

5-25-2012

An Exploration of College-Related Memorable Messages

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AN EXPLORATION OF COLLEGE-RELATED MEMORABLE MESSAGES

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Communication Graduate Program
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Ashley Yvonne Miller

May 2012

AN EXPLORTION OF COLLEGE-RELATED MEMORABLE MESSAGES

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without the help of several individuals who provided guidance, mentorship, moral support, and encouragement. First and foremost, my utmost gratitude to Dr. Jennifer Mize Smith, my committee chair, who diligently worked many hours over the past year, and continuously challenged me to further enhance my academic competence. Without her guidance and encouragement, it would have been impossible to successfully complete this thesis. In addition, I am incredibly appreciative of my committee members, Dr. Blair Thompson and Dr. Holly Payne; their insight, dedication, and valuable feedback helped me maintain a high academic standard of research and writing.

Also, I am indebted to the participants who voluntarily took time out of their life to offer their personal experiences for this project. I would like to show my gratitude to my parents, Roger and Harriet, who provided moral support and encouragement throughout the processes of constructing and completing the thesis. Their encouraging words of wisdom helped keep me grounded along the way. Finally, I offer my gratefulness to my friends who offered positive encouragement when I needed it most.

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AN EXPLORATION OF COLLEGE-RELATED MEMORABLE MESSAGES

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May 2012

77 pages

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This research explored how memorable messages and formal (official) university messages work together to inform and influence students' college choices. Recognizing the ways in which university-constructed and other memorable messages influence students' choice of college could potentially help colleges improve their recruitment messages and distinguish themselves from other institutions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to obtain data from the participants, and the data were analyzed through a thematic, constant comparative method. Within the context of higher education, findings revealed students' perceptions of memorable college-related messages, the sources of memorable college-related messages, the characteristics that increase the likelihood that students will recall a college-related message, and the extent to which college-related messages influenced students' choice of college. This study extends the exploration of the memorable message construct and provides practical implications for university admission offices and their student recruitment efforts.

Key words: Memorable Messages; University Recruitment; Higher Education

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

An Exploration of College-Related Memorable Messages

A typical high school senior applies to various universities and anxiously awaits the arrival of college acceptance letters. According to the US Census Bureau (2008), approximately 17 million Americans attend college every year which is an “experience that can affect nearly every aspect of an individual’s life...” (Nazione et al., 2011, p. 123). Students tend to put emphasis on the idea college is the only way to live a successful life. Thompson (2011) stated, “Many bright students have told me with conviction that getting into a ‘good’ college is the key to a good job and a good life” (p. 84). College is a new experience for high school seniors, and students rely on messages from universities to provide them adequate information about the campus before making a decision on which college to choose.

Not only do students rely on messages from universities, they rely on high school educators and other sources to provide them necessary information about college. Parents, friends, family, and media are all sources for college information (Goff, Patino, & Jackson, 2004). In addition, “Teachers can help students think about issues like learning styles and offer opinions about the differences among colleges...” (Thompson, 2011, p. 86). Educators, counselors, and administrators must know the appropriate college information to prepare students for college and to help the students make those difficult college decisions. University admission offices also rely on high school educators, counselors, and administrators as they strive to reach prospective high school students through college fairs, campus visits, passing out flyers, and other forms of student recruitment.

College admission counselors know they have to recruit to meet the university's student quota. Universities want to stay competitive with other universities, and maintaining and increasing enrollment numbers is one way to stay competitive. Large universities spend more than \$100,000 dollars on mailing college information to high school students (Gose, 2000). In addition to direct mail, universities send information through "e-mail, the Web, telemarketing, previews, and on-campus recruiting events" (Hossler, 1999, p. 18). High school students, particularly those who rank academically in the upper percentiles of their class, are ideal target markets and may receive vast amounts of information from various institutions. Therefore, it is important for college admission offices to try their best to offer memorable messages and stand apart from their competitors.

Memorable messages are messages that individuals remember over time and that influence their lives in some way (Stohl, 1986). The importance of memorable messages has been studied in various contexts, including breast cancer (e.g., Smith et al., 2009); gender socialization (e.g., Medved, Brogan, McClanahan, Moriss, & Shepherd, 2006); and organizational socialization (e.g., Stohl, 1986). In general, "research examining memorable messages has found that the messages are prevalent and concern many topics" (Nazione et al., 2011, p. 125). More specifically for this study, Nazione et al. (2011) appears to be the only study that has examined memorable messages related to the context of college. Their study focused on memorable messages undergraduate students remembered and used to help them navigate through college. To date, little research has been conducted on the importance of memorable messages in college recruitment, particularly from first year honor college students' perspectives. This kind of information

is pertinent and applicable for university admission offices to know during their recruitment process.

In short, high school students are a university's prime target market, and appealing messages that students will remember as they make important college choices may be critical to a university's recruitment success. As higher educational institutions strive to maintain and even increase enrollment, it is likely that high school students, particularly those who excel academically, will be recruited heavily, receiving multiple messages from multiple institutions. Recognizing how influential university memorable messages are in students' choice of college could potentially help colleges revamp their recruitment messages and take the university to the next level. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how memorable messages and formal (official) university messages work together to inform and influence students' college choices. Exploring the perspectives of first-year college honor students increased the likelihood that students would have received university recruitment messages and also ensured that sufficient time had passed for the messages they remembered to be considered as memorable.

This research makes both theoretical and pragmatic contributions. Theoretically, this study adds to the literature on memorable messages by illuminating the context of higher education, which to date, has been underexplored. More practically and equally important, this research provides valuable information for university admission counselors as they create effective recruitment materials for prospective students.

This research project is composed of five chapters. This chapter has provided an introduction and rationale for exploring the role of memorable messages in the college recruitment of first-year college honor students. Chapter 2 offers a review of extant

literature, particularly in the areas of socialization towards college, memorable messages, and college admission recruitment. Chapter 3 explains the research design and methodology. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, including themes and data clips that foreground the voices of participants. Finally, Chapter 5 concludes with a discussion of the findings, including implications for research and practice, as well as potential limitations and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins with a review of the literature related to socialization toward college. Next, it provides an overview of memorable messages and the various contexts in which they have been studied. Finally, it focuses on the college recruitment process, including the channels and messages often used. The research questions grew out of an interest in what kinds of messages that students pay attention to and retain as they made important college choices.

Socialization Toward College

Starting from a young age, children who watch television are exposed to commercials providing information about colleges and higher education. In addition, students learn about college and what to expect from a variety of other sources (Goff et al., 2004; and Bell et al., 2009). Not only are the sources of information important, but how the information is communicated is essential. Goff et al. (2004) stated, “Effective communication with potential students is of vital importance to colleges and universities” (p.796). With students learning about college through a variety of sources, it is essential the sources communicate messages accurately.

Anticipatory socialization. Anticipatory socialization has traditionally been researched in the contexts of work, careers, and organizations (Hoffner, Levine, & Toohey, 2008; Jablin, 1986; Modaff & DeWine, 2002; and Taylor & Kent, 2010). Anticipatory socialization is when individuals “...form expectations regarding particular occupations and what it would be like to be a member of a particular organization” (Modaff & DeWine, 2002, p. 145). Jablin (1986) stated, “as part of this conditioning ,

most of us have developed, prior to entering any particular organization, a set of expectations and beliefs concerning how people communicate in particular occupations and informal and formal work settings” (p. 734). During vocational anticipatory socialization, individuals are gathering information from their family, media, peers, and personal experiences (Hoffner et al., 2008; Jablin, 1986; and Taylor & Kent, 2010) to weigh important decisions in determining their future occupation.

Past research suggests anticipatory socialization provides values and beliefs toward careers an individual would want in the future; however, most careers require a college degree which leads to the notion that parents help influence the value of education and career paths (Hoffner et al., 2008). Schoon and Parson (2002) found “young people’s career aspirations are important to consider, because they can help motivate educational attainment and contribute to the achievement of successful careers” (as cited in Hoffner et al., 2008, p. 284). In the same way socialization occurs in young adolescences about career paths, individuals also become socialized to the importance of obtaining a college degree. The socialization toward the importance of college stems from the various sources from which adolescences receive college-related information.

Student sources of college information. Students gather information from important sources that socializes and influences them to attend college (Ashburn, 2007; Bell, Rowan-Kneyon & Perna, 2009; & Goff, Patino, & Jackson 2004), but there has been little research conducted on how university recruitment messages specifically socialize or influence students to the particular college they choose. A notable exception is Chapman’s (1981) article which reviews research on what influences students’ when choosing a college such as family background, cost, location, experience factors, as well

as "...printed recruitment literature on student's college choice" (p. 500). While Chapman provided an overview of literature, this study obtains current students' perspective on the influence of college admission recruitment messages to attend a university.

Chapman (1981) stated three external factors help influence college careers: "(1) the influence of significant persons; (2) the fixed characteristics of the institution; and (3) the institution's own efforts to communicate with prospective students" (p. 492). Antcil's (2008) higher education report applied the elaboration likelihood model (ELM) to Chapman's findings. Antcil characterized the central route as "considerable elaboration that occurs when individuals focus on the central features of the message, issue, or idea," then added "the peripheral route involves a quick examination of the product and a focus on simple cues about whether or not to cognitively elaborate on the message and accept or reject it" (p. 14). Antcil claimed applying the peripheral route explains why universities promote highlights of the "college experience that have little to do with the process of learning itself," and further explained "the appeal is peripheral, not central because the central route or message is too similar across institutions" (p. 15). Antcil suggested the peripheral route is applied over the central route because the highlights help make the universities stand apart from other universities.

Other research reiterates the influence of significant persons (i.e. parents, teachers, friends) (Bell et al., 2009; Goff, et al., 2004). Parents discussing college with their children influences and socializes adolescences into the idea they must attend college to help further their career. Alessio (2006) found when talking with students, they believe "... having a degree will probably mean that you won't be stuck forever in a job

you hate” (p. 69). This idea indicates students from a young age have been socialized to the idea college education means better job potentials.

In addition, high school teachers and counselors provide substantial information to students about college (Bell et al., 2009). Students use high school teachers as another source of information on attending colleges. The primary sources that socialize or influence adolescents towards the value of higher education should effectively communicate these values and beliefs, especially when adolescents are reaching the point of making the critical decision to attend college.

