take about 95 minutes of your time.

12. Are there any experimental medical treatments?

- No

13. Is there any risk to me?

- None

14. Is there any benefit to me?

- Benefits to you may include: Participants will learn through participation about research projects utilizing focus groups. Additionally, participants may aid in

growing enrollment for LHU which could add future opportunities and activities at LHU for the participants to utilize

- Other benefits may include: The research may provide administrators and admissions counselors useful information to use for their future recruitment efforts. Additionally, faculty and staff at LHU may be better informed to provide additional support to current students.

15. How will you protect my privacy?

- The session will be recorded.
- The focus group sessions will be both audio and video recorded in order for the researcher to accurately identify speaker for transcription purposes.
- Your records (consent forms, questionnaire, focus group responses, etc) will be private. Only Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti, Dr. Mark Davis, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
- Your name will **not** be used in any reports.
- Records will be stored:
 - Password Protected File/Computer
- The researcher will not include any identifiable information in transcriptions, dissertation write-up, or any professional presentations. The researcher will use pseudonyms for participants throughout transcriptions, dissertation write-up, and professional presentations.
- Records will be destroyed Three Years After Study Completion

16. Do I get paid to take part in this study?

- The first 20 full study participants will receive a \$10 Starbucks gift card.

17. Who do I contact in case of research related injury?

- For any questions with this study, contact:
 - **Primary Investigator:** Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti at 570-484-2249 or eborst@lockhaven.edu
 - **Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Mark Davis at 610-436-2017 or mdavis2@wcupa.edu

18. What will you do with my Identifiable Information?

- Your information will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the West Chester University of Pennsylvania Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 610-436-3557.

I have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I believe that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

I understand that if I click on the link below and submit a completed survey, I am indicating my agreement to participate based on reading and understanding this form.

- Based on the information above, I agree to participate in this study. [Click Here to Participate in the Questionnaire](#)

- If you do not wish to participate in this study, please delete this email

Appendix B

Pre-Focus Group Questionnaire

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 First and Last Name

Q2 Major (If not decided, use "Exploratory Studies")

Q3 Age

Q4 Gender (This is optional to share if you feel comfortable but will add to the study information)

Q13 Is LHU the first college/university you have attended?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q5 What is your hometown, city/state or zip code? (The place you lived prior to coming to LHU, even if you do not plan to return)

Q7 What is the approximate value of your Financial Aid from LHU per year?

Q9 What other colleges/universities did you get accepted to?

Q10 Were you recruited to attend LHU as an athlete?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q11 What other institutions of higher education, if any, actively recruited you as an athlete?

Q8 For purposes of the research project, your real name will not be used. Please provide a pseudonym (an unrelated fake name) that you would like to be referred to during the dissertation write-up.

Q12 In order to contact you about participating in the focus group (approximately 90 minutes) please provide your LHU email. I will email you within 24 hours to schedule the focus group.

End of Block: Default Question Block

Appendix C

West Chester University Institutional Review Board Approval



Office of Research and Sponsored Programs | West Chester University | Ehinger Annex
West Chester, PA 19383 | 610-436-3557 | www.wcupa.edu

Jul 22, 2021 9:13:03 AM EDT

To: Emmalyn Conti

Public Policy and Administra.

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - IRB-FY2021-226 Why Students Choose a Rural State Owned
Institution of Higher Education

Dear Emmalyn Conti:

Thank you for your submitted application to the WCUPA Institutional Review Board. Since it was deemed expedited, it was required that two reviewers evaluated the submission. We have had the opportunity to review your application and have rendered the decision below for Why Students Choose a Rural State Owned Institution of Higher Education.

Decision: Approved

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,

WCUPA Institutional Review Board

IORG#: IORG0004242

IRB#: IRB00005030

FWA#: FWA00014155

Appendix D

Focus Group Set-up, Participant Email

Thank you for your willingness to complete the pre-focus group questionnaire to provide a little bit of information about yourself and your college decision. I would like to compare the schedules of the other willing participants and yourself to meet for the focus groups in the next 2 weeks. You will only participate in one focus group with 4-6 other students. It will take approximately 90 minutes of your time. If you are still willing to participate, please read the consent form below and indicate your willingness by completing the doodle poll, linked at the end of the consent form

Thank you so much for your time, if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me via email at eborst@lockhaven.edu or phone at 570-484-2249. This study has been approved by the WCU IRB, protocol FY2021-226.

Thank you,

Sincerely,

Emmy

CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUPS

Project Title: Why Students Choose a Rural State-Owned Institution of Higher Education

Investigator(s): Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti; Dr. Mark Davis

Project Overview:

Participation in this research project is voluntary and is being done by Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti as part of her Doctoral Dissertation to provide information about why students choose to attend a specific institution of Higher Education, in this case, a small rural state-owned institution. The researcher would like to provide information to better recruit students in the future.

Participants will learn, through their participation, about research projects utilizing focus groups. Additionally, participants may aid in growing enrollment at Lock Haven University (LHU) which could add future opportunities and activities at the institution for students. The research may provide administrators and admissions counselors useful information to use for their future recruitment efforts. Additionally, faculty and staff at LHU may be better informed to provide additional support to current students.

If you would like to take part, West Chester University requires that you agree to this consent form.

You may ask Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti any questions to help you understand this study. If you don't want to be a part of this study, it won't affect any services from Lock Haven University or your student standing. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop being a part of the study at any time.

19. What is the purpose of this study?

- provide information about why students choose to attend a specific institution of Higher Education, in this case, a small rural state-owned institution. The researcher would like to provide information to better recruit students in the future

20. If you decide to be a part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- take a short questionnaire (2-5minutes) that will collect demographic information such as age, gender, and hometown.
- take part in a focus group (90minutes) of 5-7 students.
- This study will take about 95 minutes of your time.