Communicating with students about college. Although high school counselors may be a natural resource for students when it comes to getting informed about and prepared for college, teachers also provide valuable assistance. Kirst and Venezia (2004) found that “teachers in both upper and lower high school tracks often took a greater role in helping students prepare for college than counselors did...” (as cited in Kirst, 2004, p. 53). Therefore, it is important that teachers, parents, and counselors all “receive high-quality information about secondary school courses that will help prepare students for college level standards” (Kirst, 2004, p. 530). Educators must stress the importance of taking challenging course loads in high school to prepare the students for the college classroom (Kirst, 2004).

In addition to preparing students academically for college, educators should know and share pertinent information about universities because parents may not always provide that information. Thompson (2011) states, “In daily conversations with students, teachers can play an extremely important role in bringing perspective to the college search process” (p. 86). Teachers help students think about the differences among the

universities and which university will benefit them more. Typically, around the time when students are making college-related decisions, parents start to feel a little off balance with the thought of their child leaving home. Thompson (2011) claimed during this uncertain time, “about 40 percent of students say that their parents’ behavior has, indeed, changed, sometimes alarmingly” (p. 84). Parents communicate with their children about college but at the same time, are worried if they have prepared their children enough to be on their own. While parents and students are worried about finding the right and best college, it is important educators maintain and communicate the positive perspective that “it’s about a child successfully leaving the family and beginning young adulthood” (Thompson, 2011, p. 86).

Knowing how to communicate with high school students is essential in understanding how to provide them with the best learning atmosphere. A positive learning environment helps put students at ease to discuss personal information with educators. Most importantly, having strong student-teacher relationships can lead to students feeling comfortable to discuss college decisions with educators, especially if the educators are the main source of college information. The messages that teachers and counselors send to students about the opportunities to continue their education may be life altering for students. Therefore, it is important to understand what makes a message memorable to students and its potential influence on the students’ choice of college.

Memorable Messages

People send and receive numerous messages every day, some of which are retained while others are quickly forgotten. Obviously, memorable messages have a much better chance of affecting a person’s thoughts or behaviors. According to Stohl

(1986), “there are only two necessary characteristics of a memorable message- an individual remembers the message for a long period of time and perceives the message had a major influence on the course of his or her life” (p. 232). In a seminal study of memorable messages, Knapp, Stohl, and Reardon (1981) delineated more specific characteristics found in many memorable messages, including that memorable messages regarded important issues and were brief.

Thirty years later, Nazione and colleagues (2011) still utilized Knapp et al.’s findings and surmised that memorable messages are characterized as “brief and orally delivered, personally involving and important to the recipient, apply to a variety of contexts, delivered when the recipient is receptive, and have a source that is respected and/or of higher status” (pp. 125-126). Essentially, memorable messages are brief messages individuals retain that have significant meaning to their lives. The only condition that distinguishes memorable messages from everyday messages “is the retrospective judgment by the individual that the message was/is significant and can be precisely recalled” (Stohl, 1986, p. 234). There have been numerous studies about memorable messages including those that focus on organizational and newcomer socialization (e.g., Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Stohl, 1986), self-assessment of behavior (e.g., Smith & Ellis, 2001), high school coaches’ memorable messages (e.g., Kassing & Pappas, 2007), and navigating college life (e.g., Nazione et al., 2011).

Socialization studies. Memorable messages may play an important role in the socialization process, particularly as organizations try to help new members fit into their new environment. Stohl (1986) examined the structure, form, and nature of the content and context of memorable messages transmitted within an organizational setting. Stohl

postulated 15 hypotheses in regard to memorable messages and organizational socialization. The main idea of the hypotheses was that memorable messages are more role-oriented and come during the encounter phase from a source who has worked in the organization longer than the employee who receives the message. Stohl conducted 42 interviews which included general questions about the company, one's impressions, and hopes for the future.

Stohl (1986) found the memorable messages associated with socialization had four main characteristics: messages provide information regarding norms, values, expectations, rules, requirements and rationality; the circumstances surrounding the message had a relationship with the message; who gives the message to whom affects the memorable message (i.e., an insider vs. another newcomer); and the messages of higher level staff have more of an effect on the socialization messages. Essentially, the study found "memorable messages provide individuals with a sense of shared reality" (Stohl, p. 248). Stohl also suggested that more messages need to be collected before one can truly understand the nature of memorable messages and the role they play in organizational socialization.

Stohl's (1986) line of research was extended when Barge and Schlueter (2004) conducted a quantitative study on memorable messages and newcomer socialization. The purpose of their study was to "explore what kinds of messages newcomers attune to during organizational entry and how this influences the way they construct their relationship with an organization" (p. 234). Barge and Schlueter focused on the encounter stage of the newcomer socialization, similar to Stohl's (1986) study; however, Barge and Schlueter's research questions looked more specifically at the functions the memorable

messages played in newcomers' socialization, the contextual characteristics of memorable messages, and the relationships between socialization tactics, message content, and functions. The authors used a self-administered survey to collect data from organizational newcomers using a network sampling technique.

Barge and Schlueter (2004) came to three main conclusions. First, organizational members struggle with the internal conflict of fitting into the organization and maintaining individualism. Second, the authors found "the discourse of socialization associated with organizational entry emphasizes informal face-to-face communication when constructing individual-organizational relationships" (p. 250). This is similar to Stohl's (1986) finding that memorable messages were given more in private interpersonal settings. Third, the authors concluded that the majority of socialization discourse was positive messages.

The previous studies focused on memorable messages and organizational socialization; however, there are other forms of socialization. Medved, Brogan, McClanahan, Morris, and Shepherd's (2006) research focused on the context of family and how family might use memorable messages to socialize one about work. More specifically, the purpose of the study was to "explore the nature of socializing communication between parents and young adults regarding possible intersections between work and personal life" (Medved et al., 2006, p. 162). The research questions centered on what meanings were reflected in memorable messages provided by parents in regard to work, family, and balance. The authors also questioned if the memorable messages received were different between genders.

Medved and colleagues (2006) used Heisler's (2000) framework to provide and explain three separate messages in "regard to the role the family should play in life, the role that work should play in life, and the best way to balance work and family" (p. 167). The findings suggest the majority of messages were in reference to finding work they enjoyed, and work would lead to a happier life. In addition, female and males received similar memorable messages about the role of work and family life. One of the more interesting findings in this study was men were told to put family first, whereas in the past, men were supposed to put their career first (Medved et al., 2004).

All of these studies focus on socialization in some context. One of the major differences was that Medved et al. (2006) explored memorable messages in an individual's early stage of life, whereas the other two studies examined memorable messages during the encounter phase of an organization. In comparison, all three studies found memorable messages do affect an individual's socialization to work, whether the source of the message is family or an organization itself. These studies demonstrated the variety of contexts in which memorable messages have been studied. Similar to the way memorable messages socialize one toward work, they may also socialize one toward college, yet no studies have specifically focused on memorable messages regarding college recruitment.

Behavior studies. While memorable messages have been explored in relation to work, other scholars have examined the effects of memorable messages on more general kinds of behavior. For example, Smith and Ellis (2001) employed a Control Theory perspective to explore "how memorable message could serve as part of the foundation for personal standards and morals" (p. 154). The authors used the Control Theory as a

framework to predict behavioral outcomes from memorable messages. Specifically, the authors examined how memorable messages guide participants' behavior; the source of the message, type of memorable message, and the valance of the behavior for each category of memorable message; and, the relationship between types of memorable messages and types of behaviors.

Smith and Ellis (2001) administrated a survey about behaviors and memorable messages to more than 200 undergraduate. The specific behavior categories were as follows: unlawful activity, moral activity, personal choices, substance abuse, aggressive behavior, and kind, calm, helpful considerate behavior. The overall finding was “memorable messages were recalled in almost every instance when behavior was self-assessed,” and “extreme behaviors might exhibit more connection to memorable messages...” (p. 165).

While the previous study focused on general kinds of behavior, Heisler and Ellis (2008) narrowed their research focus to motherhood and the construction of “mommy identity” through memorable messages and face negotiation. The authors explored past messages women received in reference to motherhood and who the sources were that provided those messages. In addition, the authors asked if mothers felt the need to construct a good mother face and how they demonstrated they are good mothers. Similar to Smith and Ellis (2001), Heisler and Ellis utilized an open-ended survey. The second part of the questionnaire identified participants' beliefs about motherhood, face needs and behaviors.

Heisler and Ellis (2008) found that participants could recall messages about motherhood specifically relating to the following: motherhood is the main priority,

motherhood requires certain characteristics and behaviors, motherhood is unidimensional, and motherhood is dialectic. The main source of memorable messages came from family members and/or their own mother. The memorable messages resulted in beliefs about how mothers should behave. These findings correlate with Smith and Ellis's (2001) findings where individuals self-assessed their behavior through memorable messages. In this study, mothers' behaviors were affected by particular messages they received and remembered.

Other scholars have also examined the behavioral effects of memorable messages on a particular group of people. Smith et al. (2009) focused on health communication and the ways in which memorable messages about breast cancer might influence women's behaviors related to prevention and detection. Smith and colleagues (2009) found four main categories associated with memorable message: detection, awareness, treatment, and prevention. The primary sources of memorable messages were healthcare professionals, media sources, friends, and family. Detection was the most common type of memorable message in relation to breast cancer, and the authors found the messages affected participants' behavior by influencing them to check for breast cancer symptoms.

The behavioral effects of memorable messages have also been explored in the context of higher education. Nazione et al. (2011) investigated "how college students utilized memorable messages to help them navigate through their college experiences and how their experiences relate to control theory's negative feedback loop" (p. 124). Similar to Smith and Ellis's (2001) use of Control Theory as a theoretical framework, Nazione et al. also explored the role of the negative feedback loop in Control Theory and the ways in which it applied to the college environment.

More specifically, Nazione and colleagues (2011) used qualitative methods to look at types and sources of memorable messages, how memorable messages have helped students, and how students enact memorable messages. College students reported that “memorable messages suggested ways to resolve challenges, and positive outcomes from the actual resolution of the challenge as they navigated college life” (Nazione et al., p. 137). The socialization and behavior studies both indicate memorable messages affect individuals in important ways. In the socialization studies, memorable messages help individuals learn about and understand work, particularly family, work, and gender roles, and how to adjust to and interact as organizational newcomers. The behavior studies illustrated how individuals remember a specific message and self-assess what their behaviors should be according to those messages. Overall, the studies demonstrate the importance of memorable messages and how they affect peoples’ behaviors, shape beliefs, and influence major life decisions. The choice to pursue higher education is perhaps one of the most important decisions an individual may make. If memorable messages often influence behaviors, then it is important to understand the role of memorable messages in influencing students to attend college.

College Admission Recruitment

Among the most important decisions a person makes are those related to education. College admission offices gear up each fall to reach out to high school seniors through flyers, pamphlets, emails, and/or high school college fairs (Hossler, 1999). College admission offices have a significant amount of pressure on them to maintain and increase enrollment numbers, as well as to attract the best students. As more and different educational opportunities arise, it is important for college admission offices to not only

reach prospective students, but also leave a lasting impression that will differentiate their institution from competitors.

Importance of recruiting. It is important for colleges to establish a strong recruitment plan to meet their enrollment goal with quality students. According to Hossler (1999), “Research and a strong marketing plan are central to successful admissions recruiting because they enable the admissions staff to reach prospective students when they are ready to make decisions about colleges” (pp. 15-16). Universities with strong recruitment messages receive enough quality applicants; however, if recruitment efforts are weak, the university could struggle to attract the desired number and caliber of applicants. Also, application numbers are not as predictable as they once were, and enrollment numbers are not as reliable. Consequently, university presidents, governing boards, and faculty members carefully watch the number of applicants who are accepted to ensure the university is meeting enrollment numbers (Hoover, 2011).

Particularly in a time of an unstable economy, colleges and universities are trying to maintain their enrollment numbers (Black, 2004). For example, admission offices are increasingly reaching out to transfer students and foreign students because applicants and enrollment numbers are becoming such an issue (Hoover, 2008). Patrick J. O’Connor, Director of College Counseling at the Roeper School in Michigan said, “It’s all about uncertainty; colleges want to be certain that they won’t have empty beds, and students want to be certain that they have someplace to be next fall. The challenge is to balance those sometimes competing interests” (as cited in Hoover & Supiano, 2010, p. A18). With this being said, it is important for admission offices to use the best channels and messages to recruit new students, especially during economically challenging times.

Channels of recruiting. There are a variety of ways college admission offices distribute messages to potential students. University websites provide an abundant amount of information for prospective students and parents (Foster, 2003). Not only is the website a great electronic format for students to receive messages, so is email. Universities can use email to send updates to prospective students (Gose, 2000). In addition, emails can direct high school students to a particular section of the university website based on the interests previously expressed by students. Another way of using email is to send several emails about the university in a short time frame which helps implant the university's name into the prospective student (Hoover, 2010a). Also, universities are now simply updating their Facebook and twitter pages as a source of recruitment information (Hoover, 2010a).

Aside from electronic means of recruiting potential students, universities can use more old fashioned techniques. For example, Hoover (2010a) discussed how a university used a slogan on a t-shirt as a way to recruit students. Also, the use of direct mail (Hossler, 1999), and a recruitment pamphlet and/or booklet (Hoover, 2010) are other ways to communicate information about the university. Despite the widespread use of electronic media, printed materials are still important tools in the recruitment process.

In addition to electronic and print channels of communicating, college admission offices also utilize their alumni as a way of distributing information about the university. Alumni can serve as passionate advocates for the university; however, the benefit of using alumni depends on how well trained the alumni are on the type of information to disclose (Fogg, 2008).

Similarly, current college students are also a beneficial source when spreading information about universities. For instance, some college admission offices will use a team of students to call (telemarketing) prospective students as a way to personalize their recruitment efforts (Hossler, 1999). This kind of one-on-one contact assists universities in knowing if the prospective students want to receive more information about the university. Another way students help promote the university is providing a campus tour to interested high school students and their parents. During these tours, professors and/or other faculty may stop to provide specific academic information to the students.

Of course, university admission counselors are also key individuals who provide rich information to prospective students. Admission representatives spend much of their time traveling to various high schools near and far to promote their university (Hoover, 2008). Throughout their travels, admission counselors often develop relationships with some of the students, which make the students feel they are personally wanted by a particular university.

In short, universities employ several types of channels to promote and spread information about their institutions. According to Abrahamson and Hossler (1990), student recruitment includes a range of activities, including "print publications, advertising publications, college generated publications, network marketing (marketing to high school counselors, high school faculty, alumni, and parents), direct mail, videotapes, radio and television, telemarketing, marketing in the field (high school visits, college fairs, and hotel programs), and on-campus programming activities" (as cited in Hossler, 1999, pp. 18-19). Some colleges utilize one channel more than the other, but utilizing all channels can help reach a larger pool of potential applicants.

Types of messages. The types of messages colleges send to prospective students can influence students' decisions about attending college, and if so, where. Universities tend to provide similar types of messages, which is why "high-school students often say that all college recruitment pitches sound alike" (Donehower, 2003, p. B16). Consequently, university admission offices are trying to provide personal messages through emails and/or direct mail in an attempt to separate their university from others. Yale University's Dean of Undergraduate Admissions describes the kinds of messages they send: "Our first priority," he claims, "is to send a clear message far and wide that we are open to students of great promise from every conceivable background" (as cited in Hoover, 2010b). Following a student expressing interest in a college or university, admission counselors and/or students may send personalized note cards to students. These personal note cards can thank the students for their time, make reference to looking forward to seeing them again, and/or specially mentioning an interest the student had expressed, all of which demonstrate that the university is interested in the student's interests.

Because many families worry about finances and paying for college, admission counselors often reference or send materials discussing financial aid and ways to pay for tuition (Hoover & Supiano, 2009). In addition, students want to know about academic programs, so admission counselors may bring faculty along while they travel to discuss the curriculum, as well as mentoring and tutoring programs.

Other types of university messages focus on places and activities that might be of interest to potential students. Foster (2003) explored university websites and found that a "virtual tour" might highlight important campus buildings and popular places to eat

study, work out, and hang out. Still other types of messages provide information about extracurricular activities, athletic programs, special events, and campus traditions in which new students might enjoy participating.

Although many universities might disseminate similar types of messages, Hoover (2010a) contends that universities must state how they are different and make their messages stand apart from other institutions. One way to differentiate is to develop a different theme of the messages being distributed. For example, Maricopa Community College sends messages that imply the university wants to develop a partnership with the students, while North Carolina Central University sends messages that give a positive image of their history (Black, 2004). The bottom line is that some of the best types of messages are those that are personalized and make the student believe there is a unique relationship in the works.

Most would argue that admission recruitment is imperative to universities and potential students. Admission recruitment messages sent to perspective students can influence their decisions on which university to attend. Universities need successful recruitment plans to meet their enrollment numbers and maintain a prestigious university. Both the channels used to send messages and the types of messages sent likely play a role in students' perceptions of the university. If a university is to be competitive in recruiting students, messages must be memorable.

Summary

In summary, this chapter has reviewed relevant literature regarding the socialization of important values, adolescences being socialized and influenced to attend college from valuable sources, high school student communication, memorable messages,

and college recruitment. Understanding ways to communicate with high school students and how to successfully discuss college decisions can help college admission offices know what types of messages to send in their recruitment efforts. University admission recruitment messages should be memorable in order to stand apart from other universities. High school seniors have received a variety of information about colleges through numerous channels, but memorable messages from universities can help them make a crucial decision in their life.

To date, there have been numerous studies about communication with high school students and a host of other research exploring memorable messages in numerous contexts. Additionally, scholars have also documented the importance of admission recruitment, including types and channels of recruitment messages. Surprisingly, there have not been any studies connecting these three areas of research.

This study fills that gap in the literature by exploring how memorable messages and formal university messages work together to inform and influence students' college choices. This study extended communication research of memorable messages by focusing on the context of higher education and privileging the voices of those most targeted by recruitment messages. More specifically, this study posited the following research questions:

RQ1: From a student's perspective, what memorable messages do students recall about college?

RQ2: From a student's perspective, what and/or who are the sources of the memorable messages about college?

RQ3: From a student's perspective, what characteristics increase the likelihood that students will recall a college-related message?

RQ4: From a student's perspective, how, if at all, do college-related messages influence their choice of college?

The next chapter describes how qualitative methods were used to explore these questions among second semester college freshman who most likely received university recruitment messages.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methods and procedures used to conduct this research project. First, it provides a rationale for a qualitative approach. Second, it describes the participants. Third, it explains how data were collected and analyzed. Finally, it discloses the role as the researcher and reflections on the research process.

Rationale for a Qualitative Approach

A qualitative approach was essential for this research because gaining the college freshman students' in-depth perspectives about college recruitment messages provided a more thorough account of what they found to be memorable. A major goal of a qualitative study is to provide understanding in as rich and detailed a manner as possible (Baxter & Babbie, 2003). Also, Baxter and Babbie (2003) indicated in an interpretive study, the researcher's purpose is to study the participants' experience through their eyes because meaning can be different for different people. By utilizing qualitative methods, students were able to provide more detailed responses without the limitations of rating scales or preconceived categorical answers. That is, speaking and interacting directly with college freshmen gave them an opportunity to describe college messages in their own words and recall the kinds of messages they found to be most memorable and influential.

A subjective study provided the college freshmen students the ability to give their own specific examples, as they were not limited to picking "the best" option. Creswell (1998) described qualitative research as a useful research method to explore and understand a central phenomenon. This qualitative study explored the central

phenomenon of college admissions memorable messages from college freshmen students' perspective. Essentially, a qualitative method was preferred because it was "more likely to access multiple realities, human meanings, and interactions from insiders' perspective" (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p. 262).

Participants

This study foregrounds the perspective of first-year honor students and specifically, students who were in honors courses. Therefore, participants were recruited from a four-year university located in the Southern United States. A total of 10 first-year honor students participated in the study. Four were male and six were female. They ranged in age from 18-20 years old.

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, a technique utilized to find people who can best help understand the phenomena of interest (Schumacher & McMillan, 1993). In this case, first-year honor students were selected because they were likely to have received university recruitment messages, those messages may have been influential in their decision to attend the university, and sufficient time had elapsed since they received recruitment messages for them to recall those most memorable. These participants provided thick description of memorable messages which helped enrich understanding through extensive details (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Therefore, participants were purposefully recruited such that all met the following criteria: 1) second-semester freshman honor students, b) participating in the university Honors program, and c) at least 18 years of age.

Data Collection Procedures

Since the research design called for individual interviews, permission was sought from a human subjects review board, a process in which a campus committee reviews research studies for their potential harmful impact on subjects (or participants) (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After gaining expedited approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), data collection began in January 2012 and continued for approximately two weeks.