21. Are there any experimental medical treatments?

- No

22. Is there any risk to me?

- None

23. Is there any benefit to me?

- Benefits to you may include: Participants will learn through participation about research projects utilizing focus groups. Additionally, participants may aid in

growing enrollment for the institution which could add future opportunities and activities at LHU for the participants to utilize

- Other benefits may include: The research may provide administrators and admissions counselors useful information to use for their future recruitment efforts. Additionally, faculty and staff at LHU may be better informed to provide additional support to current students.

24. How will you protect my privacy?

- The session will be recorded.
- The focus group sessions will be both audio and video recorded in order for the researcher to accurately identify speaker for transcription purposes.
- Your records (consent forms, questionnaire, focus group responses, etc) will be private. Only Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti, Dr. Mark Davis, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.
- Your name will **not** be used in any reports.
- Records will be stored:
 - Password Protected File/Computer
- The researcher will not include any identifiable information in transcriptions, dissertation write-up, or any professional presentations. The researcher will use pseudonyms for participants throughout transcriptions, dissertation write-up, and professional presentations.
- Records will be destroyed Three Years After Study Completion.

25. Do I get paid to take part in this study?

- The first 20 participants will receive a \$10 Starbucks gift card.

26. Who do I contact in case of research related injury?

- For any questions with this study, contact:
 - **Primary Investigator:** Emmalyn (Emmy Borst) Conti at 570-484-2249 or eborst@lockhaven.edu
 - **Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Mark Davis at 610-436-2017 or mdavis2@wcupa.edu

27. What will you do with my Identifiable Information?

- Your information will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the West Chester University of Pennsylvania Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 610-436-3557.

I have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I believe that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

I understand that if I click on the link below and participate in the focus group, I am indicating my agreement to participate based on reading and understanding this form.

- Based on the information above, I agree to participate in this study. [Click Here to Complete the Doodle Poll with your availability](#)

If you do not wish to participate in this study, please delete this email

Appendix E

Focus Group Questioning Route

Opening: Please tell us your name (or the pseudonym you chose during the pre-focus group questionnaire), major, and what you are most excited about for college.

Introduction: What are some of the things you remember about starting the college application process.

- a. Did anyone give you suggestions
- b. What were some of the things you thought about
- c. Was anything particularly important to you during this time

Transition: How did you first learn about Lock Haven?

- a. Did you visit LHU? When was the first visit?
- b. Did anyone you know attend LHU?

Key: How did you decide which schools to apply to?

- a. Did anyone help you
- b. What was most important in the decision to apply
- c. Were there other factors that impacted where you applied
- d. Did you have a preference list to attend once you applied

Once you had your list of accepted schools, what did you do?

- a. Did you already know where you wanted to attend
- b. If yes, how did you know
- c. Was there a comparison? What was that based on

What were the top considerations for you when deciding where to attend?

Hoping for each participant to provide 3-5

Were there considerations that made the process of deciding difficult?

- a. Were there barriers to your decision of where to attend?

What specifically about LHU made you decide to attend here?

Was the choice to attend LHU ultimately yours or did someone else make the decision for you?

Ending: If college was completely free and you were automatically accepted to every school, where would you choose to attend and why?

The application and decision process can be stressful and time consuming, can you think of anything that would make it less stressful and easier for prospective students?

Appendix F
Code Book

Parent Codes	Sub-Codes	Times used in Focus Group 1	Times used in Focus Group 2	Times used in Focus Group 3	Times used in Focus Group 4
Academics		1	0	0	1
	class size/ ratio	5	4	4	5
	faculty approachable and know you or try	4	5	5	2
	program/major	15	12	15	8
	reputation	8	1	7	5
Affordability		0	1	0	0
	aid	0	0	2	2
	low cost	1	4	2	1
	affordability	11	0	4	0
	cost	0	3	2	0
	free services	1	0	1	0
	no loans or aid	0	0	3	0
	not getting debt was so important	0	2	1	3
	price	3	2	0	0
	scholarship	0	2	1	0
	tuition	0	1	2	0
Campus Visits		6	5	6	5
Communication		4	0	0	0
	admissions	13	3	3	1
	cards, etc	6	0	0	0
	ease of application	7	4	1	5
	email	4	0	0	0

	fast responses	21	0	1	0
	friendly and sweet	15	1	0	1
	text	1	0	0	0
	used names, personal communication	8	0	0	0
	website is easy to use	4	0	0	0
Community		7	2	1	1
	atmosphere (comfortable)	9	2	4	0
	safety of campus	1	0	0	6
	extracurriculars	3	2	14	2
	felt like home	1	1	2	3
	food	0	3	0	0
	look of the campus/size/walkability	6	6	11	3
	nice people	12	3	5	7
	not party school	1	0	0	3
	part of the family	0	0	4	0
	people on campus care about you	28	1	3	1
	pet on campus	0	1	0	0
	size of school	2	1	3	5
Current Students or Alumni		6	3	0	0

	alumni or current students	1	4	6	1
Distance from home		2	2	0	3
	close to home	6	6	3	2
	out of hometown	6	3	2	0
	within a few hours of home	5	2	7	0
Help on Campus		1	2	1	0
	disability services	0	2	0	0
	help I needed	0	0	1	0
	open door offices	4	0	0	0
	success center	0	0	2	0
	tutoring	3	4	1	0
Parents/Supporters		0	1	2	0
	1st gen	0	0	2	2
	friends	0	1	0	0
	parents	6	2	4	2
Getting a job after school		3	0	2	0
	career	1	1	0	0