First, the instructor of a communication honors class was contacted through email for approval to email their students. The instructor sent an email explaining a researcher would contact them asking for their participation in a research study. Then, the researcher sent an email explaining the nature of the study and ensuring participant anonymity to second year college freshman students. Zero students replied by email saying they would voluntarily participate.

Next, an email was sent to 21 honor students varying among majors at the university to participate in the study and one student responded. This email explained the subject matter, interview process, and the potential to win 25 dollars cash for participating. No students responded to this email. Finally, two instructors of communication honor classes received an email asking permission to come speak to the classes in order to recruit volunteers; four students from each class volunteered. Last, snowball sampling occurred when participants referred two other individuals who possessed characteristics of the participant criteria. From the 10 participants, two students' names were drawn at random to win 25 dollars cash.

For the students' convenience, interviews took place in the researcher's private office. Before the interviews started, participants were given an overview of the study and research procedures and then asked to sign two copies of the informed consent document (see Appendix A for informed consent form), one for the researcher and one for the student. Interviews were semi-structured using an interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions and potential probes (see Appendix B for complete interview protocol). Most qualitative researchers "conduct semi-structured interviews by outlining questions in advance and improvising probing questions on the spot" (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p. 277).

First, the interview began with basic questions about students' interest in college, why they wanted to attend college, and when they knew they wanted to attend college to help build a rapport between the student and the researcher. According to Whyte (1982), "The first concern of the interviewer is to build rapport to establish a relationship in which people will feel comfortable and confident in talking with him [sic]" (p. 113). Then the interview continued with research questions and detailed questions to ask the participants. These questions asked students about the college-related messages they received in high school, specifically, what memorable messages they remembered, how they received the memorable messages, and how the college-related messages influenced their college choice. The interview protocol followed a "funnel format, proceeding from general to specific levels of inquiry" (Baxter & Babbie, 2003, p. 277). In addition, probing questions were used when the participants had difficulty in answering the original question. Overall, the interview protocol was used as a guide to ensure each area of questioning was covered with every participant. However, the semi-structured format

also allowed for a conversational style and flexibility to pursue interesting unanticipated questions as they arose during the interview.

Lindlof and Taylor (2002) stated, “Interview discourse must be recorded, of course and the choices are twofold: note taking or tape recording” (p. 187). Participant interviews were recorded in both forms; they were audio recorded, and handwritten notes were made during and after the interviews. Notes included interesting statements made by the participants, as well as the researcher’s analytical memos. The audio recorder captured the interview as it was exactly spoken (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Participants were made aware that they were being audio recorded and could see the tape recorder; in addition, they knew exactly when the recorder was started and stopped.

After each interview, audio files were uploaded onto a computer and were transcribed verbatim into a word-processing document; the researcher reviewed all transcripts for accuracy. Interviews ranged from 14 to 27 minutes, with an average of 19 nineteen minutes. The transcription generated a total of 95 pages of double-spaced text. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) suggest interviewing until data reaches saturation with repetitive notes and the “new data feed is fewer” (p. 224). Repetition in the data emerged after the seventh interview, and the new data feed was fewer after the seventh interview.

Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis began with the researcher trying to make sense of the data through “the process of labeling and breaking down (or decontextualizing) raw data and reconstituting them into patterns, themes, concepts, and propositions” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 210). First, the researcher reviewed all of the transcripts to gain a better understanding of the content and participant meaning. The interview data were analyzed

using the constant comparative method of open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After reading through the interviews once, the researcher reread and started open coding line by line, underlining important concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The unit of analysis included words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs that were relevant to the research questions of interest. Codes were assigned to the data in the left hand margin, including some in vivo codes that used the participants' own words (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

A total of 90 concepts were compiled into a word-processing document to formulate a master codebook. A numerical system was devised for the researcher to easily locate codes in the transcripts. Participant numbers (1-10) were followed by transcript page numbers, for example, 3:10 (participant 3, page 10). Participant numbers were later replaced by pseudonyms.

Once the codebook was established, concepts were compared and contrasted and then collapsed into larger categories. Organizing the data into categories reduced the data to a manageable amount. Baxter and Babbie (2003) stated, "It's just not possible to present the large amount of data typically acquired from naturalistic inquiry (e.g., observational notes, interview transcripts, and documents), so the data must be reduced to some manageable amount" (p. 280). Originally, the data were separated into 17 categories according to shared commonalities (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Categories were then reviewed, and the properties of each category were defined, which reduced to 14 categories.

Finally, after the categories were determined, axial coding was used to compare and contrast the categories which led to larger themes and subthemes. Five major themes

emerged across the data (e.g., *pragmatic and value-added messages*), with some themes including up to four subthemes (e.g., academic messages, student life). A theme was characterized by repetition, recurrence, and/or forcefulness (Owen, 1984). Transcripts were reviewed to find the best supporting quotes to illustrate each theme in the findings section. The themes offered a detailed description of the college recruitment memorable messages from the college freshmen students' perspective.

Verification Strategies

I used two verification strategies, thick description and peer reviews, to help reduce my biases. Thick description included providing a detailed account of the research procedures, as well as specific quotations from participants to support the findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Also, I debriefed two peers and used peer reviews to demonstrate the credibility of the themes. As part of the process, the peer reviewers read my transcripts, as well as read the master code list, open codes, and axial codes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). After studying the coding procedures and categories, the peer reviewers were asked to play devil's advocate to challenge my potential biases, explore meaning in the data, and clarify the bases for my interpretations. Ultimately, the two peers agreed with my final findings and explanations (see Appendix C for peer reviews).

The next chapter presents the findings of the study, including themes and data clips that focus on the voices of participants. In addition, the chapter demonstrates the forcefulness of each theme and subtheme.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This chapter provides the themes, subthemes, and data clips that foreground the participants' voices. Through a thorough analysis of the data collected, five overarching themes emerged: (a) pragmatic and value-added messages, (b) perceived influential adults, (c) university recruitment efforts, (d) message content and delivery, and (e) personal compatibility. The themes and subthemes were developed with the minimum requirement of half of the participants making reference to the particular subject matter. Theme one addresses research question one, themes two and three address research question two, theme four addresses research question three, and theme five addresses research question four (see Table 1 for summary of themes and sub-themes). The following section details the themes and subthemes discovered through the analysis with specific quotations from the participants supporting the findings.

Table 1

Summary of themes and sub-themes

RQs	Themes	Subthemes
What memorable messages do students recall about college?	1. Pragmatic and Value-added Messages	1. Academic Messages 2. Financial Information 3. Student Life
What and/or who are the sources of the memorable messages about college?	2. Perceived Informative Adults 3. University Recruitment Efforts	1. Parents 2. High School Educators 1. Electronic 2. Non-electronic 3. High School Visits 4. Tours
What characteristics increase recall of college-related messages?	4. Message Content and Delivery	1. Connects to a Personal Interest 2. Provides Visual Appeal 3. Comes from a Trusted Source 4. Arrives in a Timely Manner
How do college-related messages influence their choice of college?	5. Personal Compatibility	

Pragmatic and Value-added Messages

The theme of *pragmatic and value-added messages* emerged in response to what participants recalled as memorable college-related messages. Nine out of ten participants described pragmatic messages and seven out of ten participants recounted value-added messages. This theme captures two types of pragmatic messages, academic messages and financial information, while student life emerged as the primary value-added message. This theme offers what students remembered as the essential college-related messages and the messages that enhance the overall college experience.

Academic messages. A majority of participants described academic messages as part of the most memorable college-related messages. The academic messages refer to

messages students received about programs, departments, majors, studying abroad, and other topics specifically relating to academics. The participants discussed different types of information they remembered, particularly majors and areas of study. For instance, Michael described receiving information about a specific major, saying, “They {university} have a really good broadcast journalism program which I was interested in, and they have the honors college which I am currently in, so it was just kind of something to be challenging in and a respectable school in my major.” Michael mentioned particularly looking for messages related to broadcast journalism and academics that could challenge him. Similarly, Malinda remembered messages that demonstrated the “University had a particularly outstanding major and mention they have the number four researcher in the country.”

Several students discussed how they were interested in furthering their academics by studying abroad, so for them, those related messages were especially memorable. Jason said, “There are a lot of stories about study abroad; for example, Kathryn went to Ecuador and studied for a semester while completing a project there; the universities showed they have outreach programs.” Also, Michelle proclaimed study abroad had an impact on her decision when she insisted “whenever I was looking at [university], they were promoting study abroad a lot so that is one of the reasons why I chose to come here.” Academics are what universities strive to succeed in, and the previous quotations illustrate that academic related topics are indeed memorable messages. Although students did not recall university messages verbatim, academic programs and initiatives are clearly capturing their attention.

Financial information. Along with academics, financial information also provided pragmatic messages. In order to attend college, one must have a way to pay for tuition. Therefore, participants recalled messages about scholarships and cost of a higher education. David discussed messages on how much it would cost to attend college, so he remembered “scholarships, tuition, financial side of [attending college].” Likewise, Joe admitted, “The information that caught my eye was most of the scholarships.” Also, Nicole recalled receiving “A little card of information on how much everything would cost, along with scholarships” and reiterated the benefit of the costs being laid out for her. The costs associated with attending college were clearly important to these participants, as evidenced by the financial messages to which they paid attention and remembered several months later.

Student life. Participants found student life messages also notable. These messages highlight the non-academic characteristics of the institutions that add value to or enhance the overall college experience. Michelle reflected on student life messages when she expressed, “I liked how [the messages] talked about how on campus there are always activities to get involved in no matter what you’re interested in’ [universities] have groups for everything.” Then, David expressed specific student activities in the following statement, “Well, I received the brochure about Greek life from {university}; then usually somewhere within packets of material they sent us, there was information on intramural leagues, club leagues, or different club options that were on campus.” These messages showed a different aspect of college for the students and allowed them to see life outside the classroom. Also, Rachael emphasized how universities reiterated “our student life is really diverse” in messages she received. Student life messages

demonstrated ways to add value for the students' college experience while the pragmatic messages provided the basic information a student must know for college. Together the *pragmatic and value-added messages* give the students a full circle idea about college.

Perceived Influential Adults

Research question two explored the sources of memorable college-related messages. The theme of *perceived influential adults* points to the people to whom participants were paying the most attention when learning about their college choices. According to these participants, parents and high school educators helped provide valuable insight to adolescents during this critical time in their life. Nine out of ten participants attributed the most memorable college-related messages to parents and high school educators.

Parents. Parents advocated for their children to attend college, and their messages appeared to come across loud and clear. Several participants mentioned it felt more like it was expected for them to attend college, rather than college being a choice. For example, Jason voiced, "It was expected for me to go to college. It wasn't really like, 'maybe you should attend college;' it was more you have to go." David explained why he attended college, by responding, "First off, my parents definitely pushed me into it; so like, it felt like I had to do it." Likewise, Lauren learned from her parents that "school didn't end at high school; you had to go to college to get a degree." Joe shared a story about how his mother's parents did not talk about college, so he claimed "she pretty much instilled attending college into me." Despite parental messages often being indirect, perhaps even unspoken, the parents' initial influence to attend college was one of the participants'

primary sources of college-related messages. However, parents were not the only source of important college information.

High school educators. High school educators consist of guidance counselors and teachers who influence students. Students interact with high school educators on a daily basis by attending high school. Michelle discussed how helpful guidance counselors were in the push to attend college by explaining, “Guidance counselors really pushed college on us with the classes you could take and what opportunities are at college.” In addition, Megan recalled the guidance counselors having a college room for the high school students with a bin about three feet long full of information. According to Megan, “The bin had about every college in KY. We had a bin that would have manila folders in it filled with applications, information, brochures, and parent things- pretty much anything you could ever want the colleges to send our guidance counselors.”

Along with guidance counselors, teachers advocated for the students to attend college. Nicole noted, “Our teachers promoted us to go to college; they would tell us they went to the college and it was great.” In comparison to Jason, he claimed “Sometimes [teachers] asked about my acceptance, my English teacher especially who worked with me on college essays would ask ‘what do you need for these scholarships.’” Students appeared to appreciate educators asking what they could do to assist in their college decisions. They remembered their show of support and deemed high school educators, specifically counselors and teachers, as sources who provided them with college-related messages.

University Recruitment Efforts

University recruitment efforts were another source of salient college messages. Participants received college information from the following university recruitment efforts: (a) electronic, (b) non-electronic, (c) high school visits, and (d) university tours. The majority of participants recognized the university recruitment efforts as sources of memorable college messages. Based on participant responses, university recruitments provided more formal messages about college.

Electronic. All of the participants mentioned receiving electronic materials from universities. Electronic materials included emails sent to prospective students and students gathering information from the university websites. David expressed he would “Mainly look on the websites at scholarships, tuition, financial side of it.” In contrast, Rachael articulated “I looked at the academic information; I’d always go straight to the academic list and their majors.”

Also, several participants commented on receiving an abundance of emails from the universities. Jason explained, “I received application messages through the email because most of them said apply here, and had a link that went directly to admission then you click on the link and it goes to the PDF application.” Then, Lauren exclaimed, “The emails are more of like, ‘I am President of this college and I want to open up my campus for you to come visit the university.’” Given this generation’s dependence on technology, it is not surprising that electronic sources, websites and emails, from *university recruitment efforts* were important college-related information channels.

Non-electronic. According to all of the participants, non-electronic materials, including information packets and brochures, mailed from the university provided a

significant source of information. Nicole addressed various types of mail as sources of messages from universities. Nicole stated, “I received a big envelope that had a lot of information about the campus, for instance, dorm pamphlets, study abroad pamphlets, and the paper scholarship form you feel out.” In addition, Malinda claimed “they sent me brochures in the mail.”

Meanwhile, Michelle described the value-added messages she received, by summarizing, “[Universities] would send you a big book of pictures of students doing fun stuff, what all you could do on campus, and pictures of the dorms.” She then added, “I just like how it talked about how on campus there is always stuff to get involved in no matter what you’re interested in.” In contrast Lauren spoke of the pragmatic messages sent through non-electronic sources, by indicating, “Information in the mail would be more statistics and information that kind of highlighted the schools.” Although students remembered messages from electronic sources, they also appeared to retain a variety of messages from non-electronic sources. This suggests that, traditional print materials such as letters, pamphlets, brochures, flyers, postcards, or packets of information may still be important to a university recruitment effort.

High school visits. In addition to electronic and non-electronic message sources, university admission counselors from universities reach out to prospective students by visiting high schools and/or participating in college fairs. During the high school visits and college fairs, admission counselors engage in conversations about attending college and discussing the university they represent. Half of the participants recalled receiving information from admission counselors during the admission counselors’ high school visits. Megan explained how “admissions counselors came and talked to us in our library

like an open session,” while Nicole recounted how “admission counselors had a traditional little booth set up with a bunch of different brochures.” Typically, admission counselors had set up in both the lunch room and at a college fair supplying college-related messages. Also, Michelle made reference to the frequency of admission counselors visits when she proclaimed, “We had an admission counselor from each college come and talk to us about once every week.” The admission counselors visited high school frequently to aid the university as another source of *university recruitment efforts*.

Tours. College tours are led by current university students in order to contribute information about the university and tell stories of their own personal experience to help give prospective students a better idea of what the campus offers. The majority of participants recalled hearing information from college tours. Lauren described in detail what messages were received during the tour, by explaining, “The tours talked a whole lot about where buildings were placed like the dorms, where [the student center] is, and where all the various parts of college are when we went on the bus. Then in our information session, they talked about the different departments and colleges.” Megan also recalled, specific tour guide stories including those “about, the {university} stadium, the {university} hill, and why the university received its name.” Then, Rachael described three different college tours she went on and remembered “going into the different academic facilities.”

In addition, Malinda remarked, “The tours talked about all the cool activities [university] had going on.” In addition to seeing the building and hearing about activities on campus, Michelle revealed, “If anybody had specific questions, [tour guides] would

answer it [sic] which was really helpful because it was made me choose [university] over [another university]” The college tours served as a source for college-related memorable messages by letting the students view the campus in a variety of aspects. The university recruitment efforts provided an assortment of sources that sent more formal college-related memorable messages to potential students.

Message Content and Delivery

The third research question of interest explored, generally, the characteristics that students perceived to increase their recall of college-related messages. That is, what about a message makes it stand out such that the student remembers it? *Message content and delivery* describe the characteristics that increase recall of college-related messages. A majority of the participants agreed on important characteristics and delineated the following four areas: (a) connects to a personal interest, (b) provides visual appeal, (c) comes from a trusted source, and (d) arrives in a timely manner.

Connects to a personal interest. The connection to a personal interest appears to make a college-related message extraordinary. Participants shared that they remember a message more than others when it reflects something important to them. When Jason was asked what content stood out to him, he quickly replied, “I really want to study abroad, so having something I am really interested in and how easy it is to study abroad at a university really affects my decision. Also, the organizations they offer students, the activities that give back to you.” Nicole recognized several types of messages that seemed personally pertinent to her when she admitted the following:

I didn’t want to pay for college, so I paid a lot of attention to scholarships. Also, what the schools could do for me and what I could do at each college, like the

different programs as well as the different campus activities, because color guard played a big impact on where I wanted to go.

For both Jason and Nicole, messages were retained when they related to topics and opportunities of special importance.

In comparison, David discussed the content he did and did not pay attention to. He disclosed he did not pay attention to clubs offered because that information would be at the colleges when he attended. David then shared, “It was more academic based information I read.” The participants paid attention to the college messages that met their own personal interests and concerns.

Provides visual appeal. Messages that included visual appeal appeared to be an important characteristic. In fact, a majority of participants commented on the visual appeal of the messages. The visual appeal described by participants ranged from colors, pictures, and diagrams, to simply the layout of the message. Lauren was summarizing her experiences of viewing websites and communicated, “I like flashy colors, so the colors, like, brought to my attention the different things, and it was really easy to follow.” She reiterated how the flashy colors made it easier to follow when she was searching through departments on the website.

Similarly Malinda responded, “The pictures really helped.” Then while laughing, she added “if they were crummy, it was kind of like, ‘why would I want to go there?’” Also, Nicole confessed, “I am a visual learner, so I like pictures and diagrams. I am really weird, but I like lists of information of, ‘here is everything we can do for you.’” Correspondingly, Rachael added, “The letters I got, I remember more because of the

pictures on them, and if they were creative.” The visual appeal is another aspect aiding in what makes a message unforgettable.

Comes from a trusted source. Information coming from a trusted source makes a message more notable. If the participants viewed the source as credible, then it made the message stand out more. In illustrating what made a message worthy of attention, Malinda voiced, “Definitely, if it was from somebody I trusted or an esteemed person like my mom.” Michelle explicitly stated that a person made the message memorable, by offering, “whenever I received information from people I knew and had been to college, I knew that information was better.” Several participants mentioned the face-to-face communication with the source deemed the message as more memorable. Michael made note of face-to-face communication by verifying messages from “parents, going to tour, going to honor college representatives” were more prominent than other ways to receive information. Clearly, messages are recalled more when received from individuals who participants deemed credible.

Arrives in a timely manner. Finally, the timeliness of a message also contributed to the degree to which it was remembered by participants. High school students are gathering college information and making college choices at particular times. Consequently, a few participants suggested the ideal time period to receive college messages, and even acknowledged that they stopped looking at messages past a certain time frame. For example, Lauren declared, “The best time to get information is your junior year. That is when you’re making all those decisions and trying to figure out where you want to go; then by January of your senior year you have already made your decisions.”

Likewise, Malinda verified, “Junior year is when I really started paying attention to messages.” David outlined a similar timeframe in which he attended to college messages, saying, “Well, pretty much after like Christmas break I stopped looking at information because I made the decision to come here; so obviously anything after that I don’t remember, but I would say anything really before that makes a difference.” Participants claimed that college messages must be sent in a timely manner in order for them to pay attention to the message. After a certain point, students no longer paid attention, despite other characteristics they attributed to message memorability, such as content, delivery, and source.

Personal Compatibility

The final research question examined the ways in which college-related messages may influence participants’ college choice. Overall, the messages contributed to participants’ decision-making process by illuminating their *personal compatibility* with a particular college, which ultimately influenced college choice. Nine out of ten participants discussed how the most memorable messages helped them compare colleges to discern their best fit or and to decide if they could see themselves attending that particular university. The specific messages relayed from the universities allowed the students to use the messages to compare and contrast the universities. Megan described how one university was better for her than another when she shared, “Here, they definitely had anything I could have ever wanted to do, communications, journalism, teaching--they have it all. Whereas [another university], if you think about it, it’s really a science-oriented school; that’s where the nurses, the dentists, and the vets comes from there. So, [it] just was not for me.” This quote illustrates how the messages conveyed

what each university had to offer and enabled students to find the most compatible fit based on the messages.

In addition, Jason discussed in detail two college programs and how one university's programs were better than the others, as well as how one university appeared like they wanted to help him more. He pointed out

{This university} made it seem, 'we want you to study abroad, we have this money, we have these scholarships, you can do it, and it's easy.' [Another university] was like, 'we have a lot of study abroad programs, but you have to instigate it and go to the person to tell them you want to study abroad'; then you had to plan everything out it seemed.

Based on the study abroad messages Jason received, he was able to use the messages to select which college fit him better. The messages showed him how each university handled the study abroad opportunities, and he felt the first college met his needs.

Also, when Rachael conveyed how the messages influenced her decision, she stated, "I just kind of was like, 'Okay, is this a school I could see myself at or not?'" Similarly, Michelle noted the opportunities at the university she choose. She indicated, "[The University] has more ways you could get connected to the college than other colleges, I think. Also, the money was better here and I just felt I would like the campus and all the opportunities more. [The university] just fit me better, I think." The college-related memorable messages influenced the students' choice of college by allowing the participants to compare universities and decide which university fit their needs.

In summary, the previously mentioned themes emerged to address the original four research questions. The themes and subthemes demonstrate memorable messages

students receive about college, the sources of those memorable messages, message characteristics that may increase student recall, and the influence of college-related messages on their choice of college. The next chapter concludes the study with a discussion of the findings, including implications for practice, as well as potential limitations and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This chapter provides further discussion of the themes, practical implications of the research, limitations, and suggestions for future research. The study sought to contribute to the current gap in literature focusing on student-directed messages in the higher education context, specifically exploring how memorable messages and formal (official) university messages work together to inform and influence students' college choices. Previous research has examined the various factors that contribute to students making college decisions (e.g., Chapman, 1981; Eric, 2008) but has not explicitly focused on how college-related messages may influence students' choice of college. Five themes (*pragmatic and value-added messages, perceived informative adults, university recruitment efforts, message content and delivery, and personal compatibility*) emerged to address the following research questions: (a) what are memorable messages related to college? (b) who or what are sources of memorable messages related to college? (c) what characteristics increase the likelihood that students will recall a college-related message? and (d) how, if at all, do college-related messages influence students' choice of college?

The first research question explored what memorable messages students recall about college. The findings suggest *pragmatic and value-added messages* are the most college-related memorable messages. Pragmatic messages demonstrated the fundamental information about the university, for example, academic messages and financial information. The fundamental messages appear to be memorable to prospective students because these are essentially the basic criteria for attending a university. Students recalled academic messages in relation to the specific degrees the university offered, opportunities

for academic outreach, and particular researchers or programs at the university.

Participants recalled these messages because academics seemed to be of great importance to them.

Also, students retained financial information. These pragmatic messages gave students an idea about the cost of tuition, financial aid, and scholarships to help pay for college. In some form or fashion, a student must pay for college, whether it is out of pocket or through a scholarship. Students retained these messages because they were concerned about finding a way to pay for their education. Academics and financial information are the kinds of basic information that students need to choose and attend college.

Value-added messages illustrated the student life activities and how students can get involved on campus to enhance their college experience. Student life activities included various organizations, for instance, Greek life, marching band, groups to raise awareness, and sports. Some of the activities on campus help with academics, but typically, the student life messages show what students can do when they want to take a break from academics. The extracurricular organizations also help provide students' with other skills (i.e. leadership, time management). These messages resonated in the students' memory because the student life messages show more of the 'fun' side of college.

These subthemes suggest that together, *pragmatic and value-added messages* help illustrate the total college experience. The degree to which these messages were truly memorable according to extant definitions, however, is unclear. On the one hand, students indicated that messages were important to them, a criterion outlined by Nazione and colleagues (2011). They had significance and did serve to provide information about

norms, expectations, and requirements that socialized students toward both a specific university and college in general, satisfying at least some of Stohl's (1986) criteria for memorable messages.

On the other hand, message importance and recall may not necessarily make them memorable. According to Stohl (1986), memorable messages should be "precisely recalled" (p. 234). The messages these students remembered focused more on general content related to colleges and universities but seemed to lack the kind of vividness and detail found in extant memorable message research (e.g. Medved, Brogan, McClanhan, Morris, & Shepherd, 2006).

If messages were not particularly memorable according to traditional standards, students' recall may be explained in part by social judgment theory. Upon receiving messages about college, participants made judgments about those messages, particularly judging the degree in which messages were more or less relevant to them. According to social judgment theory, "We weigh every new idea by comparing it with our present point of view" and "...judge where the message should be placed on the attitude scale in our minds" (Griffin, 2009, p. 183). The degree of relevance to a topic is called ego involvement (Griffin, 2009). The greater one's ego involvement, the more important the topic is to the message receiver. In this case, the messages that participants deemed important to consider and remember were *pragmatic and value-added messages*. The pragmatic messages focused on the fundamental information students needed to know about the university. Such messages were high on participants' latitude of acceptance scale, meaning they were more likely to be interested in and judge favorably the college-related messages that addressed their practical questions.

These findings support those of past research that examined how students choose a particular college. Ashburn (2007) found that, “in evaluating colleges, students were more interested in internship programs and the institutions’ reputation in their interest major” (p. 39). Similar to the students in Ashburn’s research, the participants in this study placed emphasis on university academics because academics are the main reason for attending college. In addition, Hossler (1999) concluded, “...financial aid information can also influence a student’s decision to apply or to finish an incomplete application” (p. 19). These students also recalled memorable messages communicating financial information. Participants’ ego involvement with scholarships or the cost of tuition placed these messages high on their latitude of acceptance. That is, students were more likely to be interested in and agree with finance-related messages because they had to find a way to pay for college. Consequently, when asked to recall messages they received from colleges, these were among some of the first topics that participants mentioned.

In addition to the pragmatic messages, the participants felt the value-added messages were also worthy of judging and remembering. The value-added messages presented the student life aspect of college and how students could get involved on campus to enhance their college experience. Some of the value-added messages showed how student life can help with academics, but typically the value-added messages depicted what students could participate in when they wanted to take a break from their studies. Hoover (2010a) discussed how a Chicago university was trying to enhance its recruitment and the first priority was to send photographs of students engaged in group activities (e.g., dance, tennis, football) to recruit more applicants. With the help of this

new strategy, enrollment went up. Similarly, these participants described the value of the information illustrating student life.

In short, because students were highly ego-involved in *pragmatic and value-added messages* that described the aspects of college they deemed important, those messages were easily remembered and recalled. They provided the kinds of information that participants thought necessary to know when making their college choices.

The second research question explored the sources of memorable messages. In this case, participants described *perceived influential adults* and *university recruitment efforts* as sources of the messages they perceived to be memorable.

Students claimed they always knew they had to attend college based on their parents telling them they needed a degree to receive better jobs. Parents socialized students toward the idea of attending college and advised the students that obtaining a degree helps lead to a better life. The messages were easily recalled because the idea of college had been instilled into the participants for as long as they could remember. This finding illustrates the anticipatory socialization process that influences values and beliefs about careers (Modaff & Dewine, 2002). As found in previous literature, parents are one of the most important influences on one's belief about work (e.g. Hoffner, Levine, & Toohey, 2008).

High school educators were another set of influential adults in the students' lives. Teachers talked about personal experiences they had in college or would ask questions about essays students had to write. These types of messages illustrate more informal messages about college and the teachers' genuine concern for the students to attend college. Teachers' messages resonated with students because, like parents, they, too, are

significant persons who can influence college-related decisions (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Goff, Patino, & Jackson, 2004). It appears memorable messages received from *perceived influential adults*, generally, discussed about the need to attend college.

Although students' general language and imprecise recall suggest the messages fall short of the definition of memorable messages, the parents and educators as sources of those messages are more in line with traditional memorable message characteristics. Nazione et al. (2011) claimed memorable messages are characterized by "a source that is respected and/or of higher status" (p. 126). In this case, students trusted their parents and teachers as credible providers of important college information. Furthermore, the significance of the message, along with its more informal oral delivery, comes closer to meeting the existing notion of memorable messages (Nazione et al., 2011; Stohl, 1986).

Conversely, *university recruitment efforts* provided more formally constructed messages to students. These messages were sent electronically, non-electronically, and through individuals. Every participant discussed receiving memorable information through mail, including letters, pamphlets, flyers, and postcards.

In addition to print messages, all the participants recalled receiving electronic college information through emails and websites. Usually, the students searched for scholarships or specific information on the websites. Surprisingly, the participants discussed the abundance of emails sent. Many mentioned how their inbox would be full from receiving almost 12 emails a day from varying universities. The findings support Hossler's (1981) prediction that in the future, "electronic media will play an increasingly larger role in admission recruitment" (p. 28). As Hossler expected, universities seem to rely heavily on computer mediated communication as part of their recruitment efforts.

Other university constructed messages were received from admission counselors and campus tour guides. Admission counselors went to high schools or attended college fairs to interact with prospective students. They provided pamphlets and forms to the participants, and generally engaged in conversations with the students. An interesting finding was that the admission counselors promoted attending college in general, rather than persuading the participants to attend the university they represented. Campus tour guides also provided general information about the university, but several participants mentioned the tours helped induce a sense of belonging to the university. This particular recruitment effort sold a few participants on their decision to attend a specific college.

Again, if measured against the ways in which memorable messages have been previously examined, most often informal and oral (e.g., Stohl, 1986; Barge & Schlueter, 2004), formal university recruitment efforts may not be considered as memorable messages. However, the messages still appear to be persuasive.

The two major sources of college information—formal *university recruitment efforts* and informal *perceived influential adults*—are reflective of the sources of persuasion Walther and Parks (2002) discussed in regards to the warranting theory. While warranting theory originated from and is typically applied in computer mediated communication, it also seems to reflect the different types of sources to which students credited memorable messages. The warranting theory “posits that perceivers’ judgments about a target rely more heavily on information which the targets themselves cannot manipulate, than on self-descriptions” (Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009, p. 229).

In the context of this study, the university has the ability to construct and manipulate messages so the college is perceived in a positive frame, and parents or high school educators offer external messages that may or may not validate what the university messages claim. This study did not focus on which source was more or less persuasive, but the notion of who has control of the message, as explained by warranting theory, raises important questions about message sources and consequently, the persuasiveness of university recruitment messages. In short, despite the more or less extent to which the messages and sources may fit traditional memorable message characteristics, these findings suggest that participants are retaining important messages from both types of sources that promote college.

The third research question sought to discover the characteristics that might increase students' recall of college-related messages. The findings show *message content and delivery* are characteristics that increase students' recall of college-related messages. When the *message content* directly connected to a student's personal interests, that message was more likely to be retained, for example, academic messages. Also, many explained how they wanted to study abroad, so information suggesting the ease of studying abroad stuck with those students. If the messages affected the participants personally or were especially relevant to their college experience, the messages stood out more than others.

In addition to *message content*, *message delivery* also influenced students' perceptions of what increased the likelihood to recall college-related messages. In today's society, students are accustomed to high-tech websites and visual stimuli, thus they may expect more visual appeal from the online presence of universities.

While students suggested that visual appeal (e.g., pictures, lists, and color) helped them retain messages, retention was also influenced by when messages were delivered. According to participants, messages received in a timely manner, especially during the students' junior year of high school, received greater attention and were more likely to be remembered. Bell et al. (2009) also found that students were actively gathering information during their junior year, and the participants in this study seemed to be paying closer attention to the college messages they received in a similar time period.

Participants also reported that messages were recalled more easily when delivered by a trusted source. Specifically, messages delivered by those who participants deemed competent and credible were more likely to stand out among other college-related messages. Participants often recalled messages from professors, presidents of the university, and alumni as those they most remembered, particularly if those messages were delivered in a face-to-face interaction.

These subthemes indicate the specific elements of college-related messages that are essential to helping students retain the college-related messages for later use. However, these message characteristics, again, only partially reflect those that constitute a memorable message. Two of the four elements described by students, important content and a respected source, align with memorable message definitions (see Stohl, 1986). However, the two other elements, visual appeal and timely delivery, vary from the original idea of memorable messages. Furthermore, participants remembered written data, whereas the original idea claims memorable messages are orally transmitted (Stohl, 1986).

Nonetheless, the characteristics of the college-related messages as described by these participants still illustrate ways to make a university's pitch unique in comparison to other institutions (Hoover, 2010a). Therefore, the role of *message content and delivery* in recalling college-related messages may be better explained by the elaboration likelihood model (ELM). ELM suggests how a person processes a message, and more specifically, the degree to which one critically evaluates a message. Processing through the central route involves more elaboration or critical thinking, while processing through the peripheral route involves less elaboration and critical thinking (Littlejohn, 2002). In other words, the peripheral route is "...a mental shortcut path to accept or reject a message..." (Griffin, 2009, p. 194).

In this study, participants appeared to use the peripheral route as they recalled the visual appeal of college-related messages, as well as the timeliness of those messages. Message appearance such as color and organization, in addition to message timing, were externalities, that is, elements of the message outside of the actual content. Anctil (2008) applied ELM in a similar way and concluded that because universities basically offer the same curriculum, they have to market themselves in other ways to differentiate from other institutions. Therefore, "The appeal is peripheral, not central, because the central route or message is too similar across institutions" (p.15). In this case, particular peripheral cues of appearance and timeliness contributed to the delivery of a message and increased its odds of being retained.

In addition, according to participants, *message delivery* also entails who delivered the message. In this case, college-related messages often came from a trusted source, including parents, alumni, and university representatives. The original conception of

ELM considered the speaker or source credibility as a cue on the peripheral route (Griffin, 2009). In this case, however, it appears that who delivers the message about college is processed by students through the central route. Peripheral cues related to speakers often include their likability and expertise, causing those who are less motivated to accept, or perhaps remember, a message because of the source, independent of its content. In contrast, these students seemed to critically think about the degree to which they could trust the source, perhaps because they were highly motivated by the importance of the topic (i.e., ego involved). This is not surprising since high motivation tends to lead to central processing (Littlejohn, 2002).

Therefore, if it is true that all university messages are similar in content, perhaps it is not that students just turn to the peripheral route to process college-related information, as Anctil (1998) posited, but rather that students become more critical of other cues available to them. In other words, if message content is relatively equal and students are highly motivated/ego-involved, they may more critically evaluate, and thus more centrally process, other parts of the message (e.g., Griffin, 2009).

Because students reported that both content and delivery were important characteristics of remembering college-related messages, it stands to reason that the information processed by both the central and peripheral routes was important to retention. Stiff (1986) posited, “it’s possible for a person to ponder evidence and be influenced by characteristics of the communicator *at the same time* [italics in original]” (Griffin, 1994, p. 246). Likewise, it seems reasonable that both content and delivery increase the likelihood that students recall college-related messages.

The final research question explored how college-related messages may influence students' choice of college. Generally, participants discussed using the messages to illuminate *personal compatibility* when selecting a university to attend. All of the themes previously discussed culminate in students' ability to better assess their college choices. The combination of message content, source, and delivery influenced their decision making process. The data did not reveal that memorable messages or simply college-related information directly lead students to choose a particular college over another. However, the messages assisted in the evaluation process that yielded a good college fit. Similarly, the person-organization fit concept claims "the compatibility between people and organizations occurs when (a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share similar fundamental characteristics, or (c) both" (as cited in Carless, 2005, p. 412).

Basically, the college information students received, albeit 'memorable' or not, indirectly influenced students' college choice by enabling students to make comparisons across universities and ultimately illuminating which institution was the best fit for them. The active role of the college-related messages in the decision making process reflects Medved et al.'s (2006) claim that "Memorable messages are ones that are vividly remembered and believed to have had a large impact on how we behave, the attitudes we hold, and the decisions we make or anticipate making in the future" (p. 167). The college-related messages recalled by students were not necessarily vivid but did appear to impact their decision making process. So while the college-related messages participants received and retained do not meet all of the criteria of memorable messages, both formal

and informal messages from universities and others influenced the students' choice of college.

In summary, the themes provided answers to the research questions of interest and fulfilled the overall purpose of the study. For these participants, using both memorable and other college-related messages aided in their decision making process of selecting a college. The *pragmatic and value-added messages* and the trusted sources of *perceived influential adults* and *university recruitment efforts* illustrated influential memorable messages coming from higher status sources as playing a role in allowing the participants to use the messages to compare universities. Along with memorable messages, the *message content and delivery* of college-related messages demonstrated other message characteristics that increased recall and retention. Both college-related messages and memorable messages combined illuminate *personal compatibility* with institutions, which assisted the students during their process of finding their college fit.

These findings provide a new context in which to study memorable messages and raise important questions about what constitutes the 'memorableness' of a message. According to Stohl's (1986) primary characteristics of memorable messages as being retained and influential, these messages were memorable. However, other scholars have added more detailed clarification, such as Nazione et al.'s (2011) claim that memorable messages are characterized as "brief and orally delivered" (pp. 125-126). This study suggests that *pragmatic and value-added messages* from both formal and informal sources may, in fact, be 'memorable,' at least from the perspective of the students to whom they are directed. After all, students recalled messages nearly two years later as college freshmen after having received the messages in their junior year of high school,

and the college-related messages, at least indirectly, had a major influence on students' lives.

Practical Implications

These findings suggest that formal university messages, however 'memorable' by traditional standards, do play a role in students' choice of college, generally aiding the evaluation of student-university fit. Consequently, university administrators, particularly admissions counselors, can utilize these findings in several ways. First, universities should take time to get to know prospective students and provide messages that appeal to students' interests. This may take a little more effort and time, but electronic communication makes collecting this type of information much easier than in the past. Once university recruiters have a better understanding of prospective students, they can tailor their messages to students' wants and needs. The tailored messages should include more details relating to students' interests than does the average mass message. Using person-centered messages helps make the student feel wanted by the university and not just a number. The more ego-involved the prospective students are in the messages, the more likely they will remember the messages when selecting a college. Generally, universities should provide not only the practical, useful kinds of information, but also the 'feel good' messages to make the student truly visualize themselves at the university.

More specifically, while university-constructed messages should include practical information about university academics, that information can be enhanced by providing information that illustrates the kind of unique academic opportunities that might appeal to a particular target audience of students. Every university provides degrees, but if the university can show a special program (e.g., band or study abroad) in which a particular

group of students has expressed interest, the message is more likely to be both memorable and influential. According to Donehower (2003), students feel university recruitment pitches are very similar, therefore memorable messages can separate one college from its competitors. Universities can separate themselves by promoting a unique degree or program. In addition, university messages should add value to academics by showing the diversity of campus life, making sure each prospective student sees an organization or sport in which they can get involved. Of course, these messages are only possible if universities know their audience and utilize target marketing across prospective students.

As suggested by the importance of *perceived influential adults*, universities need to reach out to parents as well as students. Many parents already expect students to attend college, and sending university messages to parents may help increase the chance that parents will advocate for a particular university. In addition, students appear to view high school educators as credible sources of college-related information. Students attend high school every day before they attend college. Therefore, it is vital for high school educators to promote college and have an abundance of information. University admission counselors should have a one-on-one meeting with local high school counselors to provide sufficient information about their university and build a relationship in which guidance counselors will want to promote that institution. If universities can find a way to reach out and build relationships with parents and high school educators, then universities come full circle utilizing the most prominent sources of college-related messages and increase the odds of their messages being more memorable.

When universities send messages, they should find a balance in the amount of information so the university is not wasting money or time on information being thrown away or deleted from the inbox. Based on these findings, colleges should send the majority of their information during the students' junior year of high school and fall semester of their senior year. Making contact during this time frame helps the prospective students remember the information better when making a college decision.

Also, the *message content and delivery* theme raises the question as to how many universities are applying, in their recruitment efforts, all four of the message characteristics deemed important by these students (i.e., connection students' personal interests, visual appeal, trusted sources, and timely delivery). If universities are not applying these aspects, then based on the findings, universities should gravitate towards utilizing these characteristics. On the other hand, if universities are using these aspects of making college-related information stand out, then they should have a more successful enrollment number than those universities who do not apply these facets, as deemed important by students.

Last, memorable messages have the ability to influence students' choice of college, and universities should try more strategically to create memorable messages. One way a university can achieve this idea is through building relationships with prospective students. Then, students may start to perceive the source as a higher status (Stohl, 1986) and be influenced easier, especially with face-to-face communication. Universities can also provide more vivid language, along with pictures and greater visual appeal, to increase the likelihood of the message being memorable. Universities that consider and integrate the characteristics of traditional memorable messages may just

provide both the fundamental and unique information students are seeking to differentiate one university from its many higher education competitors.

In summary, students use memorable and college-related messages to compare and contrast universities to find one compatible with their needs and wants. Taking the time to send person-centered messages and evoking ego involvement in the messages increase the chance that a prospective student will remember and perhaps choose one university over another. Every university competes for prospective students, but strategically using memorable messages to meet student needs and make students visualize themselves at a particular university may give an edge over other universities' recruitment efforts.

Limitations and Future Research

As with any research, there were a few limitations during this study. First, the quantity of participants utilized limited the amount of data to analyze. Future research should increase the quantity of participants to extend the data. Another limitation to the study was that the participants were restricted to honor students which may attract students who share a particular mindset and represent a small population at colleges. Therefore, qualitative research scholars should strive for not only more, but also more diverse participants in the future to help make the findings more transferable. Last, the study focused solely on participants' recollection of messages, and did not analyze specific recruitment messages the participants received. Future research should conduct a similar case study and include a textual analysis of recruitment materials sent to prospective students. Consequently, researchers could then compare/contrast the

messages that were sent and the messages that participants recalled to add another dimension to memorable message research.

Conclusion

Overall, this research adds to existing literature by showing the degree to which recruitment messages in the higher education context are more and less memorable, as well as how both memorable and more general college-related messages are perceived and utilized by prospective students. Also, the research provides practical implications for university admission offices when constructing formal recruitment messages. The messages influence students' choice of college because they provide them an opportunity to critically scrutinize colleges and decide which university best fits the student. In conclusion, memorable messages play an important role in everyday life and may hold great potential to influence an individual's future collegiate career.

APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT



Project Title: An Exploration of College Related Memorable Messages

Investigator: Ashley Miller
Department: Communication
E-mail: ashley.miller634@topper.wku.edu

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask him/her any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have.

If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign on the last page of this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

1. **Nature and Purpose of the Project:** The purpose of this study is to explore what the role of formal (official) university messages in the formation of memorable messages when students are making college choices.
2. **Explanation of Procedures:** A 45-60 minute audio recorded interview will occur, as well as, the researcher taking additional notes. Questions will pertain to college related messages you received in high school, specifically, what messages you remember, how you received the messages, and how they influenced your college choice.
3. **Discomfort and Risks:** It is my understanding that this study places me at little to no risk. The probability of harm anticipated is no greater than I would encounter in everyday life.
4. **Benefits:** There are no direct benefits; however, by providing their information, subjects will be able to contribute to generating knowledge that will help universities' better understand how beneficial their recruitment efforts are in recruiting students.
5. **Confidentiality:** It is my understanding that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. Records will be viewed, stored, and maintained in private, secure files only accessible by the researcher and faculty sponsor for three years following the study, after which time they will be destroyed. All participants will be assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity, and any other subject identifiers will be altered or reported only in comprehensive form.

WKU IRB# 12-122
Expedited Approval
Start - 12/14/11
End - 12/1/12

6. **Refusal/Withdrawal:** Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

Signature of Participant

Date

Witness

Date

It is also my understanding that my participation in an interview will be audio recorded.

Signature of Participant

Date

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT
THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Paul Mooney, Human Protections Administrator
TELEPHONE: (270) 745-6733



WKU IRB# 12-122
Expedited Approval
Start - 12/14/11
End - 12/1/12

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

An Exploration of College-Related Memorable Messages

Name:

Date:

Age:

Location:

High School:

Colleges you've received information from:

Colleges you've applied to:

Introduction: I want to thank you for taking time to meet with me today. During this interview, I will ask a series of questions about your perceptions of college-related messages you have received. This interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes. If at any time you feel uncomfortable or want to terminate the interview you have the ability to do so.

Research Question 1: From a student's perspective, what memorable messages do students recall about college?

1. Describe your level of interest in college?
 - A. Have you always wanted to attend college?
 - B. What year of high school did you realize you wanted to attend college?
 - C. Why do you want attend college?
 - D. What other colleges were you considering?
2. Describe the information you have received about colleges.
 - A. What information did you receive about academic programs?
 - B. What information did you receive about athletics?
 - C. What information did you receive about student life?
 - D. What information did you receive about campus activities?
 - E. What information did you receive about scholarships?
 - F. What information did you receive about financial aid?
3. What is your favorite college-related message you received?
 - A. Describe the most inspiring message you received?
 - B. Describe the funniest message you received?
 - C. Provide a specific example.
4. Describe a positive message you received, if any.
 - A. Describe a motivational message you received.
 - B. Describe a message that made you feel good to attend a particular college.
 - C. Provide a specific example.

5. Describe a negative message you received, if any.
 - A. Describe a message that made you afraid of college.
 - B. Describe a message that made you stray away from a college.
 - C. Provide a specific example.
6. Do you remember any specific slogans from the universities?
 - A. Provide a specific example.

Research Question 2: From a student's perspective, what and/or who are the sources of the memorable college-related messages?

1. Describe the different people from whom you received college-related information.
 - A. Did you receive information from friends? If so, describe the type of information you received from friends.
 - B. Did you receive information from family members? If so, describe the type of information you received from family members.
 - C. Did you receive information from high school teachers? If so, describe the type of information you received through high school teachers.
 - D. Did you receive information from high school counselors? If so, describe the type of information you received through high school counselors.
 - E. Did you receive information from college admission counselors? If so, describe the type of information you received through college admission counselors.
2. Describe the different channels you received college-related information.
 - A. Did you receive information through email? If so, describe the type of information received through email.
 - B. Did you receive information through mail? If so, describe the type of information received through mail.
 - C. Did you receive information from websites? If so, describe the type of information received through websites.
 - D. Did you receive information from campus tours? If so, describe the type of information received through the campus tours.
 - E. Did you receive information from commercials? If so, describe the type of information you received through commercials.
3. Describe the different ways you received information from universities.
 - A. Did you receive information through email? If so, describe the type of information sent to you through email.
 - B. Did you receive information through mail? If so, describe what type of information was sent to you through mail.
 - C. Did you receive information from a campus tour? If so, what specific information do you recall receiving?
 - D. Did you receive information from their website? If so, describe the amount of time spent on the website and the particular information you searched for and found.

E. Did you receive information from admission counselors? If so, what specific information do you recall receiving?

Research Question 3: From a student's perspective, what characteristics increase the likelihood that students will recall a college-related message?

1. From the previous information you have mentioned what made you remember messages more than others?
 - A. Does who you receive the information from make the information stand out? If so, describe why.
 - B. Does the channel you receive the information from make the information stand out? If so, describe why.
 - C. Does the time frame you receive the information make the information stand out? If so, describe why.
 - D. Can you think of anything else that made you pay attention to college-related messages?

2. Does the specific content of college-related messages you received make the information memorable or stand out?
 - A. Does content about the academic programs make the information stand out? If so, describe why.
 - B. Does content about the scholarships offered make the information stand out? If so, describe why.
 - C. Does content about the athletic programs make the information stand out? If so, describe why.
 - D. Does content about personal experiences make the information stand out? If so, describe why.
 - E. Does content about financial aid make the information stand out? If so, describe why.
 - F. Does content about student activities make the information stand out? If so, describe why.

3. How does the visual appeal make you remember college-related messages?
 - A. How does the color make you remember the messages?
 - B. How does the font make you remember the messages?
 - C. How do the pictures make you remember the messages?

Research Question 4: From a student's perspective, how, if at all, do college-related messages influence their choice of college?

1. Who are what most influenced your college choice?
 - A. Did the specific channel you received information from influence your choice? If so, describe why.
 - B. Did a specific person influence your choice? If so, describe who and why.

2. How did you use the information you received in your decision making process?
 - A. How did the messages impact your college decision?

3. To what extent did the college-related information you receive influence your decision to attend WKU?
 - A. Did the content of the information influence your decision? If so, describe how.
 - B. Did who you received the information from influence your decision? If so, describe how.
 - C. Did the channel you received information from influence your decision? If so, describe how.
 - D. Did the time frame you received the information influence your decision? If so, describe how.

4. Is there anything else you want to share with about the college-related messages you received?

APPENDIX C

PEER EXAMINATION ATTESTATION

Peer Examination Attestation

The role that I played in Ashley Miller's research was that of the disinterested peer during the peer debriefings as described by Lincoln and Guba in *Naturalistic Inquiry**. The debriefings occurred at the end of the project where Ashley debriefed me on her study. As part of the process, I listened to Ashley's oral explanation of her transcriptions; in addition, I read the master code list, open coding, and axial coding.

The central purposes of the debriefing sessions were to establish credibility and explore aspects of the research that might otherwise have remained implicit in the researcher's mind. Through the process of playing devil's advocate, I attempted to probe potential biases, explore meanings in the data, and clarify basis for interpretation of the data by studying the coding procedures and categories. Debriefing provided an opportunity for catharsis during which I could provide a sympathetic ear and assist in devising coping strategies during a very stressful time.

*Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Attested by: _____

Ian Brandon

Date: _____

4/2/12

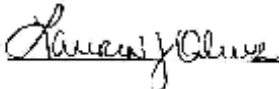
Source: Miller, A. (2012). An exploration of college related memorable messages. Unpublished qualitative research study.

Peer Examination Attestation

The role that I played in Ashley Miller's research was that of the disinterested peer during the peer debriefings as described by Lincoln and Guba in *Naturalistic Inquiry**. The debriefings occurred at the end of the project where Ashley debriefed me on her study. As part of the process, I listened to Ashley's oral explanation of her transcriptions; in addition, I read the master code list, open coding, and axial coding.

The central purposes of the debriefing sessions were to establish credibility and explore aspects of the research that might otherwise have remained implicit in the researcher's mind. Through the process of playing devil's advocate, I attempted to probe potential biases, explore meanings in the data, and clarify basis for interpretation of the data by studying the coding procedures and categories. Debriefing provided an opportunity for catharsis during which I could provide a sympathetic ear and assist in devising coping strategies during a very stressful time.

*Lincoln, Y. S. & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Attested by: 
Lauren Oliver

Date: 4/2/12

Source: Miller, A. (2012). An exploration of college related memorable messages. Unpublished qualitative research study.

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